



The Cozy Mystery.

*a body, a village,
and a very good cake.*

A working field guide to the cozy mystery: the amateur sleuth and the reason they must investigate, the village that becomes a character, a fair-play puzzle hidden in gossip and routine, warmth that keeps the death real without the gore, series design that brings readers back for book five, the mistakes that break the spell, and a printable cozy worksheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft.

A cozy mystery is a murder told from inside a community that means to survive it. Every craft decision in this guide traces back to one job: give the reader a fair puzzle, a safe way to enjoy it, and a place they will want to come back to.

The genre has no single author. What follows distills the working practice shared across the bakery cozy, the bookshop cozy, the village cozy, and the craft cozy alike, with a running example - an invented cozy carried from its first crumb to its last confession - so you can watch the machine move. The same twelve beats live as a free fill-in planner on our site.

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What a cozy mystery is.

a murder, kept at arm's length, in a place worth protecting.

A cozy mystery is a whodunit with the violence turned to the wall. There is a body, usually early, and a real puzzle about who put it there. But the death happens off the page, the blood stays in the past tense, and no one is tortured, graphically hurt, or bedded on camera. What the reader gets instead is the investigation as lived by an **amateur**. A baker, a librarian, a yarn-shop owner, someone with an ordinary life and a hook occupation that keeps intruding on the case, in a small closed community where everyone is a neighbor and any neighbor could have done it.

The pleasure is not fear and not disgust. It is the comfort of watching a disordered world put right by someone who belongs to it. The cozy promises that order will be restored, that the guilty will be named, and that the village, minus one, will still be there on the last page with the kettle on.

COZY • HARD-BOILED • PROCEDURAL

- **Hard-boiled** follows a professional through a corrupt city. Violence lives on the page, and the world stays broken when the case closes.
- **Procedural** makes the police the protagonists, solving with method, resources, and forensics. The institution is the hero.
- **Cozy** follows an amateur inside a small community. Violence stays off the page, the puzzle plays fair, and order is restored.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A cozy mystery is a fair-play whodunit solved by an amateur inside a small community they belong to, with the violence kept off the page and an ending that returns the village to order.

The reader's contract.

safety, a fair puzzle, and a place worth returning to.

The contract a cozy signs with its reader has three clauses, and the first is **safety**. Not the absence of death but the absence of cruelty on the page. The reader has agreed to a murder; they have not agreed to watch it, to linger over the wound, or to be frightened for their own life. Safety is what lets the reader enjoy the puzzle with their guard down, and the moment a scene breaks it, the pleasure the whole book was built for drains away.

The second clause is a **fair puzzle**. The cozy reader is playing. They want the clues on the page, the suspects introduced before the halfway mark, and a solution they could have reached and probably did not. Withhold a clue the sleuth has seen, or produce a killer in the last chapter, and the reader feels cheated in a way no warmth can repair.

The third clause is a **world to come back to**. The cozy is nearly always a series, and the reader is choosing a place as much as a plot. A shop, a street, a set of neighbors they expect to find still there next spring. Deliver all three and you have kept the contract. Break any one and the reader, however charmed, will not buy book two.

THE WAITING-ROOM TEST

Would you hand this book to someone reading in a hospital waiting room at two in the morning? A cozy should be the book they reach for there. If a scene would make them put it down for their own comfort, the tone has slipped, and the puzzle cannot pull it back on its own.

Why the sleuth investigates.

an amateur needs a reason. give them one they cannot refuse.

The amateur sleuth is the cozy's engine and its biggest plausibility problem. A baker has no badge, no warrant, and no business at a crime scene, so the book has to answer, on the first page of the investigation, why this person is asking questions at all. The answer must be **personal**. Someone they love is suspected. Their shop is about to close under the whisper. The victim asked them for help the night before and they said no. The reason has to be strong enough that not investigating would be the stranger choice.

The second half of the engine is **access**. The sleuth gets what the police cannot because of who they are, not what they carry. People talk in a bakery. Customers confess things over a counter they would never say in an interview room. Give the sleuth a **law-enforcement foil** who is competent and simply elsewhere. A deputy with three towns to cover, a detective with a plausible suspect and no reason to look further. The sleuth does not outsmart the police. They out-belong them.

THREE THINGS THE SLEUTH NEEDS

- **Reason:** a personal stake that makes asking questions the only bearable choice, not a hobby.
- **Access:** a shop, a craft, or a role that puts them where the community talks unguarded.
- **Foil:** an officer good at the job, wrong about this case, and worth winning over by the end.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • A SLOW RISE

Throughout this guide we follow one invented cozy, working title **A Slow Rise**. Hattie Penrose, fifty-three and widowed, runs Second Rise, a sourdough bakery on the harbor in Gull Harbor, Maine, population 1,900. The morning after the Blessing of the Fleet, Marjorie Beal, president of the Historical Society, is found dead at the foot of the lighthouse stairs. The deputy calls it a fall until a witness reports Hattie's nephew Danny arguing with Marjorie the night before. Hattie investigates because the only suspect is family, and because Marjorie came into the bakery two days earlier to say something and lost her nerve.

