



Mystery & Detective.

*the fair-play
whodunit beat sheet.*

A complete working guide to the investigation structure: all twelve beats from hook to denouement, the fair-play contract and how to honor it, a worked example designed culprit-first, the mistakes that break whodunits, and a printable beat sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

Unlike the other structures in this series, the mystery beat sheet has no single author. It is the distilled practice of a genre, from Poe's Dupin stories through the Golden Age of Christie, Sayers, and Queen, to the modern procedural. The tradition is so self-aware that its practitioners wrote actual rulebooks (Ronald Knox's "Decalogue," S.S. Van Dine's twenty rules) about what a detective story owes its reader. The twelve beats here map that tradition's common skeleton, the shape a fair puzzle takes when it is paced for maximum suspense.

This guide is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of that skeleton: what each beat is for, how to write it, where whodunits go wrong, and a running example so you can watch the machinery move, including the machinery the reader never sees, because that is the genre's defining secret. A mystery is **two stories**. The hidden story is what actually happened - the culprit's plan, executed and concealed. The visible story is the investigation that digs it up. You must write the hidden story first; every beat below is really an instruction about how much of it to reveal, and when.

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The fair-play contract.

the reader must be able to lose honestly.

A mystery is a game played against the reader, and the genre's foundation is that the game must be winnable. Fair play means the reader has access to every clue the detective does. The solution should be surprising in the moment and inevitable in hindsight, so that a re-read becomes a tour of everything they were shown and misread. Withhold the deciding fact, or produce the culprit from off the page, and you have not outwitted the reader. You have cheated them, and mystery readers, uniquely among audiences, keep score.

The contract shapes every craft decision in the form. Clues must be hidden by **placement**, not omission - buried mid-list, disguised as characterization, mentioned once at speed. Misdirection must be honest. A red herring is a wrong conclusion the reader draws from true facts, never a lie the narrative tells. And the detective must win by observation and reasoning the reader could theoretically replicate, not by confession, coincidence, or a lab result announced at the reveal.

Held to it, the contract is not a constraint but the pleasure engine itself. The whole apparatus - suspects, alibis, twists, herrings - exists to keep the reader exactly one step behind a detective who is playing fair, close enough to feel the answer, far enough to be fooled. That one-step gap is the genre, and the twelve beats are the machine that maintains it for three hundred pages.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A crime interrupts the world; a detective sifts suspects, clues, and honest misdirection while the reader plays along; and the reveal shows that the truth was on the page all through - hidden in plain sight.

The engine: design the crime backward.

write the hidden story first. the beats pace its excavation.

Every workable mystery starts where the book ends, with the culprit. Before outlining a single investigation scene, build the hidden story complete - who did it, why, how, and above all how they expected to get away with it. The concealment plan matters most, because the visible story is nothing but that plan slowly failing. A culprit who improvised gives you nothing to excavate; a culprit who built a good lie gives you twelve beats of demolition.

Then plant the suspect field. Each viable suspect needs the classic triad - means, motive, opportunity - and one honest secret that makes them behave suspiciously for reasons unrelated to the murder. Sustainable red herrings come not from authorial trickery but from a cast of people who all have something true to hide. The reader's wrong theories should be *good* theories.

BUILD THE HIDDEN STORY IN FOUR LINES

- **Culprit and motive:** who, and the pressure that made murder feel like the only exit. The motive should be the book's best-kept character study.
- **Method and window:** exactly how and when, rigorous enough to survive a re-read with a stopwatch.
- **The concealment:** the lie as designed. What was staged, who was framed, which clue was supposed to never surface.
- **The flaw:** the one detail the plan couldn't control, the thread the breakthrough will finally pull.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Throughout this guide we follow one invented whodunit. Bram Voss, patriarch of a celebrated family winery, dies at his own harvest festival. Our detective: Ada Quist, a retired forensic auditor visiting her niece in the valley. The hidden story, written first: the culprit is Piet, the devoted cellar master of thirty years. Bram had been secretly blending cheap bought-in grapes into the "estate" vintage. When Piet confronted him, Bram made plans to survive the coming appellation audit by falsifying the cellar books, which carry Piet's signature. Method: pesticide in the private tasting glass that only Bram used and only Piet polished. The flaw: harvest logs, in plain sight, that record more wine than the estate's acres can grow.

