



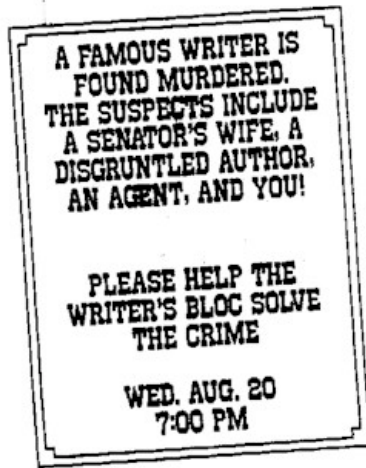
**Why spend money on a store-bought “murder party game” when you can write one yourself – and have a lot of fun doing it?**

My writing, as they say, "just slays 'em." At least it did when I wrote and created a "mystery game" for a gathering of my local writers group.

Mystery games—in which players assume various roles and try to solve a fictitious murder—have grown increasingly popular, and a number of packaged murder games are available (some in *bookstores*). But why, I asked myself, should I buy one when I can write one myself—especially when I can tailor it to the people playing the game. I called the game for my writers group "Best Seller and Dead." It was about the murder of a best selling author, and participants played roles from agent to editor to publisher to jealous wife. We had great fun.

Here's how the game works:

First, a murder game is not an intimate party game for two. You need five to eight players—*minimum*—depending on how many suspects and witnesses you have. You also need a "game arbitrator" who directs the action of the game (you will usually be the arbitrator, since you know whodunit, but another player can arbitrate). Assign each player a role, and give him a packet of information sheets that describe his character's background, motives, actions at the time of the crime, and information about other suspects. Help promote the illusion by giving each player a prop that emphasizes the role. Costumes can be fun, too.



The game starts when either you recreate the crime (you'll need a "victim" who's willing to act out the murder), or you narrate an introduction to what happened. You can also recreate the crime *scene*. For "Best Seller and Dead," I set up the murder scene in my office, complete with clues and ketchupy blood stains.

The players now try to solve the crime. You can leave the detecting to them, but unless they are mystery aficionados, I recommend a more structured format. I set up a coroner's inquest, with me the coroner. Each suspect tells his story, then other players ask the suspect questions. This procedure allows you to introduce additional evidence as appropriate.

Once all the evidence is revealed, everyone makes an accusation. Then you reveal whodunit, and how it was done.

### Writing Your Mystery Game

If you write fiction, you know about characters and plotting. If you write nonfiction, you know the importance of order and structure. Here's how to put those skills to use:

✓ *Choose a theme.* If you're creating a game for a high school reunion, perhaps you'll write "Murder at the Prom"; if your player of honor is a baseball fan, perhaps "Diamonds Aren't Forever."

✓ *Choose a crime.* Murder and theft of valuable property work best. But use only one at a time. No multiple murders. If your mystery is too complex, players may give up in frustration.

✓ *Choose your cast.* I begin by listing the types of people involved with the theme. In "Best Seller and Dead," I listed author, secretary, research assistant, agent, editor, publisher, movie producer, family members, other writers, fans, talk show hosts, and so on. The number of players you have will, of course, determine cast size.

✓ *Choose a victim.* Is your victim fictional, or will a player play him? If so, which player? (Avoid making the player of honor the victim; it might make him uncomfortable— besides, he'll miss most of the fun.)

✓ *Determine motives for killing the victim.* Ask yourself why each character on the cast list might want the victim dead. For example, in "Best Seller and Dead," the author's wife has caught him with another woman. Motive: jealousy. The author has fired his agent, who will lose the sale of a recently completed novel. Motive: financial gain. A senator is afraid that the author will reveal that she was once a prostitute. Motive: self-protection.

✓ *Choose a method of murder.* For game purposes, choose something simple: poison, gunshot, stabbing, a chain saw. In "Best Seller and Dead," the victim was bludgeoned to death with an unabridged dictionary.

✓ *Select the prime suspects.* Use four to six. More makes for a confusing game; fewer, a too easy game. A prime suspect has motive, opportunity and means for murder. From among the prime suspects, choose a murderer.