The shape of a whodunit.

the same twelve beats as any mystery, with the blood offstage.

The cozy walks the same twelve beats as any whodunit. Underneath the tea and the cat it is a fair-play detective story, and it rides our **Mystery / Detective** beat sheet without a single beat removed. What changes is the staging. The crime is discovered rather than shown, the peril rises without gore, and the confrontation is built for danger to the sleuth, not for spectacle. Read the beats below as the puzzle's skeleton, not as rooms to furnish.

THE CRIME

01	The Hook	~3%
02	The Crime	~8%
03	Enter the Detective	~14%

THE INVESTIGATION

04	The Investigation Begins	~22%
05	First Clues & Suspects	~32%
06	The First Twist	~40%
07	Midpoint Revelation	~50%
08	Red Herrings & Rising Stakes	~62%
09	The Setback	~72%

THE SOLUTION

10	The Breakthrough Clue	~82%
11	Confrontation & Reveal	~93%
12	Resolution / Denouement	100%

The percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is the fairness. Every beat should put a clue or a suspect in front of the reader, and nothing the sleuth learns should stay hidden from the person holding the book. This guide rides the Mystery / Detective beat sheet start to finish, and you can draft against its beats directly in the free planner named on the last page.

Setting as a character.

small enough to know everyone. large enough to hide a killer.

In a cozy the setting is not scenery. It is the closed circle the puzzle depends on and the reason the reader comes back. The village, the island, the seaside town, the college quad: each is chosen because it is small enough that everyone is a suspect and knowable enough that the reader can hold the whole map in their head. Build it with the specificity of a real place. Name the streets. Decide who owns the hardware store and what the weather does in March. A cozy town that could be anywhere is a cozy no one will remember.

The **hook** is what makes the setting yours. A bakery, a yarn shop, a bookstore, a bed and breakfast, a garden center. The sleuth's ordinary work gives the series its texture, its recurring rhythms, and its supply of clues. The hook has to do real story work. It puts the sleuth in the path of gossip, gives them a skill the case will need, and hands the reader a world they can practically smell. Do not bolt on a craft you have not lived in. Readers of the bakery cozy know the difference between a recipe and a research note.

BUILD A PLACE, NOT A POSTCARD

- Draw the map. Streets, shops, who lives above what. The reader should be able to walk it blind.
- Give the town a history and a grudge. Old feuds are where cozy motives grow.
- Make the hook load-bearing. The sleuth's craft should supply clues, access, and the book's texture.

A SLOW RISE • GULL HARBOR

Gull Harbor is a working harbor first and a summer town second. Second Rise sits on Wharf Street between the bait shop and the Historical Society's one-room museum, and the lighthouse on Nub Point is the town's whole argument with itself. Restore it, or sell the lot to a developer. Hattie's day begins at four with the starter, and the town comes through her door in order, lobstermen at five, the knitting circle at eight, the summer people at ten. She hears everything, and the bread gives her a reason to be everywhere the case needs her.

The recurring cast.

the neighbors who make book five feel like coming home.

A cozy runs on its **recurring cast**, and the cast is what the reader is really subscribing to. The best friend who says what the sleuth will not. The rival who is right just often enough. The relative who needs looking after. The animal, because there is nearly always an animal. Each one needs a life that continues off the page, a job in the community, and a private want the series can slowly pay off. They are not furniture. They are the reason a fifth book feels like a visit rather than a purchase.

This is why the **series bible** is not optional. Before you draft, write down everyone's age, house, occupation, history with the victim, and what they know that they should not. Track it as the books accumulate. A regular whose eye color changes, whose dead husband reappears, whose shop moves streets between books, breaks the spell faster than any plot hole, because the reader knows this town better than you have remembered it. The bible is the town's memory, and the town is the product.

THE CAST THAT KEEPS THEM COMING BACK

- Give every regular a want. A neighbor with no private ambition is a name, not a character.
- Let them be useful and wrong. Regulars should supply real leads and real misdirection.
- Keep the bible current. Every fact you state about the town is a promise you must keep.

A SLOW RISE • THE REGULARS

The bible for Gull Harbor starts with six names. Danny Penrose, nineteen, Hattie's nephew and apprentice, who wants to leave town and will not say so. Ruth Ostrander, retired schoolteacher, runs the knitting circle and remembers every grudge since 1971. Tom Kittery, lobsterman, buys the first rye of the day at five o'clock and has for eleven years. Deputy Ray Coburn, Hattie's late husband's closest friend. Bosun, a three-legged harbor cat who sleeps on the flour sacks. And Marjorie Beal, whose chair by the window is empty from chapter three onward, and stays empty.

