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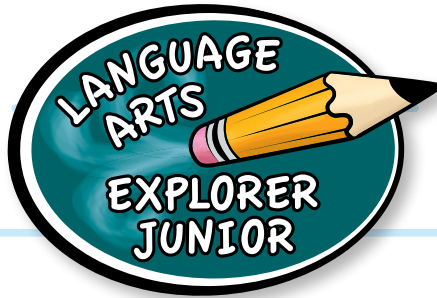
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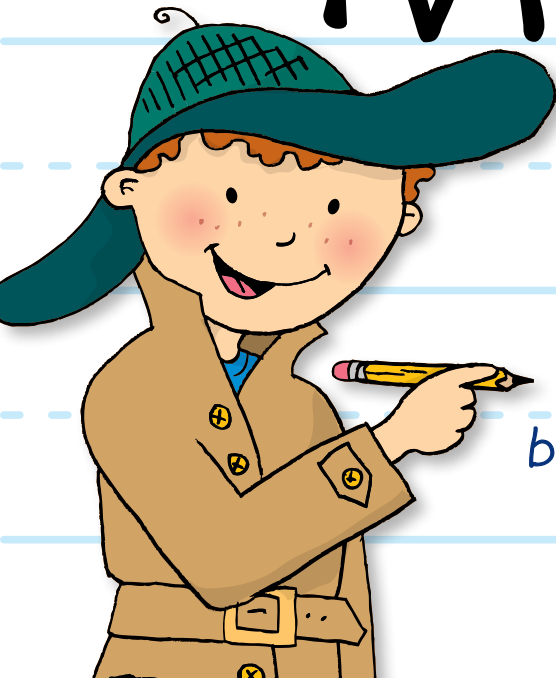
How to Write a Mystery



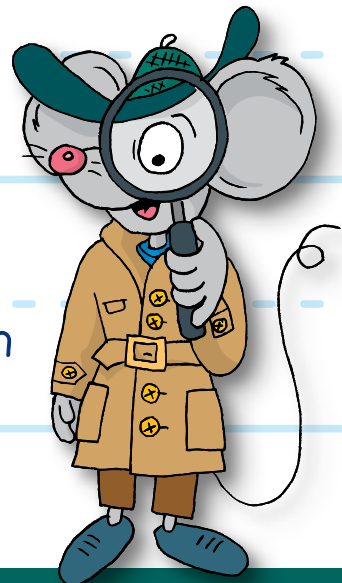
Cecilia Minden
and Kate Roth



How to Write a Mystery



by Cecilia Minden
and Kate Roth





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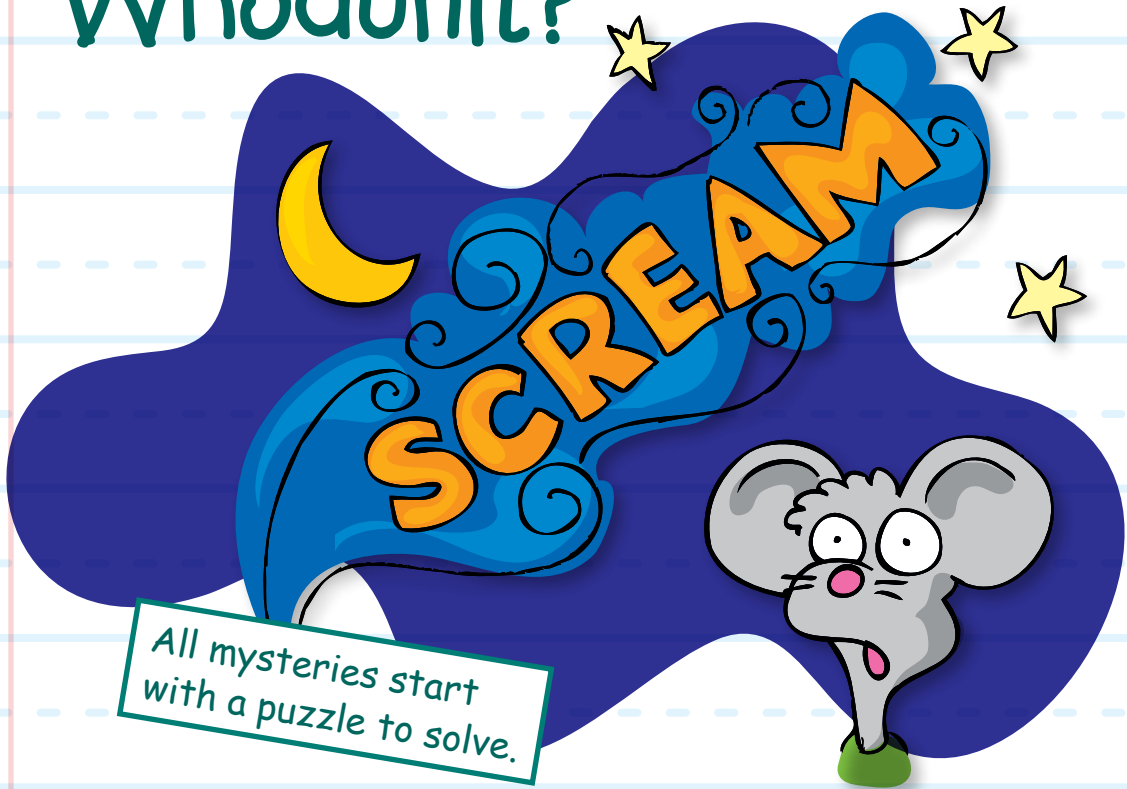
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What's a Whodunit?



