

# **Elementary, My Dear Watson: Mystery and Suspense Writing to Expand Thinking**

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## **Contents**

Overview  
Rationale  
Objectives  
Strategies  
Classroom Activities  
Annotated Bibliography/Resources  
Appendices-Standards

## **Overview**

From the time we were born we have been reaching and grasping to figure out; knocking things over and about to get at the truth; or looking closely at details and trying to put one and one together to make two. We are creatures of curiosity. We want to know Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? While young we revel in exploring, discovering, finding out and learning. Some how, though, as we get more deeply involved in the intricacies of formal education much of the passion, enthusiasm, and curiosity for figuring out or solving is often snuffed. And, as we mature, we feel a certain “Eureka!” when we do figure out a missing part of a puzzle or hit upon the right answer after having struggled and wrestled with our own thoughts or simply hit upon something by accident.

What happens to us at school that makes us not want to indulge in mind play? Research suggests that students have little difficulty in making judgments about what they read but what is lacking are the problem-solving and critical thinking skills to explain or defend their judgments in writing. Further, the research does not cite as the cause that students have any cognitive inability to respond analytically. Rather through the current emphasis in testing and instruction on multiple choice and short answer responses, students are simply not used to undertaking critical thinking tasks. Included in this curriculum unit are a range of thinking tasks and writing experiences that make use of mystery writing and the reading of mystery and suspense texts to develop cognitive abilities which foster critical thinking skills.

It appears that we are at a critical place in education in that the institution of school as we know it needs to move in the direction of society's development. For example, until recently most education has focused on left hemisphere thinking activities; problem solving analysis that leads to the right or wrong answer. Now, however, with all the technological advances impinging on and influencing children, as educators we need to move toward right hemisphere thinking activities which are concerned with developing reason and morals which result in the shaping of more humanistic behaviors. The two underlying questions that I am begging are: (1) What are we educating for? and, (2) How are we going about it? To answer these questions all any teacher need do is look within the walls of his own classroom and the dynamics of intellectual reason and social interaction which take place.

Much of the theoretical stance on which this curriculum unit is based is derived from the well-known model of problem solving referred to as the four stage model: (1) identification of a problem and initial unsuccessful attempts to solve it; (2) a period of latency with no evident progress; (3) a moment of illumination in which a potential solution is conceived or identified; and (4) verification of the solution. Using this model as a base, the writing of mystery and suspense tasks are scaffolded in a way that students must return to something already learned and apply it in order to move forward to the next task.

## **Rationale**

The face of the Pittsburgh School District is experiencing a reshaping and rethinking of what is important for student learning and how to go about teaching what it is they should know. Recently, a new Communications curriculum was adopted which focuses on skill development as a means to the end of increasing student scores on state assessment tests. It is my intention that the curriculum unit presented here will work in tandem with the newly adopted curriculum and augment the depth of student learning we all hope for as professional educators.

I teach sixth, seventh, and eighth grade Communications in a public Montessori magnet school where we are in the process of developing a curriculum that is "more Montessori." However, the state standards and achievement scores are still the driving forces for the direction of what in the long run, will actually be a "Montessori-like" curriculum. In the Upper-Middle Level, more than sixty-five percent of the students are achieving at a basic or below basic level in reading and writing on state school assessment tests.

The rationale for creating a curriculum unit on expanding critical thinking skills arises from my concern for middle school students who make very little effort if any to undertake a task and think it through to completion. This may well have as much to do with the students' cognitive capacity as well as their internal motivation. We are in a time of competing with the internet, text-messaging, talking on cell phones, online gaming, TV, movies, DVD's and so many other digital and multimedia sources that adding an element such as mystery and suspense writing and the thinking skills that go along with it is critical at this time. Why? In the everyday life of the student, he experiences or hears about something that is not solved. For example, did someone scam several senior citizens for insurance money; did thieves burglarize a neighborhood while everyone was at work; did someone posing as a grandmother kidnap a child from the nursery? This is a curriculum unit that presents opportunities for students to use their background knowledge within the school setting. It is a way to help students to engage their real life experiences in a safe environment and within the context of literature and writing. They can articulate their world (and this in itself may be freeing for some students), while developing their thinking capacity.

Many teachers, as I do, believe that the students described above and others like them, who demonstrate similar cognitive constraints, simply have not had enough practice with particular thinking exercises. The students simply don't know how to think independently. I also have concern for the students who claim that they "...just can't imagine!" Then there are those students who make connections between ideas that in no way make logical sense in any realm of reason and leave me baffled and stretching my own intellect to grasp some way to understand the disconnected connection. These three ways of student thinking have particular implications for the classroom as well as for the broader space of society. This curriculum unit provides students an opportunity to develop cognitive constructs based on graphic organizers which enhance critical thinking skills. It also provides an opportunity for students to make use of the writing process which is promoted in writing for a portfolio intended to keep track of student progress in writing.

It worries me that students have become so sedentary in their thinking and have such huge gaps in their reasoning skills. This of course may well be the result of several factors one of which was mentioned in the Overview regarding the current emphasis on testing and instruction on multiple choice and short answer responses. Another cause is that students have at their fingertips technological and media sources that require little awareness of original and purposeful thought. Also some of these same sources don't require interaction or communication with another human being, so students don't have practice engaging a healthy dynamic which helps shape wholesome and responsible people. As a result, many students have become abstract random thinkers who

have unconsciously developed thinking patterns that accord with the video games they play, the quick clip images on the videos they watch, and the rise- and- fall gallop of the music they listen to. Unfortunately, for these students, it doesn't seem necessary to be aware of one's thinking; their thoughts are just a given part of the flow. One last reason is that many students have been trained at home and at school to function as passive learners, just empty vessels into which information is poured. The minds of the children and the environment of purposeful thinking are at a mismatch on many levels of which only three have been mentioned here.