Twelve beats.

open the case, work the field, close the trap.

The twelve beats fall into three movements: three beats to open the case, five to run the investigation's rise and fall, four to collapse it into truth. Single-moment beats (the Crime, the twists, the Breakthrough) are points; the investigation beats are stretches. Percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is the order and the logic: each beat controls how much of the hidden story is showing.

OPENING THE CASE

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%

THE SOLUTION

09	The Setback	~72%
10	The Breakthrough Clue	~82%
11	Confrontation & Reveal	~93%
12	Resolution / Denouement	100%

BEAT 01

TARGET ~3%

The Hook.

promise a puzzle. start planting immediately.

Before the body, the book. The hook opens with intrigue, whether the world on the eve of the crime or the detective's voice and competence, and makes the genre's promise: *a puzzle is coming, and it will play fair*. Tone is set here and is binding. A wry hook promises a wry book; an icy one, an icy book. Readers choose mysteries by voice as much as by plot, and the hook is the voice's audition.

Structurally, the hook has a secret job. It is the safest place in the book to plant. The reader's guard is down; nothing has happened yet, so every detail reads as scene-setting. That makes these pages prime real estate for the clues that must be on the record before the crime recontextualizes everything. Golden Age writers routinely hid the key fact of the whole novel in the first chapter's furniture.

ON THE PAGE

- Open on texture with tension underneath: a gathering, a routine, a household where at least three future suspects are visible in motion.
- Plant one load-bearing clue as pure atmosphere; the earlier a clue lands, the more innocent it looks.
- If the detective opens the book, open on competence. Show the habit of mind (noticing, counting, doubting) the case will run on.

WATCH OUT

A hook that is only atmosphere. The pages before the crime must earn their keep twice, establishing world AND laying pipe. If nothing in your hook matters at the reveal, the real estate was wasted.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Harvest festival eve. Ada, dragged along by her niece, watches the winery run: Bram holding court; his brother Theo working the crowd for a loan; the sommelier Marguerite, publicly fired that morning, still pouring with shaking hands. And a detail planted as pure color: Bram tastes only from his own etched glass - nobody touches it, everybody knows it - and old Piet collects it at night's end to polish, as he has for thirty years.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~8%

The Crime.

the question the whole book will answer.

The central crime is committed or discovered - classically a murder, because murder makes the stakes absolute and the silence permanent. The one witness who knew everything is the victim. The crime scene is the puzzle's first and densest data set, and the reader will re-read it in memory for the rest of the book, so write it with forensic discipline: what is present, what is absent, what is slightly wrong. Every detail is testimony.

Craft the discovery for maximum question-density. A good crime beat leaves the reader with a fan of open questions. Why here, why now, why this method, why was that door locked? The shape of those questions quietly defines the book's structure, because each will be answered by name before the end. The victim matters too. The best mystery victims are people whose death makes several lives simultaneously easier, so that suspicion has somewhere to pool immediately.

ON THE PAGE

- Fix the geography and the clock; readers of this genre map rooms and timetables, and the reveal must survive their map.
- Include one staged element, something the culprit arranged to be found, and one detail their plan couldn't control.
- Let the household react in character; first responses to a body are the fastest suspect characterization the form has.

WATCH OUT

A vague crime scene. If you don't know exactly what happened in that room, to the minute, to the object, the reader will eventually know you didn't. The hidden story must be timestamped before this scene is drafted.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Midnight, the fermentation cellar. Bram is found among his barrels, the etched glass shattered beside him, a dark pour of the new vintage spilled like a question mark. Staged: a cellar window forced from outside. Uncontrolled: the harvest ledger open on his desk, one page freshly rewritten in a careful hand. Lena, the daughter, calls the police; Theo checks his watch; Piet, wordless, begins picking up the broken glass until Ada, without quite knowing why, tells him to stop.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~14%

Enter the Detective.

the mind the reader will ride for three hundred pages.

The investigator takes the case, and the book takes its final shape, because a mystery is ultimately a portrait of a way of thinking. Establish three things fast: the detective's **method** (what they notice that others don't), their **stake** (why this case, why they can't put it down), and the case's **resistance** (why this one is hard, or personal). Amateur sleuths need one thing more, a credible reason to be allowed anywhere near the evidence.