*It was a dark night. There was a loud scream.
Then there was silence.*

What do you think happened? You'll have to solve a **mystery** to find out. A mystery is a puzzle that readers try to solve by paying attention to **clues** left by the author. The main

character puts all the clues together to solve the puzzle. He figures out “whodunit,” or who did it. Some readers like to see if they can solve the mystery before the main character. A good mystery has you guessing until the end.

Do you have an idea for a mystery? Grab your pen and paper, and let’s give it a try.



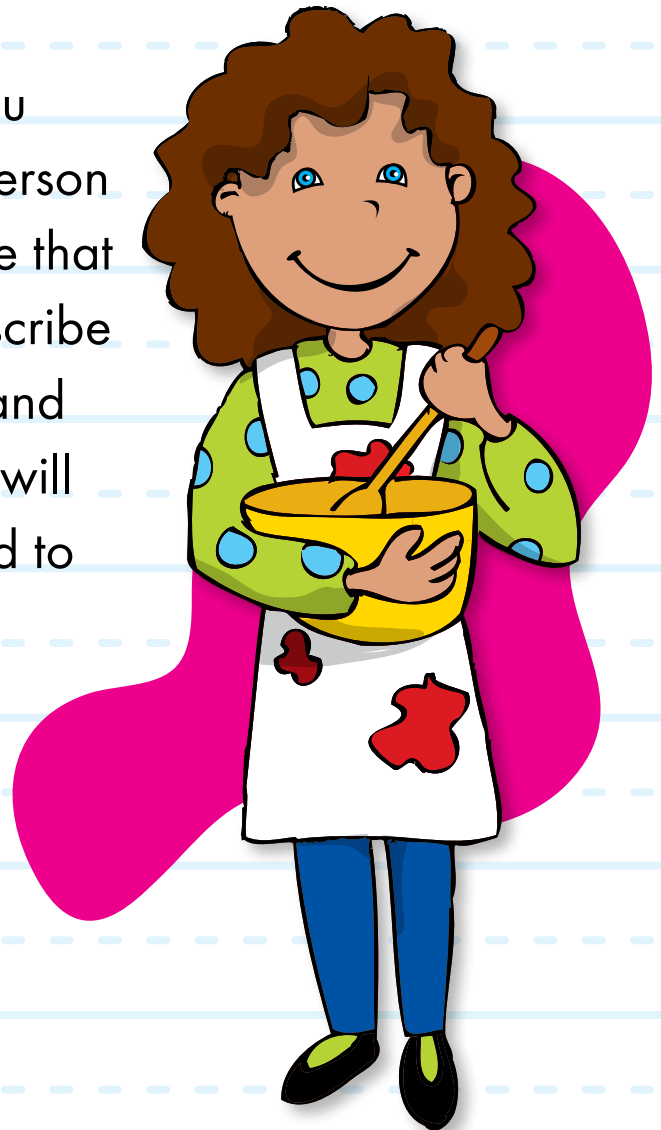
Reading mysteries is a good way to learn how to write them.