The students I have described above are not fictional characters. Each type actually exists within my classroom. For the development of these student types, in this curriculum unit the focus is on right hemisphere thinking activities that develop the reasoning skills needed for seeing patterns, making generalizations, making inferences, reasoning by analogy, recognizing cause and effect (and distinguishing these from events that merely occur close in time), spatial perception, recognizing relations, discovery, creativity, and asking and answering such questions as: "What would happen if...?" "What might be done about...?" "This is what happened. What might have been the matter?" "Why do you suppose...?" and "How would you go about...?" All of these questions can be asked as students write about what they read across content as well as what is transferred over and applied to everyday real life situations.

One fundamental problem that some middle school students have is the undeveloped and/or unrefined cognitive abilities to express what they mean. These underdeveloped thinking and reasoning skills show up in student writing. This may well include lack of vocabulary, poor sentence structure and incoherent organization of thoughts and ideas or just coming up with ideas in the first place. They write something, but it makes sense only to them, maybe. This is particularly so of informational writing because the structures within the writing appear to be different than those of narrative writing. It is therefore assumed that cognitive structures must be different as well, in order that clear and cohesive expression of thought is exhibited. Another problem may be the ever and overused lack-of-confidence syndrome. It shows up in students who have the attitude that writing is boring and they don't have anything to write about. In this case the students may have experienced so much failure and anxiety that they have developed a negative attitude toward writing. This attitude has further led them to believe that they can't write and consequently they disengage themselves from the writing process. They then come to believe that it does not matter whether or not they have the cognitive abilities to write well. Once the students disengage from the writing process, this belief toward writing keeps them distanced from writing. A third reason for not wanting to write may stem from the idea that as writers, students don't know what type of writing they might enjoy or

be excited by. Moreover, they may not know the types of genres that exist for them to write.

This curriculum unit provides students the opportunity to expand thinking through engaging the writing process. This curriculum unit offers various ways to put thinking at the center of writing. After all, writing is a thinking process and writing mystery in particular can lead to various levels of progressive, cumulative and recursive thinking experiences depending on how writing tasks are shaped. I use the reading and writing of mystery and suspense as the genre to support the development of critical thinking skills. In this way literary elements can be drawn on and taught, and the writing process can be used as a tool one needs in order to see, understand better, and hence learn more. It is the idea that reading and writing are language activities that function as purveyors of special ways of thinking and learning; in other words special ways of students' coming to know. The activities are designed to encourage students to analyze, reflect, engage in group discussion, synthesize information from various experiences and observations and in some instances realize that more background information is needed.

Included here are a range of thinking tasks and writing experiences that facilitate cognitive growth and foster critical thinking. Using the writing of mystery, activities are scaffolded in such a way that students must go back to something they have already learned in order to move forward to the next task. I particularly use cognitive models that can function as templates or frameworks that can help move a student's thinking from conception to completion. The following cognitive schemas are used to help develop thinking through writing:

1. spatial -panorama
2. spiral - convergent
3. connectivity/ relatedness -contextualizing
4. linear – chronological sequence

The literary elements that are focused on are perspective, character, setting, and plot development. In using the cognitive schemas together with these literary elements, students can develop and apply critical thinking skills which help them write their way to unearthing the sleuth "who dun it."

### **Writing Mystery and Suspense**

Jeremiah Healy gives ten rules for writing mystery of which, of course, some are meant to be broken. These rules are said to govern the private investigator novel, but they are just as applicable for struggling student writers. So, I have modified them somewhat for school use.

- Rule 1 - The plot is everything. (Do Not Bend)
- Rule 2 - The hero must be male. (Bend)
- Rule 3 - The setting will be Los Angeles. (Bend)
- Rule 4 - Some violence is required. (Do Not Bend. However for school appropriate writing, the actual violence must appear as mischief or a misdemeanor that has already taken place.)
- Rule 5 - Certain violence is prohibited and includes graphic scenes of child abuse, rape, and cruelty to animals. (Do Not Bend)
- Rule 6 - Write in the first-person narrative. (Do Not Bend unless you are an accomplished writer.)
- Rule 7 - The hero cannot be the culprit. (Do Not Bend)
- Rule 8 - The culprit must appear early in the story. (Do Not Bend)
- Rule 9 - Use only two-character scenes with the protagonist and one other person. (Do Not Bend.)
- Rule 10 - Authenticity is required. (Do Not Bend)

## **Objectives**

One of the main objectives of this unit is to arouse and reawaken in students the desire to be curious, to imagine and in short to disentangle their minds from the grips of media images and sound bytes in order to reclaim their own imaginations or to give voice to the unsolved stories of their personal lives. Another objective of this unit is that students employ and develop higher order thinking skills. These thinking skills are those that go beyond the basic skills of recall and comprehend. Here I am more concerned with the particular skills of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as described in Bloom's categories in the cognitive domain. Another objective is that the students be able to identify the literary elements of perspective, character, setting, and plot development when reading mystery and suspense "Whodunits." Hand in hand with this objective is that the students be able to participate in class discussions making use of the knowledge and language that is applicable to mystery and suspense. In another vein is that students use the writing process as a means for using these same literary elements to write their own mystery and suspense "Whodunit?" Also, in writing, students will be able to produce and use three word banks to help them create clear images. The three lists are: 1. precise and vivid adjectives; 2. qualifying adverbs; and 3. strong verbs. Another objective is that students will work in small groups and use class discussions as a forum to share their thinking and to hear the thinking of others.

