How to Write and Host Your Own Large Group Murder Mystery Party (For Parties of 20 Or More)

By Susan Haley-Zemanek

Hello, fellow mystery lover!

If you want to create an unforgettable, personalized party your guests will be talking about for months to come then this is the guide for you.

If you've tried those mysteries in a box and found them to be lacking, then this is the guide for you.

If you're bursting at the seams with untapped creativity, then this is indeed the guide for you.

This a how-to guide for mystery lovers and creative party planners like you who want to write and host your own personalized interactive murder mystery game.

In this article, you'll learn how to write, cast and host your own interactive murder mystery game and you'll learn the basic elements that make up a good murder mystery plot.

Happy Reading, Writing & Sleuthing!

Susan Haley

Make it easy on yourself and use coupon code "mmghelp" (no quotes) to purchase one of our murder mystery games!

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Writing it

2. Casting it

3. Guidelines for your prime suspects

4. Party Details

5. Plot and character samples

WRITING IT - THE RECIPE FOR A PERFECT MURDER

Hints to help you get started:

* The setting, events and characters have to come alive for your guests.

* Tell a story! Don't just have a crime, a victim and a detective, give them a reason why they've been brought together other than the superficial solve a murder/crime.

* First step: figure out what the story is and how best to tell that story.

* Second step: figure out what the crime is, who committed the crime and how the criminal will be caught.

Here's how I design my mystery games: They are all geared towards groups of 20 or more. To play the game, you'll need to provide 6-8 people willing to take part in the mystery as the primary suspects, victim(s), detective and killer. They'll have full knowledge of the script, which means they'll know whodunit. The rest of your guests will take on the role of detective and it will be their job to solve the case. Essentially, everyone will have a crucial, interactive part in the mystery. Your guest actors won't have to memorize a lot of dialogue but they will have to be familiar with a sequence of events or timeline that will move the mystery through the clues, the murder(s) and the solving of the crime. They'll have to carry out certain actions (like arguments) and suspicious activities to set themselves up as suspects. I like to pack a lot of action into the mystery to get people active and involved unlike those mysteries-in-a-box where

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

everyone just sits around reading their part and asking questions they get from a booklet.

PLOT. You need to come up with a plot, the cornerstone of the mystery. It will be your crime scene if you will. Why have the primary suspects gathered? What do they all have in common that brings them together to this soon-to-be crime scene? The stakes need to be high for all your primary suspects to give them a motive for murder. Most people murder for love, money or revenge. Sometimes pure insanity is the reason but mostly it's for love, money or revenge.

CHARACTERS. Add your characters, your primary suspects. I would recommend a minimum of 6 but no more than 8 because you want to have enough suspects to keep the mystery challenging but you don't want to have too many to make it confusing. Of those primary suspects, 1 or 2 will be victims. All these characters must be quirky and interesting love 'em or hate 'em types and ALL MUST HAVE MOTIVE. You must give your guests a stake in the primary suspects' lives. Give them a reason to hate the bad guy (usually the 1st victim); give them a reason to ally with another suspect (maybe he's a pathetic mama's boy? Women love to protect this type of character. Or maybe it's the vulnerable, innocent, and dim-witted but stunningly beautiful woman?).

One of your characters should be your "detective" character. He or she doesn't actually have to be a police officer but he should be in charge of the investigation (and yes, he can still have motive). He will be the one who will strongly maintain control and be able to best deal with your guests' questions.

> NOTE: If you want, you can have your first victim come back as a detective character so they can be a part of the entire show. If not, they make great support "backstage". They can prep the clues and the next victim for example.

MOTIVES. Select your victim(s) out of the primary suspect list. Why will they be murdered? As I said, all characters need motive or else the mystery will be too easy to solve or too vague for folks to follow. I like to make a chart where I list the 2 victims at the top of the page and the primary suspects down the side of the page. Then I fill in the motives: unrequited love, jealousy, in debt, feuding and rejection are just some examples of motive. Once you have this chart filled in, you can then proceed to filling in the action. Each character should have a motive-establishing scene with the victims. But more on that later.