Who Will Solve the Mystery?

Begin by thinking about your main character. The main character can be anyone. He or she could be any age or live anywhere in the world. In some books, the main character is a dog or cat!

Think of someone you know. How does that person dress, act, and talk? Use that person as a model. Describe your character's looks and personality. What skills will the main character need to solve the puzzle?

Detectives are people who solve mysteries by using clues.



ACTIVITY



Describe the Main Character

INSTRUCTIONS:

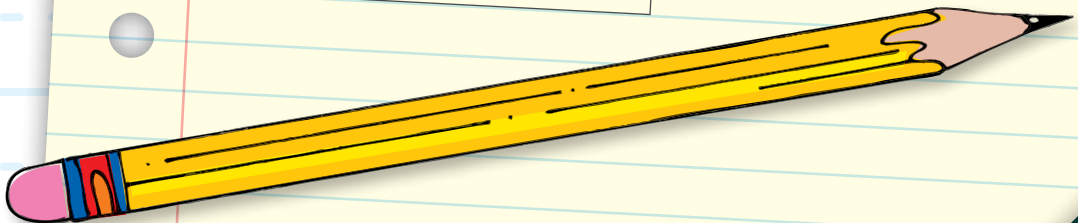
1. Write the title "Planning Sheet" on the top of your paper. You will be planning your story on this paper.
2. Choose the main character for your mystery.
3. Describe what the character looks like and his or her personality.

To get a copy of this activity, visit www.cherrylakepublishing.com/activities.

MAIN CHARACTER

Michelle

- age 13
- medium height with curly brown hair and blue eyes
- likes to cook and try out new recipes
- is very messy when she cooks



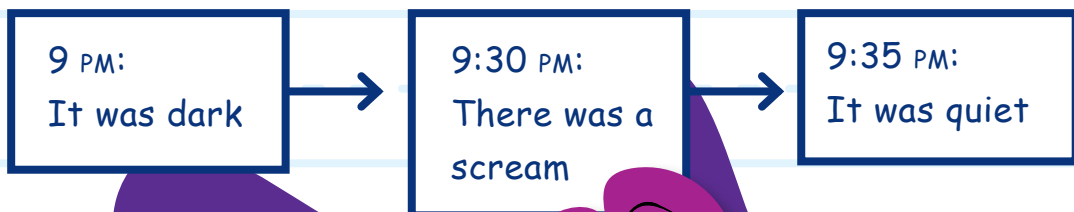
What Is the Plot?



Plan your plot before you begin writing the story.

The **plot** of a story is the plan of the main events. Thinking through your plot is the most important step in writing a mystery. The plot includes the puzzle and the events leading up to the **solution**.

Ideas for mystery plots are all around you. Did you hear a strange noise? Did something odd happen at school? Is something missing? Maybe you read about something unusual. You can find ideas for mysteries almost everywhere you look. These ideas will help you create the plot. Plan out the entire plot before writing your mystery. How will the main character solve the puzzle? The author needs to know whodunit!



ACTIVITY



Plan the Plot

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. On your planning sheet, create a timeline for the actions in the plot.
2. Write the mystery that needs to be solved.
3. Write the solution to the mystery.
4. Add the events that will happen in the middle between the puzzle and the solution.

To get a copy of this activity, visit www.cherrylakepublishing.com/activities.