## Strategies

The strategies presented here are arranged in an order that allows students to go back and use what has already been learned in order to move ahead. Graphic organizers offered here map out ways for students to practice using right hemisphere thinking to produce sets of ideas, organize them, arrange concepts and relations, and to fit in what they know. These graphic organizers are also aimed to help the student simultaneously hold the characteristics of a particular audience in mind as well as the parameters of the writing assignment. For struggling and inexperienced thinkers, this is a tough task with, and particularly without, helping structures to provide graduated assistance to achieve higher levels of thinking competence. Graphic organizers function as helping structures and in a way are similar to the mother board directing electrical impulses inside a computer or the online gaming that is so popular with my students. So, I usually work with graphic organizers to help students see their thinking in concrete form. Struggling students in particular need a longer stretch of thought that extends from the mind down through the arm and emerging through the fingers gripping pencil to paper. This movement, as studies show, improves judgment, memory, and social cognition. Graphic organizers also help students develop their metacognitive abilities.

### Strategy 1 - Read Aloud and Class Discussion

This strategy helps students develop and demonstrate a degree of mastery of the mystery genre and writing process subject matters as well as identify literary elements. If we want students to be better writers we must provide two things above all others: provide them opportunities to read a lot and write a lot. Reading short one to five page stories aloud and discussing them as a class is a good way to get students interested in writing a story of their own. Before, during and after reading strategies should be used to aid in comprehension as well as to discover the literary elements of mystery and suspense being used by an author. In a class of struggling students it is better to work as a whole class. Go through a story and plot the sequence of events; use the five ways of revealing a character to sketch out the main character; tell where certain objects are in relation to others and try to make a map of a room in the story; list possible clues This is a good strategy to get students to share their own thinking and to hear the thinking of others. It also is a strategy to get the students excited about writing. Some mystery and suspense stories found in the literature book can be useful for this strategy.

### Strategy 2

Writing Strategy: Brainstorming

Cognitive Schema: Spatial - Panorama

## Literary Element: Perspective - Omniscient Narrator

Brainstorming is a technique that sparks lots of ideas. The purpose of brainstorming is to produce as many ideas as possible without stopping to consider whether or not they are realistic, sound “funny” or “stupid”, or have any value to the topic. This process provides space for creativity and motivates the student to a higher level of thinking by drawing from a set of diverse experiences as well as ideas that are not yet cultivated or seem unusual. This step has often proved difficult for the struggling writers whom I teach. They claim that they “...can’t think of anything,” or “It’s too hard.” In actuality though, I believe the fact that they are simply not confident about their cognitive abilities is an obstacle hindering their growth.

For example, I have a student Orlando, who is in a constant state of ‘I can’t think of anything.’ I met Orlando when he came to sixth grade. He had virtually hit a brick wall when it came to thinking. “I don’t know,” was his patent response to any question that was not basic recall of facts or details. When it came to writing, Orlando was just as stumped in his thinking. Even after the assignment was explained, a brainstorming model and a guided practice provided, Orlando would still sit baffled about how and where to begin. Inevitably, when I approached him, Orlando would say, “I don’t know what to write about,” or he would ask, “What should I write about?” I am not so sure that Orlando didn’t know what to write about as much as he lacked the cognitive confidence to take risks and use what he already knew and to use his own imagination. This strategy gives space for students to associate what they already know with new information as they make decisions based on employing differentiating skills.

The panorama cognitive schema describes a wide-open and clear view in all directions as from a mountaintop. In literary terms this may be likened to an omniscient narrator; a see all, hear all, and know all. Implementing this strategy entails giving the student opportunity to think, think, and think some more. Many struggling thinkers, and hence readers and writers, often begin writing about the first thing they think. They rarely reach beyond to expand their ideas or connect initial ideas to other thoughts. Their sense of flow has been shut down at the very point of departure that would further expand thinking. Again, I believe this has much to do with the overload of images, sound bites, and bits and pieces of media driven texts rather than direct interaction with written texts.

This spatial thinking schema involves a metacognitive strategy that leads students to see interrelations and structures connected in space. The graphic organizer for this strategy is shaped to scaffold a panoramic perceptual skill in a concrete space and encourages students to fashion, monitor, and to reshape their thoughts in a broad, global or holistic way. The idea is to provide a thinking

experience that encourages and nudges struggling writers to expand their thinking capacity. They need to understand through scaffolding exercises and practice that the more ideas one can generate, the more possibilities can be created; hence more choices, more thinking and more risks. The graphic organizer should be structured as a very simplistic diagram. A graphic organizer for a panorama thinking experience should be used after the student has decided on a mystery topic to write about. For particularly struggling thinkers, this graphic organizer can be modified to include fewer frames.

What this graphic organizer suggests is that the Main Frame (MF) at the center is the mystery the student is writing about. On the left and right of the MF are the ideas that may have something to do with the MF in a general way and may or may not be used in the writing piece at all. The rectangles labeled Foreground Frame (FF) represent ideas or information that is guided by the use of frontloading strategies whereby the teacher begins the scaffolding process by aiding the students in accessing prior knowledge; providing opportunity for interacting with a literary element that will be used in the writing assignment: setting; characterization; sequence of events; or any literary device, as in this case omniscient narrator. The FF may also be used to identify vocabulary words that can be used; or any exercise that will help the student begin to construct meaning before they begin writing a draft. The rectangles labeled Background (BF) represent bits and pieces of information that the student brings to this step of the writing activity. This background information may include text knowledge, world knowledge, and a fund of folk knowledge derived from experience.