The fair-play puzzle.

the clue is in the recipe, the gossip, and the Tuesday routine.

The cozy's puzzle is exactly as strict as any detective story's, and the fair-play rules apply in full. Every clue the sleuth uses must appear on the page before the solution. Every suspect must be introduced before the midpoint. The killer must be someone the reader has met, talked with, and probably liked. What the cozy adds is **where the clues live**. Not in ballistics but in routine. The standing order that was cancelled a day early. The recipe that calls for an ingredient nobody in town stocks. The gossip that was one detail too specific to be secondhand.

The suspect pool is the neighbors, which means every suspect needs a real motive and a real life the reader would hate to see ruined. Five is a good number. Each should be plausible enough to carry a chapter of suspicion, and each innocent one should be hiding something true that is not murder. That is the secret of the **honest red herring**. The lie the sleuth catches is real; it simply covers a smaller shame. The reader is misled by facts, never by the author cheating.

PLAY FAIR, PLAY LOCAL

- Hide clues in habit. What someone did differently this week is a clue only the sleuth would notice.
- Build five neighbors, each with a secret. Only one of the secrets is the murder.
- Make every herring true. The suspect lied, but about the affair, the debt, the forged permit.

A SLOW RISE • THE SUSPECTS AND THE CLUE

Five neighbors could have wanted Marjorie dead. Gideon Marsh, the developer she blocked. Owen Beal, her estranged son, home and in debt. Ruth Ostrander, forty years into a feud over a scholarship. Celeste Vane, her deputy at the Society. And Danny. Each hides something true. Gideon lied about being in Augusta because he was with a married woman. Owen came home to apologize, not to inherit. The clue is the standing order. Celeste cancelled the Society's Saturday cardamom buns on Wednesday, two days before anyone could have known there would be no Saturday meeting.

Tone and warmth.

humor, food, animals, and a death that still matters.

Warmth is the cozy's atmosphere, and it is built from specific pleasures rather than general niceness. Food the reader could cook. Humor that comes from character, not from a narrator winking. An animal with opinions. A **romance subplot** that moves at the pace of a small town, one shared coffee per book, so that the reader's investment in it outlasts any single case. These are not decorations laid over the mystery. They are the reason the reader can bear to spend three hundred pages with a murder.

The risk is that warmth curdles into twee, and the death becomes a plot device the town shrugs off between scones. Keep the death **real**. Someone should grieve on the page. The victim should have been a person, with a chair they always sat in and a habit someone now misses. The sleuth should feel the wrongness of what happened, even while the book stays gentle about how. Warmth without weight is a greeting card. Weight without warmth is a different genre.

KEEP THE KETTLE ON WITHOUT LOSING THE BODY

- Make the pleasures specific. A named recipe and a cat with a grudge beat a vague sense of charm.
- Let someone grieve. One honest scene of loss buys the reader's permission for every joke after it.
- Slow the romance to a series pace. A kiss in book one leaves nothing for book four.

WATCH OUT

The tone slip is the fastest way to lose a cozy reader, and it usually happens in one paragraph. A wound described in detail. A threat that turns sexual. A joke at the victim's expense. The reader does not need the whole book in the same gentle key, but they need never to be ambushed. Read every scene of danger twice, and cut whatever you would not read aloud to the knitting circle.

Series design.

book one signs a contract. book five keeps it.

A cozy is nearly always designed as a series, and book one is where the contract is written. It establishes the town, the sleuth, the hook, the recurring cast, and the tone, and every one of those is a promise the later books must keep. Decide before drafting what the reader will be able to count on. The season each book lands in, the shop's rhythms, the deputy who will always be one step behind, the friend who will always bring pie. Those constants are the product. The murder changes each time. The place does not.

Then design the **subplot that spans books**. A slow romance, an unsolved question about the sleuth's own past, a town fight that no single mystery resolves. The spanning subplot is what turns a reader into a subscriber, and it must move a little in every volume without ever finishing. Each book's ending does two jobs at once. It restores order, naming the killer and returning the town to itself, and it leaves one thread hanging. The case is closed. The place is not.

DESIGN FOR THE FIFTH BOOK

- Write the constants down. What every book will include is the series. Guard it like a recipe.
- Move the spanning subplot by inches. Progress it in every book, resolve it in none until the last.
- End closed and open at once. Solve the murder completely. Leave the town with a question.