The genre's oldest trick belongs to this beat. It is the gap between the detective's perception and the reader's. Whether through a Watson narrator or simple restraint, let the detective visibly notice things without immediately explaining them. That itch - *they saw something I didn't* - is the one-step gap being installed, and it will pull the reader through every interview to come.

ON THE PAGE

- Give the detective an entrance observation, one small, verifiable deduction on arrival that proves the method works.
- Set the jurisdiction problem early - the official view the detective will work against, or the access an amateur must earn.
- Attach a personal cost to the case; detectives with nothing at risk make puzzles, not novels.

WATCH OUT

The omniscient arrival. A detective who dazzles from page one leaves no room to be wrong at beat 9, and the Setback needs their fallibility on the record. Establish brilliance AND a blind spot.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

The police like the forced window and, within a day, the neighbor Okafor - a water-rights lawsuit, a shed full of the same pesticide. Ada would happily stay retired, except for the thing she can't unsee: that rewritten ledger page. Forty years of forensic audits say nobody rewrites a ledger the night they die. Her way in: Lena, drowning in probate, hires her to "sort the books." Her blind spot, established gently: Ada trusts numbers, and the people who keep them neatly.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~22%

The Investigation Begins.

first interviews, first facts, the board assembled.

The methodical opening of the case: the crime scene walked, the first interviews taken, the initial facts fixed. This beat's job is to give detective and reader the same starting board, laid out cleanly enough that later contradictions can snag on it: the timeline, the geography, the cast with their stated alibis. Pace is procedural on the surface and selective underneath. What the detective chooses to ask is characterization; what witnesses volunteer unasked is plot.

Interviews are the genre's fundamental scene, so build them as small contests. Every witness wants something from the conversation - to help, to hide, to be suspected less, occasionally to be suspected *more*. Fair play requires their honest secrets to start working now; each interviewee should leave the reader with one fact and one faint wrongness, not yet distinguishable.

ON THE PAGE

- Fix the timeline on the page - who was where, when, vouched by whom. The reveal will be judged against this table.
- Give every interview a texture beyond information: a room, a nervous habit, an interruption. Data delivered as life.
- Let the detective's method show in question order; what they ask first tells the reader how this mind hunts.

WATCH OUT

The interview conveyor belt - six identical Q&A scenes in a row. Vary the format: an interview during a task, one that's overheard, one that fails entirely. The information must move even when the scenes are wearing different clothes.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Ada works the books by day and the kitchen by night, where everyone talks. The board takes shape: Theo left the festival "before eleven" (nobody vouches); Marguerite was seen crying by the gate at midnight; Lena was with the caterers; Piet, as every night, locked the cellar at one. He found nothing amiss, he says, and his log says the same, in his careful hand. Ada, admiring: a man who keeps records like that is a man after her own heart.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~32%

First Clues & Suspects.

the field forms. the real clue hides in the noise.

The suspect field emerges in earnest: a handful of people, each with means, motive, or opportunity, each carrying their honest secret. This is the beat where the genre's information game gets played at full sophistication. The real clues must go on the record here, planted among a fair volume of noise, because clues introduced after the midpoint feel like authorial rescue. The rule of thumb is that by forty percent the reader holds everything needed to solve the case. They just can't see which pieces matter.

Hide by placement. Bury the crucial detail third in a list of five; let it double as characterization; have a witness mention it while lying about something else, so the lie draws the eye. And keep the suspect field morally alive. Suspects who are only alibis with names give the reader nothing to theorize with. The wrong theories the reader builds now are the capital the twists will spend.

ON THE PAGE

- Inventory your plants: list every fact the reveal depends on and confirm each is on the page by this beat's end.
- Give the killer's clue protective coloring. Attach it to a scene about something else entirely.
- Balance the field: at least three suspects with theories a smart reader could champion, each anchored by one true secret.