The panorama brainstorming graphic organizer provides thinking practice for struggling thinkers like Orlando. It offers the student opportunity to write ideas in spaces already provided like a fill in the blank. This becomes their bank of ideas to draw from as they have to do more thinking and sifting to decide which ideas are useful, which ones to save for later and which ones to pitch out altogether. The students must apply the higher level thinking skill “evaluate” in order to measure the value of each of their ideas.

### Strategy 3

Writing Strategy: General to Specific

Cognitive Schema: Spiral – Convergent

Literary Element: Main Character

The general to specific writing strategy gives the student opportunity to establish a structural design that will underlie his writing. He will start broadly and spiral down to precise details. This allows the student to begin to decide, to shape the character and to pursue that shape. This strategy leads the struggling thinker to begin at the general cognitive level where most of his thinking takes place and

where he is most comfortable. He can begin with direct characterization and with the inherent scaffold of the graphic organizer, spiral down to include characteristics or traits that will make the character interesting. Also included here is anything about this character that will affect the action in the story. This writing strategy evolves from the scheme of procedure inherent in the scaffolding process that a specific graphic organizer provides for this purpose.

Convergent thinking means to approach the same point from different directions. It is a way to direct the flow of thought as if pouring water down the neck of a bottle through a funnel. It involves analytical reasoning, evaluating possibilities and then narrowing down to a single goal. The spiral cognitive schema given here provides the student with practice in going from the general to the specific. The goal here is to develop a character with one or two precise and detailed traits that help keep the abstract-random thinker focused and not sidetracked by what he may consider many other interesting possibilities. For many middle school students who are struggling thinkers, staying focused is not an easy task. In fact, often times, when these students describe a character, the character changes in so many ways that the story begins to ramble or fall apart and when all else fails, the student makes a sudden move and reverts to what he thinks is a safe and easy way to end the story by writing, "...and it was all just a dream." On other occasions the student may hurriedly introduce life threatening aliens that the main character fights to the end, loses and the story is over, but if there is victory for the main character, then the ending is "happily ever after".

Aristotle said, "Our characters are a result of our conduct." These days we could say, in other words, "We are what we do." The main character is the major actor in the story. He or she will determine in which direction the action will grow based on his or her desire and behavior. The main character must be shown to have been changed or affected by the events in the story in such a way that at the end of the story he or she must be shown to have been moved to a different emotional state or understanding than at the beginning of the story.

There are five basic ways for a writer to show what a character is like. Struggling thinkers will usually describe a character using the method of direct characterization. It is much easier for them to state directly or tell what the character is like than to show through indirect characterization, which explains the other four methods of showing what a character is like. For example, students find it easier to say directly (telling or interpreting as an author), "Tameka is a gossip," rather than indirectly by giving her actual speech (voice); what she is thinking or feeling (thought or emotion); her actions (action); or how other characters respond to her (image).

A graphic organizer that makes use of the five basic ways that a writer reveals what a character is like can take the shape of an outline of a body of the character whether it be human, or in the case of writing for younger children, animal, plant, or any insentient object. "Character's Thoughts and Feelings" is written inside the outline of the body. To the right of the outline is a huge callout bubble in which is written "Character's Words" and below the callout bubble are three (3) to six (6) lines headed "Character's Actions."

The general to specific thinking to develop a main character that this graphic organizer presents allows students to practice higher level thinking skills of analytical reasoning and evaluating the possibilities. This graphic organizer will help the struggling student to keep focused as a writer, to narrow down the character's description, and to make the character interesting to the reader. Convergent thinking exercises nudge the abstract-random thinker to be precise, to include details and to stay on track.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is one of the best ways to make a story interesting and to set the pace of the story. Dialogue can do all the things that narrative writing does. As mentioned above, for example, it can provide information about a character. Instead of writing; It had been years since Gloria had seen her son, Allen. It could be written in dialogue form as, "It's been years since I've seen my son Allen," said Gloria. Dialogue can also reveal character. Again instead of writing, Heather has such a bad temper, it could be said in dialogue form as, "So help me," Heather shrieked, "if you ask me that one more time, I am going to slap your face, and I mean hard!" The reader can get a better sense of Heather's temper as her anger is brought from the passive to the active and from the abstract to the concrete. So, the words a character speaks reveal him in three ways: what he says, how he says it, and the fact that he has said it. Let students know that to learn to use dialogue effectively, listen to what people say and how they say it. Through this kind of practice, students can analyze the tone and impact of speech rhythms as they function to purvey meaning.

Dialogue should be used when a writer can provoke, humor, color, characterize, and stir an emotion better with a character's words than can be done with their own narration. Using dialogue brings the characters front and center where the back and forth motion of the spoken words between them creates a tug of war tension or pull that draws the story tighter. The speakers need not be adversaries, there just needs to be some issue, some question or some space between them. In this way the use of dialogue can help students see that not only is character being revealed through the tension created by dialogue, but also that

the story is being moved forward as a result of the back and forth movement of talk.

Another function of dialogue is to break up huge blocks of narrative. This is especially true for struggling students who write on and on often times without paragraphs breaks. Using dialogue can help break up huge blocks of print and make the format more inviting and pleasing to the eye. Dialogue can also help create a sense of place, a sense of time such as the Great Depression, describe a place and summarize much of what has already occurred.