A SLOW RISE • THE SERIES

The book-one contract is a Gull Harbor autumn, the bakery at four in the morning, Bosun on the flour sacks, and Deputy Ray Coburn, who has not yet noticed why he keeps stopping in for coffee. The spanning subplot is the lighthouse. Book one saves it from the developer. Book two finds out who has been quietly paying its taxes for thirty years. The ending restores order, Celeste in custody and Danny back at the ovens, and leaves one thread. Marjorie's last letter to Hattie, unopened, in the museum's donation box.

Pacing the cozy.

the body by chapter three, the peril by the last act.

The cozy's pace is gentler than a thriller's and stricter than it looks. The body should arrive by chapter three. Readers of the genre are patient with setting and impatient with delay, and every chapter before the crime must earn its keep by planting suspects, clues, and the sleuth's reason to care. After the discovery, the investigation moves in **conversations**. Each scene should send the sleuth to a new neighbor with a new question, and each answer should open a door the reader did not know was there.

Peril escalates without gore. The investigation should cost the sleuth something rising. A brick through the bakery window, a customer who stops coming, a warning that is not quite a threat, a night when the phone rings and no one speaks. By the final act the sleuth should be in real danger, and the **confrontation** should put them alone with the killer somewhere the reader knows well, in a scene staged for fear rather than blood. The rescue can come from a friend or from the sleuth's own craft. It should never come from luck.

KEEP IT MOVING, KEEP IT GENTLE

- Kill by chapter three. Everything before the body is setup, and setup has a short lease.
- Escalate the cost, not the gore. Each warning should be more personal than the last.
- Stage the confrontation at home. Danger in a familiar room frightens more than danger in a strange one.

A SLOW RISE • THE CONFRONTATION

Marjorie is found on page thirty. The warnings climb. The starter jar smashed in the night, then all four tires on the delivery van, then Danny's arrest. The confrontation is at four in the morning in the bakery kitchen, where Celeste has come to buy a loaf and to find out what Hattie knows. Nothing is shown but a dark room, an oven door, and a woman standing between Hattie and the street. Hattie is saved by routine. Tom Kittery has bought the first rye of the day at five o'clock for eleven years, and at five o'clock he tries the door.

Seven ways cozies go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. Gore, or a tone slip.** A wound in close-up, a threat gone sexual, a joke over the body. Fix: keep the violence in the past tense and off the page, and read every dark scene aloud before you keep it.
- **2. A sleuth with no reason.** A baker who investigates because it is interesting. Fix: make the stake personal, a suspected relative or a threatened livelihood, so that not asking questions would be the odder choice.
- **3. The police who are idiots.** A deputy who exists to be wrong. Fix: make the officer competent and simply elsewhere; the sleuth wins on access and belonging, never on the police being fools.
- **4. A suspect pool too small or too obvious.** Two suspects, one of them the sleuth's friend. Fix: build five neighbors with real motives, and give the innocent ones true secrets that are not murder.
- **5. A twee setting with no real people.** A postcard town where everyone is nice. Fix: give the town old grudges, money trouble, and neighbors who dislike each other for reasons the reader can follow.
- **6. The solution by confession.** The killer explains everything the clues never proved. Fix: let the sleuth assemble the case from evidence on the page, and use the confession only to confirm what the reader could have reached.
- **7. A series bible that contradicts itself.** The cat changes color; the shop changes streets. Fix: keep a bible of every stated fact, update it after each book, and check it before a draft goes out.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels off, ask two questions: would the reader still feel safe here, and is there a clue or a suspect on this page? If the answer to the first is no, the tone has slipped. If the answer to the second is no, that is the scene the draft can spare.

Your cozy mystery worksheet.

print this page. the sleuth first, then the neighbors.

THE SLEUTH + HOOK OCCUPATION

WHY THEY MUST INVESTIGATE

THE COMMUNITY (ONE SENTENCE)

THE VICTIM + WHY THEY DIED

THE SUSPECT POOL (FIVE NEIGHBORS)

THE LAW-ENFORCEMENT FOIL

THREE CLUES HIDDEN IN ROUTINE

TWO HONEST RED HERRINGS

THE CONFRONTATION + THE PERIL

THE THREAD LEFT FOR BOOK TWO

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

The Mystery / Detective beat sheet this guide rides - the twelve-beat fair-play spine behind every whodunit - exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft. The same twelve beats, with a text box under each one that saves as you type, so you can read a beat, draft your version of it on the spot, and walk away with a full cozy outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/mystery-detective

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor with professional export, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, your resident story editor, whenever you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- Mystery / Detective · the fair-play whodunit beat sheet this guide rides
- How to Write a Mystery Novel · the whodunit, clue by clue
- Save the Cat for Novels · the fifteen-beat commercial standard
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- How to Outline a Novel · from blank page to working plan

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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