WATCH OUT

Starving the reader to preserve the surprise. Under-clued mysteries feel arbitrary at the reveal, the opposite of surprise. When in doubt, plant more boldly; readers forgive a guessable mystery far faster than an unguessable one.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

The field: Theo's debts (his secret: he'd already forged Bram's signature on a loan). Marguerite's firing (hers: she'd been writing to the appellation board). Okafor's pesticide and lawsuit (his: he was meeting Bram secretly to settle). And buried third in a list of cellar chores Ada tallies for the estate - "racking, topping, the west-lot deliveries, bottling, the glass" - one plant in protective coloring: the harvest logs record ninety tons sold from acreage that, Ada idly notes for the insurance forms, should grow sixty.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~40%

The First Twist.

the obvious answer dies. the case reframes.

A revelation lands that reframes the investigation: an alibi breaks, a hidden relationship surfaces, a second crime occurs, and the case the detective thought they were working dissolves. The first twist exists to kill the obvious answer while it is still cheap. Whichever suspect the early chapters made most convenient must be spent here, because a solution the reader reached at thirty percent is a book they stop reading at forty.

The deeper function is redirection of the question itself. Before the twist, the case asks "which of these people did it?" A strong first twist changes what "it" is. The motive landscape shifts, the crime turns out to sit inside a larger secret, the victim was not who the household said. Write the twist so the reader's discarded theory still *mattered*: wrong answers should narrow the field, not just waste it.

ON THE PAGE

- Spend your most convenient suspect. Clear them in a way that converts their red herring into real information.
- Reframe, don't merely subtract; the twist should hand the detective a new question, not the old one minus a name.
- Time it against the doldrums; landing the twist just as the interview phase exhausts itself restarts the book's clock.

WATCH OUT

The twist that only shuffles suspicion. If the case is identical afterward except for which name is underlined, it was a delay, not a twist. Something structural - motive, method, victim - must reframe.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

The twist: Marguerite, the obvious grudge, comes to Ada before the police can arrest her - with her letters. She was fired not for insolence but for a question: why did the "estate" pinot taste of the west lot, land the Vosses don't own? Her firing converts from motive to evidence. The case reframes in one stroke. This was never about who hated Bram. It's about the wine - and whatever the wine has been hiding.

BEAT 07

TARGET ~50%

Midpoint Revelation.

the theory of the crime changes. the hunt begins.

At the book's center, a significant discovery changes the detective's theory of the crime, and with it the investigation's whole posture. The first half was **gathering**, facts collected wide, everything potentially relevant. From here it is **pursuing**: the detective has a shape in mind and starts testing the world against it. The energy changes from survey to hunt, and the reader should feel the gearshift on the page - shorter scenes, sharper questions, doors approached on purpose.

The midpoint discovery is classically the moment the hidden story's outline first shows through: not who, but *what kind of who* - the motive class, the method's implication, the fact that the crime required knowledge only some people had. It converts the suspect field from a lineup into a filter. This is also where the culprit begins to feel the ground move; careful books let a first, deniable shadow of that unease show.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the discovery earned, produced by the detective's established method operating on planted material, not luck.
- State the new theory plainly (to a Watson, a notebook, a mirror); the reader must know what's being tested to enjoy the testing.
- Derive a filter from it. The revelation should disqualify somebody and newly implicate somebody. The field must move.

WATCH OUT

A midpoint that raises volume instead of understanding - a chase, a threat, a second body with no new meaning. Escalation without reframing is a thriller beat wearing a mystery's clothes; this genre's midpoint trades in comprehension.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Ada finally does what she came to do: audits. Ninety tons sold, sixty grown. The west-lot "deliveries" resolve into bought bulk grapes, laundered into estate labels for a decade. The theory of the crime rewrites itself in her precise hand. Bram wasn't killed by someone who hated him. He was killed inside the fraud - by a partner, a discoverer, or someone the fraud would ruin. The filter: whoever rewrote that ledger page knew which page mattered. The field narrows to the people Bram's paperwork trusted.

BEAT 08

TARGET ~62%

Red Herrings & Rising Stakes.

false leads cost time. the clock starts charging for it.

The investigation's most dangerous stretch, for the detective and the writer. False leads consume the middle. The honest secrets planted at beat 5 detonate one by one, each a small case that must be opened, worked, and cleared, each clearing costing time the rising stakes make expensive. And the stakes must rise: a threat to the detective, pressure from above to close the case, a ticking event - the will reading, the departure, the second victim the culprit is being forced toward.