#### Strategy 4

Writing Strategy: Contextualizing

Cognitive Schema: Connectivity - Relatedness

Literary Element: Setting

Contextualizing is the idea of giving substance and life to that space in which something significant takes place. It is bringing texture: boundaries, history, culture, memory, codes of behavior, and the structure of language to bear on the space and give it meaning. Setting is not only the backdrop scenery but also, and more importantly, the connectivity of the interwoven relationships that create a totality of impression. For example, “The sunken pillows of my grandmother’s settee always seem to swallow me in memories of playing hide and seek in the parlor.” It is the relationship of the settee and me that brings life to the environment so the environment can function to support the meaning of the action that takes place. Or, “The straight backs of the dining room chairs reminded me of my grandmother’s strictness particularly when it came to using good manners.” This kind of depth of understanding based on how and in what ways things are connected or related is what we push for students to discover and use in their own writing.

#### Visualization

It should be explained to the students how difficult it is for a reader to experience a story if it takes place in “no place no-time.” So if a student writes, “Mr. Shaw went to the store,” which many struggling thinker-reader-writer students do, he is leaving the reader hanging in midair with more questions than contextual images. But if the student writes, “Running from his front door, Mr. Shaw hopped in his gray mercury and swerving to avoid potholes, sped east on Fourth Avenue to the CVS,” the reader would get a clearer image of the action as well as begin to have a sense of where things are located in relation to other things. Also included for the reader are specific colors and shapes, a sense of urgency, and a little push deeper into the story to find out why Mr. Shaw is in such a rush. The idea is to get

students as writers to understand that the reader needs to see the action and images of the story going on in his head.

With struggling thinkers it is always best to begin simple, often times one sentence or one paragraph at a time, and build toward story. This means beginning by having each student draw his own visual map of a room and populate it with various objects. This visualization will serve as the basis for the discussion and description of setting. Students will use this information in a new domain. Even those students who claim that they can't draw will tap into their memories and create a visual of a room with which they are familiar.

### Descriptive Writing

Description is based on using our five senses. We need to have students include concrete details to stimulate the reader's senses because that is how we take in the world around us. There is no substitute for the five senses and the impressions they make on us. One strategy to help flesh out setting is to practice descriptive writing. I always begin with an exercise that offers at least one way to think about it; whatever *it* is. For descriptive writing, begin with connecting color to objects. This is a strategy that gets down to the nitty-gritty of detail. It is a strategy that helps students to see difference within sameness and begin to understand shades of meaning. Students have to use analyzing skills and determine, for example, how to differentiate this shade of green from the other shades of green. Some responses to the six green squares have been light green, mint green, pale green, money green, lettuce green, celery green, misty green, army green and neon green. At times when a student exclaims, "That's not celery green (or some other green)!" time can be taken to explain perspective in that we all don't see things in the same way. Noticeably, students start to use this strategy not only with other colors but also with shapes and sizes which in turn gives them more exercise in this way of thinking and broadens their understanding of detail and precise meaning.

#### Strategy 5

Writing Strategy: Chronological Sequence

Cognitive Strategy: Linear

Literary Element: Plot Development

Plot is the conceptual framework of a story but not the story itself. Parts of the framework: characters, setting, and language of the structure fit together to make a story. The plot is the nuts and bolts that hold the parts together. All of these parts, as one, move together chronologically as story line or plot. It begins at one point in time and moves to a later point in time. And, sometimes, in between the beginning point and the later point is a return to an earlier time, yet the time is still

moving in a chronological direction as one thing is happening after another. Another defining element of plot is the chain of cause and effect. The cause must have a consequence that is causally related. This is where many struggling thinkers begin to not make sense as they connect a consequence to a cause that is totally unrelated. I see this happening when after a student has read a story and is asked inference questions or asked to draw conclusions; the thinking is not based on text evidence. The student argues that his response is correct because, “Like see, if...” and what the student begins to espouse exists somewhere way outside the text and the response goes with his story but not the text that was read. This strategy will give students practice in comparing and discriminating between ideas and to make choices based on reasoned argument.

So, a plot is a chronological series of events that have a causal relation to each other. Each event must be more intense than the preceding one. Each should be more exciting as we move along, but need not occur in one straight chronological line. It may be an act of recursive time; the moving forward and going back to pick up more and coming forward again, this time with more information or understanding. The main character needs something and is going to try to get it. He may need the answer to “whodunit.” He has to struggle to get it and experiences obstacles and conflicts; and his circumstances get tighter and tighter. The level of intensity should be headed toward a more important or even dangerous level. If the main character can’t get what he needs or solve the problem, something terrible will happen. At this point possibilities narrow and the main character must take a huge risk or die. And, this is the resolution.

The linear movement straight along in time is probably the easiest for struggling thinkers. However, they can be nudged along with a series of questions that send them back to gather information then bring it to bear on the present. The questions help students create a recursive timeline of events.

### Clues, Red Herrings, and Motives

Clues are hints along the way to get the main character moving in the direction to be tracked. Then the red herrings which appear are false clues that function to complicate and confuse the trail as well as to distract the main character from the real objective. Next, is the question “Whodunit?” Each student must now go back to the victim or object and ask, “Who might want this person or object in this particular circumstance? Why? What is the motive?”

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Activity 1- Tap Background Knowledge**

The first activity is to have students define what they think a mystery is. Pose the following questions: 1. What is a mystery? 2. How do you know a mystery when you hear one? Or, what does the word mystery make you think? 3. What makes a story a mystery? List all the responses on the board, chart paper, overhead projector, or smartboard to each of the questions. Go through each response and ask the students: Which information can be put in a Knowledge Fund as true or relevant to mystery? Which can be put in the Trash Bin as not true (retrievable)? Explain that all the information generated will be saved for later discussions. And, the information in the Knowledge Fund and that in the Trash Bin will continually be added to and taken away from in order to refine the information created. It is knowledge in the process of verification; becoming known or what we know mystery is and is not.