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

THE ACTION. Write your sequence of events, with an action of some sort happening every 5 minutes or so. These actions should promote motives, provide clues, logically lead up to the murder(s) and cohesively lead the guests through the mystery. Make sure to add plenty of physical action (chases and fights for example). You don't need to write dialogue because in my opinion it will take away from your audience participation if your primary suspects need to recite and remember dialogue. It becomes a play and not an INTERACTIVE mystery. Simply set the scene and let the suspects improvise their dialogue as the scene unfolds. You should make mystery about 1 1/2 long.

The sequence of action outline that I generally use as my template:

0:00 - 0:15 General mingling and introductions. All primary suspects begin to set up their motive to kill the first victim. Perhaps you can include a welcoming speech to establish the crime scene: why everyone is here.

0:15 Action or physical clue found to establish motive of one of the primary suspects. Actions can include arguments between the victim and the primary suspect; "private" conversations where the audience sees the interaction but cannot hear what is being said - this looks secretive and suspicious; physical fights: water in someone's face, a push and shove match (make sure you practice these ahead of time for safety!)

0:20 Action or physical clue found to establish motive of another of the primary suspects.

0:25 Action or physical clue found to establish motive of another of the primary suspects.

0:30 Action, which is the cue for the 1st death. It could be a nasty speech by the 1st victim, in which she brings up more motives against the primary suspects, for example, or in which the victim reveals that she knows a secret that someone does not want revealed. This action should solidify why this person will be killed.

0:35 1st death. A non-identifying clue is left behind which will eventually lead to the killer. It could be a partial letter from the killer to the victim: "Keep quiet or die. You never should have eavesdropped on my conversation with your father... " (Later, another clue can be found, perhaps a love letter to the father of the victim saying she doesn't want to hurt his young son with their affair. It goes to the killer being a male, which narrows down the suspects if people are paying attention.) In general, you can

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

use a red herring or two but your clues should lead to your killer. You can even put a splash of blood on the killer (he can always say he got it when he touched the body but to the observant eye, he had the blood on him when he entered the room, before they found the body). Hint: Verbal clues are easily missed unless repeated. Most clues should be physical/visual.

0:40 After body is removed; your detective organizes a summation of the crime. Each of the primary suspects accuses another of the crime thus reaffirming each of their motives.

0:50 Action or physical clue found to establish motive for the 2nd victim.

1:00 Action or physical clue found to establish motive for the 2nd victim.

1:10 Action or physical clue found to establish motive for the 2nd victim.

1:15 2nd victim discovered. Clue found that leads to the killer. Be careful here not to give the answer away.

1:20 Final summation and motives; allow your guests to ask the primary suspects questions (you don't want them revealing anything that comes out in the wrap - the confession or reveal, however). All clues should be accessible to your guests as they fill out their solution sheet (on which they describe the victims, the causes of death, the clues, the motives and their theory on whodunit and why).

1:30 You wrap the show. The killer confesses in some dramatic fashion and is either taken down or taken into custody. End your show with a bang, not a whimper. A murderer confessing is one thing but having them take someone hostage as they try and make their escape is much more exciting for example. The more action the better - always!

CAST YOUR MYSTERY

You need to pick role players that are gregarious, creative, outgoing and trustworthy (you want them to take on the role with enthusiasm and you want them to show up on the night of the "show".) They'll have full knowledge of the script and should receive the script ahead of time and be prepared to rehearse it at least once. I usually write a script based on whom I'm going to cast. For example, if you know that you have a gal who

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

loves playing the sex pot, then write a character who's a sex pot take to the role with great zest and enthusiasm.

The rest of your guests will take on the role of detective and it will be their job to figure out whodunit. As you can see, everyone, from primary suspects to guest detectives will actively be involved in the mystery.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR YOUR PRIME SUSPECTS

Include these guidelines with your script:

GUEST PARTICIPATION: Because it's your guests' job to solve this whodunit, you want to involve them as much as possible by allowing them to ask you questions, follow you, examine clues and do whatever they need to do to solve the case. Involve them whenever possible in your arguments & conversations with other suspects. When you're accused of murder, for example, you can use a guest as your alibi. Mingle and chat, as you would do in a normal social situation only this time you're "in character". You're no longer "Sue" but "Ingrid" and don't let the guests tell you otherwise! "Sue" might never tell a guest who was accusing her of murder to go jump in a lake but "Ingrid" might.