MAIN CHARACTER

Michelle

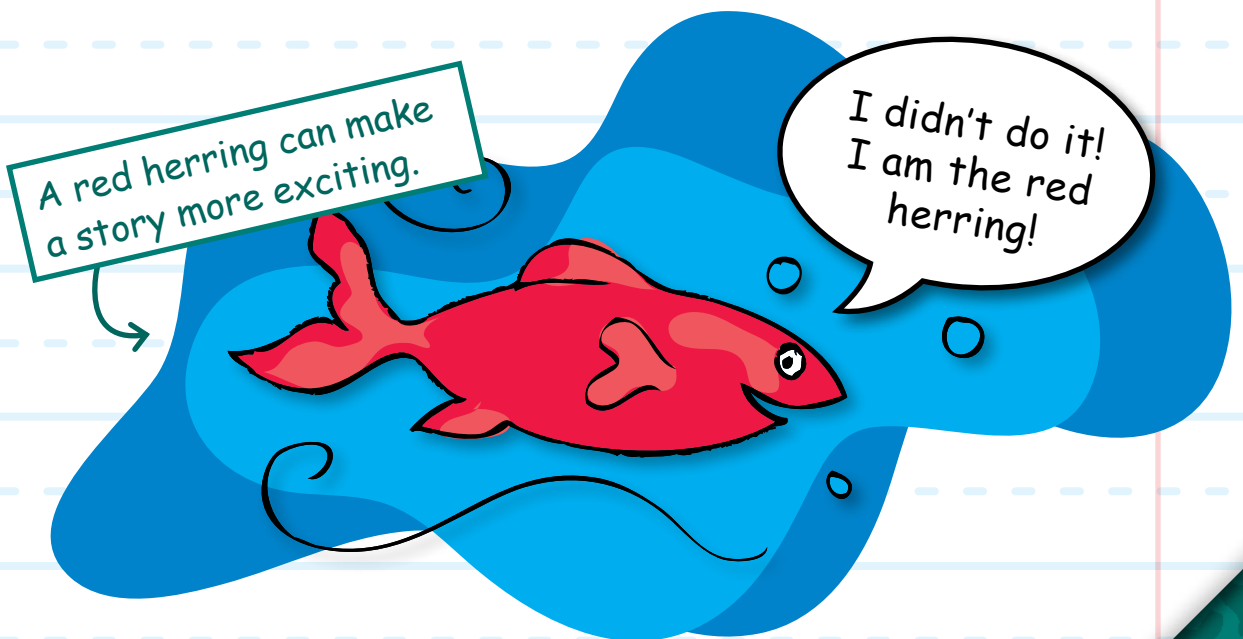
- age 13
- medium height with curly brown hair and blue eyes
- likes to cook and try out new recipes
- is very messy when she cooks

PLOT

1. **MYSTERY:** Michelle wants to win a pasta sauce contest, but she can't find her recipe.
2. She looks everywhere.
3. She remembers her dog, Honey, was in the kitchen while she was cooking.
4. **SOLUTION:** She finds the recipe in Honey's bed.

What Are the Clues?

Clues help you figure out the puzzle. In your story you need to include information that helps the main character solve the mystery. But don't make it too easy! **Red herrings** are clues that lead the reader in the wrong direction. These clues seem to make sense but do not help solve the case. They might make the wrong person look guilty. You can add these to your mystery to try to mislead the reader.



You could also add another character who is a **suspect**. A suspect is a person who is thought to have caused the puzzle. You might give the suspect a weakness that leads to clues. For example, he loves candy and leaves a trail of wrappers. Maybe the suspect has a strong **motive**. For example, if she cheats, she will win a big prize.



Your characters will need plenty of clues to solve the mystery.

ACTIVITY



Write the Clues

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. On your planning sheet, list the clues that help the main character solve the mystery.
2. Choose at least two clues that will help solve the puzzle.
3. Plan at least one red herring to lead your main character in the wrong direction.

To get a copy of this activity, visit www.cherrylakepublishing.com/activities.

- age 13
- medium height with curly brown hair and blue eyes
- likes to cook and try out new recipes
- is very messy when she cooks

2. She looks everywhere.
3. She remembers her dog, Honey, was in the kitchen while she was cooking.
4. SOLUTION: She finds the recipe in Honey's bed.

CLUES

- Clue 1: The kitchen floor is sticky.
- Clue 2: The dog is in the kitchen licking up spills from the floor.
- Red Herring: Nick, who is also in the contest, comes by to say hello.

What Is the Setting?

The **setting** is the location where your story takes place. The setting sets the mood for the mystery. Choose a place that works well with your plot. It can help to choose a place you know well so you can describe it with a lot of details. A longer mystery might need more than one setting.

Use your five senses to describe the setting. Help the reader to see, hear, smell, feel, and taste the place where the mystery occurs. By describing your setting clearly, you can make your readers feel like they are there.