### **Activity 2- Read Aloud and Discuss Flash Fiction Mysteries**

This activity consists of reading at least five short mysteries (2-3pages) aloud and one or two should be assigned as silent reading. Some appropriate mysteries to serve as models can be found in The Little Giant Book of Whodunits by Hy Conrad or any other mysteries that are suitable for your students. Some may even be found in the school literature book, but they tend to be longer. After reading each mystery, ask the students: “Whodunit?” Then, go back through the story and prove it by asking questions based on the Fund of Knowledge created. If certain elements have not been included in the Fund of Knowledge add them with student or teacher explanations. Some other questions might be: What was the motive? What were the clues? What was the distraction? Why couldn't it have been some other character? (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

The discussions should be based on the accountable talk structures. There are two important guidelines on which students should focus and use. One is: Build on what others have said by saying, “I agree with/disagree with...because...,” or “I understand how ...thinks that, but I think...” The other guideline helpful for knowledge building through discussion is: Use text evidence to back up your statements by saying, “I believe ... because in the story it says...” Get the students talking and encourage them to use the literary language associated with the mystery genre.

### Activity 3- Brainstorm Possible Topics

The next activity, by whole or small group, or individually have students use the information generated. Ask the students to list, according to the Fund of Knowledge created, the mysteries that have occurred in their home, neighborhood, school, or the world at large. The mystery can be anything from who sneaked mom's favorite cookie from the cookie jar, to who sent a birthday present to Mr. Charlie, to how do Niko's old smelly gym socks get in Jasmine's sweet and neat locker, to who and how someone's identity was stolen. Recently, in my classroom, a literature book was discovered with the cover ripped off. This was a "Whodunit" case that served as an example that the whole class participated in to try and solve. And, we went back and forth until the culprit, fearing a heavier consequence for silence now, and being discovered later, confessed.

### Activity 4- Select and Chart a Topic

For this activity, two heads might be better than one, particularly for struggling reader-writer-thinkers. The students select a topic from the list they brainstormed. The idea is to provide a graphic organizer similar to the one described in Strategy 1. So, after the students have selected a topic, they are to chart it by writing the topic in the center rectangle. In rectangles located in front of the center MF are the Foreground Frames in which students write information about mystery stories developed by the class. One FF identifies the story as theft, mischief, or some other problem; in another FF the students write whether the story will be scary or funny, and in a third FF the student includes special mystery related vocabulary words, and so on with other FF being clues, motives, and red herrings. In the right and left Peripheral Frames (PF) frames are red herring characters and their stories which are related to the selected topic in MF. In the Background Frames (BF) are bits and pieces of information the students bring from their previous knowing; their personal background knowledge. The students complete the graphic organizer. It is here that the students may find that they need more information and some opportunity for research should be provided. (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

Mystery Questions: Will the story be a murder, a burglary, or some other problem that needs solved? Will it be scary or funny? Who will tell the story? Who would have motive to do it? Where? When? How? Who knows what, how much, and when did he/she find out?

Assignment: Have each student write a note to a classmate giving them information about a story he is going to write. Students should include answers to the Mystery Questions. Students should fold their notes, write a classmate's name

on it and pass it if possible, undetected by the teacher, sometime during the class period. If the teacher catches the note, IT WILL BE READ ALOUD AND DISCUSSED!!!

#### Activity 5- Write a Character Sketch

For this activity students will draw an outline of their main character, whatever it is. Inside the body where the heads located, students should be instructed to write “character’s thoughts and feelings. Next, students draw a talk bubble to the right of the outline and label it “characters words.” Students then draw five lines on the same right hand side of the diagram and label it “character’s actions.” To this I always like to add a description box where students write how the character looks, how he sounds, and some defining physical feature like a small moon shaped scar at the edge of the left eyebrow, which may be noticeable if one looks closely or an observable habit like a kid in my old high school who pulled at his right earlobe when he got nervous. (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

Another activity to reveal character and will lead to what action the character will perform and build the character’s image is to have students fill out the following sentence:

(Name) is a (adjective) \_\_\_\_\_-year-old (noun) who wants\_\_\_\_\_. Next, have the students write down what makes their character: laugh, afraid, angry, awed, tender, ashamed, obsessed, or other.

If people are characterized by what they choose, wear, or own, they are also revealed by what they throw away. Have students write a character sketch based on describing what is found in the character’s waste basket.

Mystery Question: What might have been/be the matter and/or what does the character want? Why do you suppose the main character...?

Assignment: Have the students write a 1-2 paragraph character sketch which includes answering the Mystery Question (s).

#### Activity 6- Write Dialogue

Students love to talk but they don’t particularly care for writing. This exercise is designed to get the students to write their talk in a structured, fun and challenging way. The first exercise will help students understand that by writing specific lengths of dialogue they can establish mood, build tension, heighten conflict and expand characterization. They can also see clearly that each time the speaker changes, a new line is started. First, find a very small conflict or disagreement. Use only two characters (A and B). The dialogue will be written in pairs without

discussion, just the paper being passed back and forth between them. Concentrate on two distinct voices. For example, it could be two characters from one of the student's brainstorming graphic. One student can be the main character and the other student can be the bad guy. Then the students can switch and that way support each other in their thinking and writing. Or the teacher can make up the conflict and have all students do the same one to show the endless scenarios possible. Make sure students follow the rules for the amount of words to be used in each line of dialogue. For example, the first five exchanges are two to four words in length; the next four exchanges are one to two words long; after this, the next two exchanges are only one word; then the next exchange is twenty or more words; the next two exchanges are four to six words; and the last exchange is character A getting two to four words of dialogue and character B getting only one or two words. The students write until they complete the last line and stop whether they have reached a resolution or not. (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

Another dialogue exercise which students love involves comics. Cut four comics from the newspaper. One comic clearly showing the use of talk bubbles; a second showing the use of thought bubbles; a third showing the narrator box above the scene; and the fourth showing the use of onomatopoeia (Pow! Crrrack! Etc.) Ask students: 1. How can you tell a character is talking? 2. How can you tell a character is thinking? 3. Who is talking in the box above the scene? 4. Why did the writer put in sound words? As a whole class activity, work together with the students to lift the talk in the comic and transform it into a formal dialogue. Here is included a lesson on the use and punctuation of quotation marks and qualifying words. Also, a lesson on the use of precise qualifying words or dialogue tags (said, whispered, screamed, stuttered, shrieked, etc.) to add to mood or intensity in the story can be done here. The dialogue tags make a great Word Wall which serves as an easy and accessible source for students.