HOW TO PREPARE YOURSELF: First, highlight your part. Next, go through the script a few times to get familiar with what you're supposed to do and when you're supposed to do it. Then run it with the rest of the prime suspects so you get a feel for the other characters and how the sequence is supposed to unfold. Practice all physical actions (safety first!) Your audience, depending on how much they get involved, can distract you (in a fun way) because they're so enthusiastic to be a part of it all and solve the case.

WEAR A WATCH: Stick to the times. If you don't stick to the times then you'll find yourself rushing the sequence and soon you'll have no action left but the wrap and the guests are still getting used to the idea of participating in a murder mystery! Use a "cheat sheet" (small cue card) if you need to while mingling with your guests. I'd advise you not to take your complete scripts out in full view of your guests. If a guest gets a hold of the script, the mystery is blown. **DO NOT HESITATE TO LEAVE THE ROOM AT ANY TIME TO CHECK YOUR SCRIPT IF YOU HAVE A QUESTION ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.** That's the glory of improv: you can leave the "stage" if you need to and just pick up where you left off at any time!

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

CHARACTERS: REMEMBER, in a good mystery, everyone has to have motive, means and opportunity to be a suspect. Act like the suspect that you are!

ACCUSATIONS: Everyone should be clear on everyone else's motives so you can effectively accuse each other of murder.

ONE LAST NOTE: KEEP THE ACTION MOVING AROUND THE ROOM SO ALL THE GUESTS SEE AND HEAR WHAT'S HAPPENING. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN YOU'RE ARGUING, STORM AWAY AND TAKE UP THE ARGUMENT IN ANOTHER PART OF THE ROOM.

Remember have fun, let go, be outrageous, and enjoy playing these parts and your guests will automatically follow your lead.

THE PARTY DETAILS

Invitations: When you design your invitations, lets folks know they're invited to solve a murder. Set the scene a bit. "Big Daddy Sugarbaker, billionaire extraordinary, would like to invite you to attend a party in his honor. It may be his last party due to his ill health... " Encourage them to take on a character that befits the storyline and dress the part. Let them know if it's a period piece so they can find a costume in plenty of time. Get them excited about the prospect of participating in and solving a murder mystery. Build up intrigue.

The Detectives' Tools: On the evening of the party, you'll want to provide your guests with a program of some sort that identifies the primary suspects and sets up the crime scene. It will be an excellent guide for your detectives. Also provide them with an "evidence record" (and pen) so they can record the clues and evidence, the victims and cause of death and who they think did it and why. I'd recommend collecting these solution sheets at the end of the mystery and before you reveal your killer. Give an Outstanding Detective Award to the person or persons who solve the case to recognize them for a job well done.

Setting the "Stage": Of course, depending on the theme of your mystery, any additional "atmosphere" you can create via props and staging will only add to the mystery. If you already have enough on your plate, don't worry about it. Your primary suspects and your story will create the atmosphere. When my professional troupe performs our mysteries, 9 out of 10 times we're in a boring hotel function room. Never

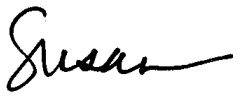
©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.

have I had anyone complain about the decor or lack thereof. They get so involved with the actual mystery, the only thing they're paying attention to are the primary suspects.

The Menu: Another element you might want to consider when creating your mystery evening is the menu. If you're doing a country and western mystery, then it might call for a BBQ for example. Or if you're doing a Hawaiian luau, then more tropical dishes would fit the bill. Again, it's only a consideration but it's not necessary.

The Party Set-Up: I suggest you work the mystery around your dinner and its courses (and no you do NOT need to include a full dinner if you don't want to but do provide beverages and finger food of some sort). It always works best to create the drama and intrigue right away. Your guests arrive excited about the mystery evening ahead of them so don't make them wait until after dinner (besides their mental energy level will be a lot lower after a meal and you want them ready, willing and able to participate). Upon their arrival, your cast should already be in character, setting the scene. Give your sleuths a program (remember it's their guide to the mystery), solution sheet and pen as they arrive. Wrap your whodunit during coffee and dessert. (NOTE: In order for your guests to enjoy both the meal and the mystery, you never want anything too dramatic happening during the actual courses or while your guests are in a buffet line.)

Thanks for reading!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Haley is the Chief Imagination Officer & Creative Director at Haley's Downloadable Games

Scavenger Hunts :: Mystery Games :: Kids' Games :: Team Bonding Games

Website: www.haleyproductions.com

©Susan Haley-Zemanek. All rights reserved.