Go through old photo albums to get ideas for settings.



ACTIVITY



Describe the Setting

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Choose your setting for the mystery.
2. On your planning sheet, write the setting.
Describe the place clearly so your readers can imagine being there.

To get a copy of this activity, visit www.cherrylakepublishing.com/activities.

likes to cook a

new recipes

- is very messy w

cooks

CLUES

- Clue 1: The kitchen floor is sticky.
- Clue 2: The dog is in the kitchen licking up spills from the floor.
- Red Herring: Nick, who is also in the contest, comes by to say hello.

Michelle's kitchen while she was cooking.

4. SOLUTION: She finds the recipe in Honey's bed.

SETTING

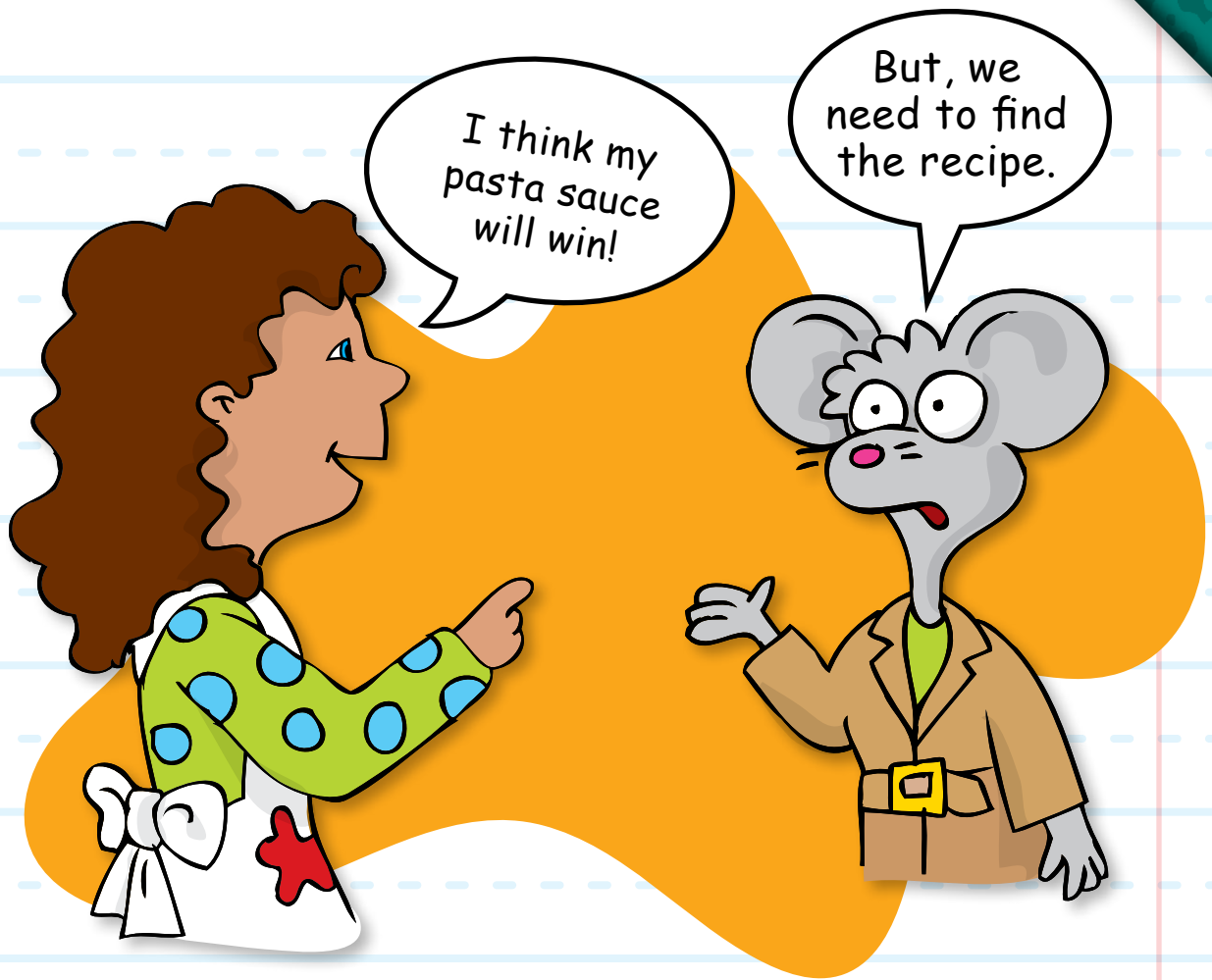
- Michelle's kitchen
- smells great, like garlic and olive oil
- piles of pots and pans in the sink
- counter is covered in tomatoes and tomato juice
- bowls and spoons clanging
- dirty dishes everywhere
- hard to find anything in this mess