Mystery Questions: What is he going to say now that she said that? How is he/she saying it?

Assignment: Have students create a comic strip of 4-5 frames using the tools of dialogue using tools for talk in comics. The students should portray their main character in action with a red herring character or the actual culprit as shown on their brainstorming graphic organizer. Of course, then, have the students transfer the language in their comic strip to formal written dialogue and extend it where necessary. Let the Mystery Questions guide your dialogue exchange between character while keeping in mind the description of you main character and others.

### Activity 7-Visualize Place

Encourage the students to close their eyes and enter a room with which they are very familiar. Ask if the shape of the room is oval shaped, rectangular, L-shaped, or pretty much a square? Guide the students to look around the room inside their minds. Take time to touch, feel, smell, and hear the room. Be sure to include asking what feeling or mood permeates the room. For example, touch an object. What does it feel like? Is it smooth, rough, silky? Continue this suggestive lead for each of the five senses and be sure to include asking what feeling or mood permeates the room. After opening their eyes have the students draw the shape of the room. The students then add furniture; pictures of people, places, or things; knick-knacks; appliances; windows with curtains or shades or neither and anything else that is usually laying around in the room. Students can color the drawing with crayons, colored pencils or markers. Here a lesson on spatial transitions will be helpful. For discussion, in small groups, each student explains his drawing using spatial transitions as connectors that help show where something is in relation to something else. (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

Mystery Question: What mischief could happen in this room? Is there a clue in this room? Is the sought after object in this room?

Assignment: Write a 1-2 paragraph paper describing the setting and be sure to use spatial transitional words and/or phrases. Make a list of possible mischief or misdemeanors that could occur in this room.

### Activity 8- Write With Detail

For this activity six (or less depending on the students' needs) different shades of a particular color of paper cut into equal sized squares are needed. I have found that green is a good color to use because it has several shades that blend one into the next, either lighter or darker and it is easy to get. The green squares are lined vertically or horizontally and numbered (#1-#6). Beginning with the first green square #1, ask three or four students, "What color green is this?" and so on until all six green squares have been described. The students can see right away that the response is not simply "green" because all the squares are green. This is a fun exercise for students as they race to come up with something to relate a particular shade of green. In the end the students have given at least thirty shades of green (five per square) and produced a chart of shades of green available to the class to pull from as needed. (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

Another aspect of the above exercise is to list the five senses vertically or horizontally as was done with the green squares. Next students are asked to choose a color they love or utterly dislike and using each of the senses give life to the color by saying to themselves for example, “If I could hear the color magenta, it would sound like (a, an, the) ...” and so on for each of the senses. Then lastly have the students create a metaphor using the color and giving it life as an emotion like “celery green is calm”; or as an abstract noun like “grass-green is beauty.”

Mystery Questions: How do the colors in the room make you feel, or, what mood is created by the colors and lighting in the room?  
What stands out or what is it that you can't stop looking at?  
Why? What about it?

Assignment: From the floor plan of the familiar room that you drew, zero in on one piece of furniture and one other object and describe each in detail.

This activity is also good for writing a poem. A student example follows:

Blue feels like sadness when I am  
bad and get consequences  
Blue looks like a happy summer sky  
Blue smells like flowery perfume ladies  
wear in summer  
Blue tastes like sweet grape juice  
Blue sounds like cool jazz music  
Blue is deep love

D., 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

Of course, this activity is adaptable and with other images and references, the poem can be a scary one. Here the student can apply the above format to a monster they create and use the five senses to describe it.

Some other quick descriptive writing activities include making lists of precise and strong adjectives, adverbs and particularly verbs. For verbs select two or three occupations and lists verbs that tell what the person does as he goes about performing his job. For example a chef will: chop, slice, cut, dice, marinate, stew, hack, flip, sprinkle, etc.

Assignment: Add vivid adjectives and adverbs and strong verbs to the ten skimpy sentences given. Next find three to ten words in your writing and replace each with a more precise and vivid word.

Another exercise to enhance descriptive writing is sentence combining. Give the students five to ten groups of related sentences. The students locate and scratch the repeated information and then embed the unused information from two sentences into a main sentence which includes all the information that was in two or three. For example:

Melissa chains her bike to a post.  
The bike is a new mountain bike.  
The post is steel.

Tell the students that the first sentence is the main sentence to which information will be added. That information will come from the related sentences in the group of sentences. Explain that the second sentence contains information about the bike. What is it? It is new and it is a mountain bike. We want to add this information into the main sentence. The new main sentence becomes -- Melissa chains her new mountain bike to a post. Next, there is information in the third sentence that also needs to be put into the main sentence. That information is about the post. It is steel. So, we add that information in and make one sentence containing the information of three. The sentence is--Melissa chains her new mountain bike to a steel post. A sentence group of related sentences can range anywhere from two to five sentences depending on the capacity of the students. And, teachers can always scaffold the number and the complexity of the sentences particularly for struggling students.

