



COMBINED STORY PLAN FOR A 4-ACT COZY MYSTERY

ACT ONE

Steps 1 to 4

Step 1. Characters and world building.

- Introduce the main characters in their story worlds and situations.
- Start with the sleuth to tell the reader that this is the person they are going to identify with.
- Let the reader know in the first scene/first chapter who the main character is and why they should care what happens to them.
- SHOW that she is skilled and has talents and strengths and can handle herself.
- DON'T MAKE THE HEROINE TOO PERFECT! PERFECT = BORING. What flaws does she have? What are her inner conflicts? She has to be intelligent and equal or better than the murderer.
- HOOK the reader in the first paragraph by hinting at a turning point or crisis in her life. Start with action or dialogue to draw the readers into the story.
- WHO IS THE SIDE KICK who she is going to talk to and hash things out with? They should have the skills that the sleuth does not have – and humour and quirky or even add a bit of conflict into the investigation.

ACT TWO

Steps 5 to 8

SHOW the reader how the sleuth identifies suspects and solves the puzzle.

At the end of Act Two there will be a major event which causes the story to pivot in a new direction. At this point the sleuth has to recommit to finding the truth. No going back from this point.

This can be another murder or attack etc as the criminal's plan gets the upper hand and the sleuth's task becomes much harder.

Act Two also introduces a B plot, such as a romance subplot.

Step 5. The Investigation Begins

- The sleuth has now made a commitment to solving the mystery and tracking down the killer/attacker responsible for the crime.
- All of the allies and sidekicks are brought in. The sleuth assembles the investigation team – all with different quirks and characters.
- They interview key suspects and start to compile a picture of what really happened with the first crime.
- All of the possible suspects have to be identified, who appear to have had motive, means and opportunity to to commit the crime.
- Then the sleuth questions them and they seem to be making real progress.
- One of these suspects will turn out to be the actual perpetrator.
- The suspects have alibis, tell lies or reveal clues that point to another real killer. There will be real evidence which turns out to be distraction clues, but also real revelations which indicate that the solution goes a lot deeper than they had expected.
- Soon becomes clear that a number of people wanted the victim dead, and several could have done it, but did not have the means or opportunity.

Step 6. Balancing Sub-Plot

- To balance out the mystery A plot, a second B plot can be introduced. This can be a romance or secondary plot, linked to the main plot in some way.

ACT THREE

Steps 9 to 12

Something unexpected occurs, such as the appearance of a second body, the death of a major suspect, or discovery of evidence which clears the most likely suspect.

The story must take a new direction.

Change of focus and scope of the investigation after what happened.

This is the pivotal point in the story where it become evident that the sleuth was on the wrong track.

This new crime is critical to the case – it provides vital information.

Step 9. Killer is Blocking the Investigation

After the shock of the Major Turning point at the Mid-Point end of Act Two, the characters will have to regroup and come up with new plan in response to this new attack /new death.

- More interviews. Follow up on alibis and clues and gather info on the second murder. Suspects will become more resistant to questioning.
- Reveal hidden motives and secrets for the key suspects. This could be linked to previous clues and revelations.

Step 10. More Complications. Stakes increase

- The sleuth is blocked and goes over what they know so far with the sidekicks and other investigators so that all the options are explored.
- Some major new revelation has to be explored, but they do not seem to be getting any closer to finding the killer. Have they missed the crucial piece of information? Or misinterpreted the information they already have?
- The killer uses clever misdirection to put them on the wrong track.

Step 11. Suspects narrowed down

- The sleuth starts to discover more about the real killer and their motivation.
- More secrets are revealed and the number of suspects narrowed down as the real crime becomes clearer.

ACT FOUR

Steps 13 to 16

Step 13. Heroine sleuth gets her mojo back and is back on track.

The sleuth evaluates the clues, evidence and information gleaned from the other characters.

- The sleuth discovers a secret about one or more of the suspects which sets them on a new path that will lead to the real killer.
- All secrets revealed. Motivation has to be powerful – why they did it.
- More complications and set-backs. They need the evidence to prove that their suspect is the killer etc.

Step 14. A New Action Plan

- She has a sudden revelation about a clue and suspect, and realizes that she been going about things in the wrong way.
- She needs a new action plan and has to work quickly.

Step 15. The grand finale. One to one confrontation with the killer where the sleuth demonstrates their skills and wins the day.

Step 16. Resolution

Has to be a solid resolution which makes sense to the reader. Strong ending.

- Heroine discusses clues with her family and friends and how she solved the case.
- The sleuth comes to a realisation about herself which demonstrates the character growth/character arc – which occurs because she steps outside her comfort zone to investigate this death. Plot-B: Scene showing full character growth of HERO.
- SHOW hero in the old world - but changed. A static heroine who never changes will lose readers interest over time,
- New equilibrium – and balance bookend to the opening scene.