Solve the Mystery

Now it is time to put it all together. The opening sentence should catch the attention of your readers and draw them in to the mystery. Sometimes it's hard to make the opening sentence as exciting as it should be.



It can be tough to think of a really good opening sentence.



You might want to write the mystery and then go back and write the opening sentence to make it extra exciting.

One way to give the reader clues is to include **dialogue** between the characters. Be sure you make it clear who is speaking. Dialogue can also help to build **suspense**. This will make the reader want to stay with the story to find out whodunit.

ACTIVITY



Write the Mystery

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Write your story on a new piece of paper.
2. Use your planning notes to help you write.
3. Add dialogue to help build suspense.
4. Go back and add an exciting first sentence.
5. Add a title that hints at the puzzle.



An interesting title
will make people want
to read your story.

The Case with a Sticky Solution

Michelle wanted to enter the Sockorama Sauce Contest. The big prize was a chance to spend the day with Chef Jeff, the owner of the best Italian restaurant in town.

Michelle was a good cook, but she was messy. When she cooked, there were dirty pots in the sink. The counter and floor were sticky. Michelle's dog, Honey, licked up spills from the floor. "I'll clean it up when I get the recipe just right," she told her mom.

Finally, Michelle was happy with her recipe. Her friend Nick came by to see how she was doing. Nick was also in the contest.

"I've got the winning recipe," Michelle told him.

"We'll see about that," said Nick.

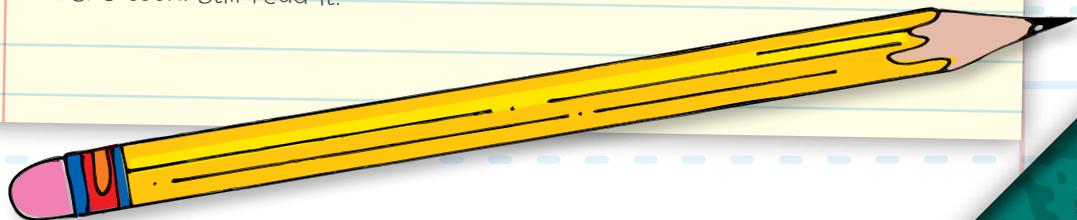
Later that day, Michelle couldn't find her recipe anywhere. She looked all over the kitchen. She asked her family, but no one had her recipe.

"Wasn't Nick here?" asked her sister, Beth. "Maybe he took it so you couldn't win."

Michelle didn't want to think that about her friend, but she could not find the recipe.

Just then, Honey came trotting in the kitchen. "Oh, Honey," said Michelle. "You still have sauce stuck in your fur. Wait a minute! Honey was in the kitchen with me. Maybe the recipe got stuck on him, and he carried it away. Let's check his bed."

Michelle found the recipe in Honey's bed. It was wrinkled and dirty, but she could still read it.





ACTIVITY

Final Changes

Check everything one more time.

- YES NO Does the title hint at the puzzle?
- YES NO Does the opening sentence catch the reader's attention?
- YES NO Does the setting set the mood for the story?
- YES NO Did I give the suspect a strong motive?
- YES NO Did I leave clues to help the reader solve the mystery?
- YES NO Did I include a red herring?
- YES NO Did I use dialogue to help build suspense?

Case Closed



Your family will enjoy trying to solve your mystery together.

Share your mystery with friends and family.
See if they can figure out whodunit before
the end of the story!