Assignment: Find 3-5 related sentence groups in your writing that you can combine into one sentence. Sentence groups can be two to three sentences in length.

#### Activity 9- Plot Sequence of Events

To simplest way to chart the sequence of events in their stories is to have students simply make a timeline of events beginning with what happened first and ending with what happened last. Then, according to the time have them write out the events and other details surrounding each. Another way is to have each student write in paragraph form the significant events that happen in his story. A final way is to do an activity that forces the students to get to the main and significant happenings fast. It is a chance for them to square up their stories. Each student draws a square of any size on a sheet of lined paper. The students then write their entire stories within each square drawn. The second time around, each student draws a square smaller than the first and the third time around the square should be drawn even smaller than the second one. Who, what, when, where, why and how should be included in each story block. (Add to or take away from the Knowledge Fund and/or Trash Bin.)

Mystery Questions: Mystery Questions: What happened first? Then what? What happened after that? How does he/she know? Any distractions? Where does so and so stand in all of this? Then what? So what? Now what? What about...? What if...? Then what? Any worries? What happened after that? Who could have reason to do such a thing? Any clues? What? When? Where? What's the risk? What's the decision? Whodunit? Main character explains the mystery.

Assignment: Select one of the possible mischiefs or misdemeanors from the list created that could happen in the familiar room you described in Activities 7 and 8. On a sheet of lined paper draw three squares. The first square will be your largest square. The second and third squares will each be successively smaller. In the first square, write your story for a fifth grader as your audience. In the second largest square write your story for a third grader as your audience and in the smallest square write your story for a kindergartner as your audience. Try to include answers to as many as of the Mystery Questions as absolutely necessary for your story to be a mystery or have the aura of a mystery or the scent of a mystery.

#### Activity 10- Omniscient Narrator Puts It Together

Each student will use as much of the information he generated to write a mystery story. The idea is to get a good frame or first draft. With all the information each has, he can always go back and reshape it by adding meat to the bones or redistributing the weight. Remind each student that he knows everything about his mystery. He is the omniscient narrator; he knows all, sees all and hears all; he made the mystery story world! He is in charge of the in's and out's of the story.

Assignment: You are going to write your mystery story using much of the information you generated in the previous activities. Use the Mystery Questions to help guide and keep you on track. First begin with an introduction to the main character and his surroundings. Next, state and describe some of the intricacies of the main character's problem. Then write the goal of your main character. After this, write at least one paragraph detailing each event that happens up to and including the resolution with an explanation by the main character. The information you created can be sprinkled throughout your story or you can put in various sized chunks at certain points where you think it is most effective.

## **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

### Works Cited

Bauman, A and Peterson, A. *Breakthroughs*. National Writing Project, University of California, California. 2002. (In this book teachers share best practices using the writing process.)

Burroway, J. *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*. Addison Wesley Longman Inc. Penguin Academics. N.Y. 2003. (This book includes techniques and discussion and illustration of those techniques through readings and exercises.)

Conrad, Hy. *The Little Giant Book of Whodunits*. Sterling Publishing Company, New York, N.Y.1998. (This book contains short mystery stories with answers.)

Davis, J. M. *Novelist's Essential Guide to Creating Plot*. Writer's Digest Books. Cincinnati, OH. 2000. (This book examines how plots have been used and offers ways to understand why plot and various techniques of plotting work.)

Grafton, Sue. *Writing Mysteries*. Writer's Digest Books. Cincinnati, OH. 2002. (This book offers direction and practical advice about how to succeed in writing mystery.)

Olson, C. Booth. *Thinking Writing*. Harper-Collins Publishers Inc., New York, New York.1992. (This book contains information about how to use writing to help students express the linguistic knowledge they already possess.)

### Student Reading List

Conrad, Hy. *The Little Giant Book of Whodunits*. Sterling Publishing Company, New York, N.Y.1998. (This book contains short mystery stories with answers.)

Holt ,Rinehart, Winston. *Elements of Literature: Introductory, First and Second Courses*.2005. (These are the middle level Communications books which contain some mystery stories that students enjoy.)

## Appendices-Content Standards

1. *All students use effective research and information management skills including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.* This is evident in the students' use of printed resources to serve as models for thinking and writing assignments.
2. *All students read and use a variety of techniques to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.* During this unit students read various levels of mystery texts in order to participate in discussions, complete assignments and tap prior knowledge as they engage the writing process.
3. *All students respond orally to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use this information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.* The writing activities in this unit require the students to discuss interpretations of characters' words, appearance, and actions as well as setting and plot.
4. *All students write for a variety of purposes including to narrate, to inform, and persuade in all subject areas.* Students will complete mystery writing assignments that require them to narrate some portion of their own experience, share information or to convince someone of a perspective.
5. *All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes, and bias and recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.* Students will apply this standard as they read and make sense of the mystery genre and in writing mystery.
6. *All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instruction, asking and answering questions appropriately and promoting effective group communications.* The mystery writing genre and other writing process pieces require discussion and group work in order to gain fully from each activity.

7. *All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify the purpose, structure, and use.* Students must apply this standard as they observe and listen to dialogue in discussion activities before, during and after presentation of relevant information, reading and writing mystery stories and other writing process pieces.
8. *All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to inform, persuade and describe.* Students will make oral presentations in the form of reading a complete mystery story or a portion of a mystery.

<file://localhost/Volumes/G-DRIVE%20mini/2007%20Curriculum%20Units/Uearth%20Clues%20to%20Go%20od%20Writing/untitled%20folder/Charmello-CeganUnit.doc>