The craft discipline is that herrings must *pay for themselves*. Every cleared false lead should leave the case genuinely richer - a timeline corrected, a secret converted to known fact, a suspect transformed into a witness. Meanwhile the culprit, under the same pressure, starts making the small managed moves - a tidied record, a redirected conversation - that the breakthrough will later read as handwriting.

ON THE PAGE

- Run herrings in cascade, not parallel; each cleared lead should point, however crookedly, toward the next.
- Charge for every delay. While the detective works a false lead, something real must be lost - evidence, a witness, safety.
- Let the culprit act under pressure once, on the page, disguised as helpfulness. Fair play loves a visible killer.

WATCH OUT

Herrings that evaporate - suspicions resolved by shrug ("turns out he was just shy"). Every false lead must resolve into a true fact with case value, or the middle teaches the reader that attention doesn't pay.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

The cascade: Theo's forged loan surfaces and clears him - a man milking the estate needs Bram alive - and corrects the timeline. Leaving at midnight, he saw Okafor's truck at the gate. Okafor, arrested on his pesticide, admits the secret meeting. Bram was buying his silence about the west lot, proof the fraud had a witness list. Stakes rise: the auditors announce a visit, the cellar door "jams" behind Ada, and Piet - so helpful now - offers to gather the harvest records for her. Overnight. Alone.

BEAT 09

TARGET ~72%

The Setback.

the leading theory collapses. the case goes dark.

The detective's best theory fails - publicly, expensively, or both. The favored suspect produces an unbreakable alibi; the key witness recants or is lost; the evidence that anchored everything turns out to mean something else. This is the genre's dark night. The case appears unsolvable, the detective's method itself stands discredited, and whatever authority tolerated the investigation starts withdrawing it.

The setback earns its place two ways. It proves the puzzle's strength, and it forces the re-examination that makes the breakthrough honest. Beaten flat, the detective must go back through what they already have - precisely what fair play has been waiting for. Design the failed theory to be *almost* right, wrong name but right shape, so its collapse leaves the truth's outline standing in the wreckage.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the detective commit before the collapse, an accusation ventured, a raid called, so failure has a public price.
- Aim the collapse at the blind spot established at beat 3; the best setbacks indict the detective's own way of seeing.
- Strip the case supports: access revoked, ally alienated, deadline advanced. The breakthrough must come from thought alone.

WATCH OUT

A setback from outside - jurisdiction squabbles, a convenient storm. The collapse must grow from the case's own logic and the detective's own error, or the recovery will feel as arbitrary as the fall.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Ada's theory, Lena protecting her inheritance, assembles beautifully: access, motive, no alibi after one. Ada takes it to the inspector. And Lena, white-faced, produces the letter she'd been hiding: dated a week before the murder, her signed instruction to her lawyers to report the fraud and renounce the label. She wasn't protecting the secret; she was burning it. The blind spot lands: Ada trusted the books - and the books' neatest keeper. Access revoked. Auditors due Friday.

BEAT 10

TARGET ~82%

The Breakthrough Clue.

an old detail, reexamined, unlocks everything.

In the wreckage of the failed theory, the detective re-sees something they, and the reader, have had all along. The breakthrough is the fair-play contract's redemption scene. No new evidence arrives; an old detail, reexamined under the pressure of total failure, reveals the pattern. The reader's experience should be a cascade. The moment the detail turns, half a dozen planted moments turn with it.

Mechanically, the breakthrough is almost always a **connection**, not a fact: two innocuous details that were never innocuous side by side. Stage the re-seeing concretely, the detective physically returning to an object, a page, a room, because abstraction kills the beat. And once it lands, shift the book into motion. The remaining pages are proof and confrontation.

ON THE PAGE

- Build it from beats 1 and 5's plants exclusively; a breakthrough touching anything post-midpoint is new evidence in disguise.
- Trigger the re-seeing with the setback's lesson. The blind spot, corrected, is what lets the old detail finally speak.
- Withhold the explanation: show the detective understanding, acting, arranging, and make the reader run the cascade alone.