Glossary

character (KAR-ik-tur) a person in a made-up story or play

clues (KLEWZ) pieces of information that help the main character or reader solve a mystery

dialogue (DI-uh-lawg) conversation in a story

motive (MOH-tiv) a need or desire that leads a person to do something

mystery (MIS-tur-ee) a story about strange events or crimes that need to be solved

plot (PLAHT) the events of a story

red herrings (RED HARE-ingz) distractions from the real problem

setting (SET-ing) the location where a story takes place

solution (suh-LOO-shun) answer to a problem

suspect (SUHS-pekt) a person thought to have caused the problem

suspense (suh-SPENSS) curiosity about what will happen next

For More Information

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Adler, David A. *Cam Jansen Series*. New York: Viking.

Farrell, Tish. *Write Your Own Mystery Story*. Minneapolis: Compass Point Books, 2006.

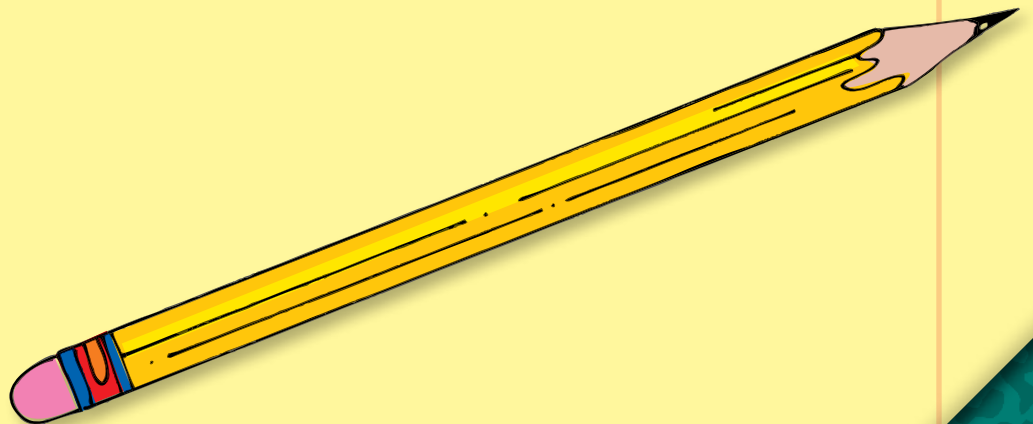
Sharmat, Marjorie Weinman. *Nate the Great Series*. New York: Dell.

WEB SITES

Scholastic—Teachers: Mystery Writing

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mystery/index.htm>

Learn how to write a mystery from a famous mystery writer!



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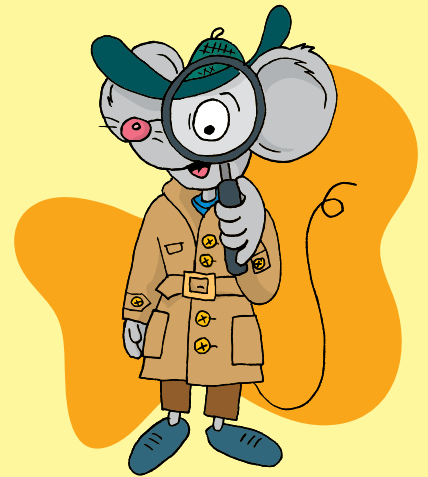
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About the Authors

Cecilia Minden, PhD, is the former director of the Language and Literacy Program at Harvard Graduate School of Education. She earned her doctorate from the University of Virginia. While at Harvard, Dr. Minden also taught several writing courses. Her research focused on early literacy skills and developing phonics curricula. She is now an educational consultant and the author of more than 100 books for children. Dr. Minden lives with her family in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. When she isn't writing, she is reading mysteries!

Kate Roth has a doctorate from Harvard University in language and literacy and a master's from Columbia University Teachers College in curriculum and teaching. Her work focuses on writing instruction in the primary grades. She has taught first grade, kindergarten, and Reading Recovery. She has also instructed hundreds of teachers from around the world in early literacy practices. She lives in Shanghai, China, with her husband and three children, ages 3, 7, and 10. Together they do a lot of writing to stay in touch with friends and family and to record their experiences.



Writing is an important skill that you use almost every day. You use it in school, with friends, at home—almost anywhere! Whether you're working on a school report or journaling about your day, the Language Arts Explorer Junior writing series has tips and tricks that will start you on your way to becoming a writing expert!

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