WATCH OUT

The laboratory rescue - a toxicology result or timely telegram delivering the answer. If the breakthrough wasn't available to an attentive reader since the first half, the puzzle forfeits; the genre's whole payout rides on this beat's honesty.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Sleepless, Ada re-reads her first notes, distrusting for once what she admired. The ledger page: rewritten in the same careful hand as the cellar log. The glass nobody touched - except the man who polished it nightly for thirty years. The connection: the fraud needed a cellar master's hands to blend it, and the falsified books that would survive Friday's audit carry not Bram's signature but Piet's. Bram hadn't hidden the fraud from Piet. He'd hidden it inside him. Ada closes the notebook and, very quietly, asks Lena for one last evening in the cellar.

BEAT 11

TARGET ~93%

Confrontation & Reveal.

how, who, and why. the puzzle resolves fairly.

The detective confronts the culprit and lays out the solution: how it was done, who did it, and - the part readers actually remember - why. The reveal is the genre's aria, and it must do three jobs at once: **demonstrate** (walk the chain of planted evidence so the reader can audit every link), **dramatize** (the culprit is present, cornered, and human; this is a scene, not a lecture), and **dignify** (the why, delivered at last, should recast the culprit as the book's deepest character study, comprehensible even when unforgivable).

Structure the explanation as a story - the hidden story, finally told in order, with each planted clue clicking into its true place as it passes. Give the culprit their moment: resistance, correction of a detail, or the terrible relief of being seen. The best reveals let the culprit finish the telling themselves; a confession earns its place only after the evidence has already closed every exit.

ON THE PAGE

- Audit the chain aloud, every load-bearing fact cited with where it was seen. The re-reader must find each one waiting.
- Stage it in the crime's own geography where possible. The room remembers, and so does the reader.
- Spend real pages on motive; the how convicts, but the why is what the book was about.

WATCH OUT

The confession-first reveal - a culprit who explains everything the evidence couldn't prove. If the solution needs the culprit's cooperation to stand up, the puzzle is unsolved; the confession may crown the proof, never replace it.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

The cellar, among the barrels. Ada tells the hidden story in order: the west-lot deliveries, the ninety tons, the books built to burn Piet at Friday's audit, the glass only two hands ever touched. Piet corrects her once - "the pesticide was in the wax, not the wine; he'd have tasted it" - and hears what he's said. Then, steady as his log entries: thirty years building a vintage worth lying about, and Bram's last plan was to sign the lie in Piet's name. "He made me the fraud, Miss Quist. I only made him the proof." Lena calls the inspector. Nobody raises their voice.

BEAT 12

TARGET 100%

Resolution.

the denouement. justice, consequences, equilibrium.

After the reveal, the aftermath: justice takes its course, consequences distribute through the surviving cast, and the world the crime disturbed finds its new equilibrium. The denouement is short by tradition and should be, but not perfunctory. The reader has just watched a community turned inside out; a few pages that honor the damage (the household diminished, the secrets that stay spent, the suspects who must now live with what clearing them revealed) are what separate a novel from a solved puzzle.

Close on the detective. The genre's quiet convention is that every case leaves a mark - a lesson, a cost, a changed relationship to their own gift - and the final page belongs to that accounting. In series work this beat banks the case's consequences and seeds the standing threads. Loose ends tie off; the one thread left loose should be chosen, not forgotten.

ON THE PAGE

- Pay the honest secrets their consequences. The cleared suspects' lives changed too, and the reader is still watching them.
- Give the detective a closing beat of cost or insight; cases solved for free cheapen the next book.
- Keep it brief. The puzzle's tension is spent, and every page now is goodwill. One scene, maybe two, then out.

WATCH OUT

The evaporating aftermath - a reveal followed by a single paragraph of arrests. The crime's community deserves a curtain call; skipping it tells the reader the people were only ever suspects.

THE GLASSHOUSE VINTAGE

Late autumn. Lena reports the fraud herself and dumps the counterfeit vintage in front of the auditors - the estate poorer, the label honest. Okafor is freed with an apology; Marguerite returns as winemaker. Piet's cellar log, complete to his last night, is entered into evidence - immaculate. On the porch, Ada answers the question she's been asked all season: how did she know? "I didn't. I trusted the numbers. So did he. That's how." She goes back to her crossword, and doesn't finish it.

Adapting the frame.

one skeleton, a dozen dialects.

SUBGENRES

The beats hold across the genre's dialects; what changes is emphasis. The **cozy** softens the crime and spends its riches on community and the amateur's access problem. The **hardboiled** keeps the skeleton but corrodes the contract's edges. The detective's moral cost swells, and the reveal often indicts the world along with the culprit. The **police procedural** distributes the detective function across a team and lets method itself carry scenes. The **thriller crossover** reveals the culprit early and converts whodunit to how-will-they-prove-it; the beats survive, but the herrings become obstacles.

THE INVERTED MYSTERY

Showing the crime first (the Columbo shape) discards whodunit and keeps everything else: the beats re-aim at the duel between a known culprit's concealment and the detective's excavation. Fair play inverts too. The reader, knowing all, watches for the flaw the detective must find, which turns the breakthrough clue into the book's single most load-bearing plant.

SERIES DETECTIVES

A series runs two structures at once: each book's twelve beats, and the detective's slow arc across volumes. Bank something permanent per case - a scar, a relationship, a reputation - and let the standing cast absorb consequences. The denouement is where series equity gets deposited; guard it from the temptation to reset clean.

CLUE ARITHMETIC

A workable planting budget for a novel: three load-bearing clues (all placed by 40%), one protective-colored plant per load-bearing clue, one honest secret per suspect, and one red herring cleared per investigation beat. Track them in a table - clue, page planted, page paid - and run the audit before every draft ends. It is twenty minutes that saves the whole contract.

Seven ways whodunits go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The unbuilt hidden story.** Outlining the investigation before the crime. Fix: write the culprit's complete plan - method, window, concealment, flaw - before drafting a single interview.
- **2. The withheld clue.** The deciding fact stays off the page until the reveal. Fix: run the plant inventory at 40%. Everything the solution needs must already be readable.
- **3. The dishonest herring.** Misdirection built on narrative lies rather than misread truths. Fix: give every suspect an honest secret and let the reader's wrong conclusions do the misdirecting.
- **4. The interview conveyor.** A middle of identical Q&A scenes. Fix: vary format and make every cleared lead pay - a timeline fixed, a secret converted, a witness made.
- **5. The infallible detective.** No blind spot, so no setback, so no breakthrough. Fix: establish the flaw in the method at entry and aim the beat-9 collapse straight at it.
- **6. The laboratory rescue.** A late test result or telegram solves the case. Fix: build the breakthrough as a connection between two long-planted details, triggered by the setback's lesson.
- **7. The confession crutch.** A reveal that only stands because the culprit cooperates. Fix: close every exit with evidence first; let the confession crown the proof, never carry it.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask: what does this scene do to the gap between the hidden story and the visible one - narrow it, fake-narrow it, or price it? A scene doing none of the three isn't in the mystery; it's just near one.

Your beat sheet.

print this page. write the hidden story first.

HIDDEN STORY: CULPRIT / METHOD /
FLAW

SUSPECTS & THEIR HONEST SECRETS

01 THE HOOK 3%

02 THE CRIME 8%

03 ENTER THE DETECTIVE 14%

04 INVESTIGATION BEGINS 22%

05 FIRST CLUES & SUSPECTS 32%

06 THE FIRST TWIST 40%

07 MIDPOINT REVELATION 50%

08 RED HERRINGS & STAKES 62%

09 THE SETBACK 72%

10 THE BREAKTHROUGH CLUE 82%

11 CONFRONTATION & REVEAL 93%

12 RESOLUTION / DENOUEMENT 100%

Keep going.

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

This entire beat sheet 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. Read the beat, draft your case's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a complete investigation outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/mystery-detective

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, industry-standard screenplay formatting, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, our resident writing partner, when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FRAMEWORK GUIDES

- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat screenplay standard
- The Hero's Journey · the monomyth, demystified
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- Romancing the Beat · the romance arc, beat by beat
- The Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel of change
- Kishōtenketsu · four-act structure without conflict

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

The mystery beat sheet distills a genre tradition running from Edgar Allan Poe through the Golden Age (Christie, Sayers, Queen, Knox, Van Dine) to the modern procedural; it has no single author. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary on that tradition. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.