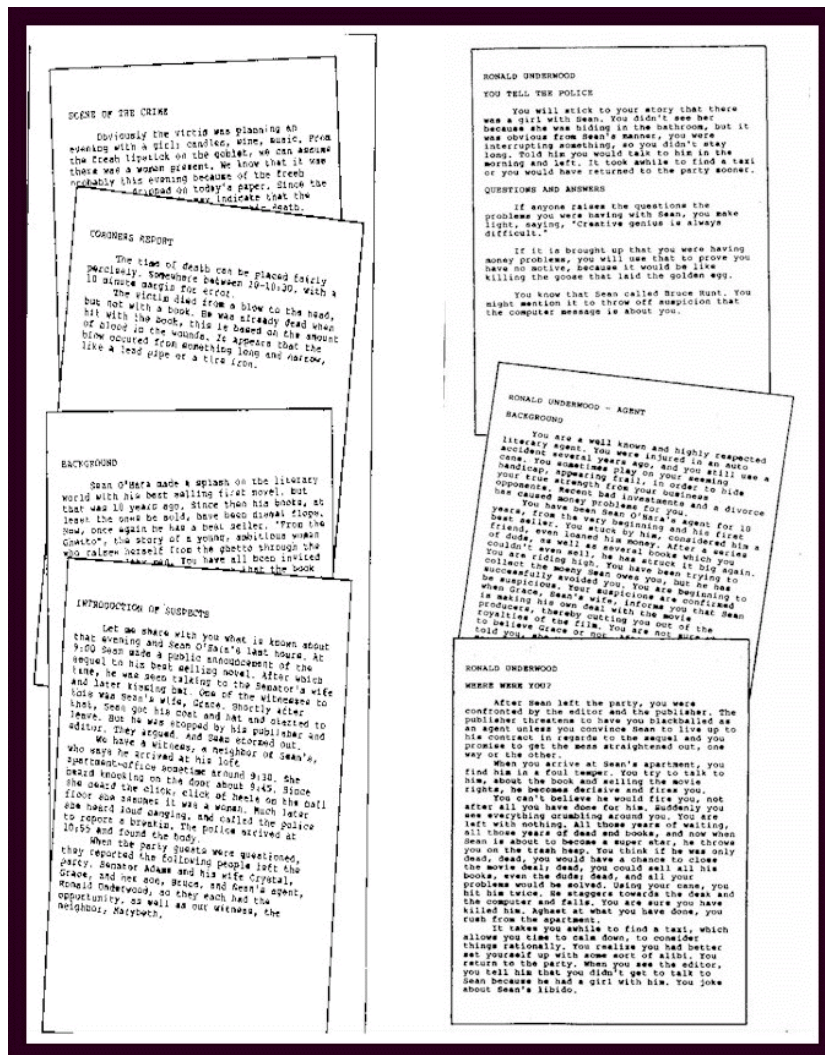
✓ *Match your players with the roles you have created.* If a player is good-humored, you might create a character to fit her. But be careful not to insult players, or give them roles they'd find uncomfortable. Don't assign the role of the gay divorcee to a recently divorced person, for instance.

✓ *Plot the crime.* Where did it take place? When? What events led to the murder? What forced the murderer to act? Did the victim leave a dying clue? What did the culprit do after the

murder? Once you've answered these questions, carefully lay the suspicion on everyone but the murderer, while planting clues that point to the crime's solution. Create clues that have more than one logical interpretation; write character alibis that are false (the player must know that they are false, and must know what really happened), yet can be detected as false with a little deduction.

✓ "Write" the game. Prepare character information sheets to give each player at the beginning of the game. I wrote three for each player: "Your Character's Background," "Where Were you?" (Describing the character's motive and what he was doing before and after the crime), and "Questions and Answers" (Describing his statement to the police and what he knows about the other characters).

For the game arbitrator, write a synopsis of the crime, divided into sections: "Setting the Stage" (background), "Scene of the Crime," "The Evidence" (an autopsy report, forensic report, witnesses' statements, will, newspaper clippings, etc.), and "The solution." A detailed time line describing the events surrounding the murder also helps the arbitrator.



## CONSTRUCTION THE GAME

In concocting murder games, I detail the actual crime, list vital clues and evidence, and describe the actions of each of the suspects on 3x5 cards. I then create a file for each suspect and for each information sheet that I'll eventually prepare. I transfer each piece of information onto the relevant file. This is crucial: *You* know exactly what has happened, but the players know only what you tell them. Make sure you tell them enough, but not too much.

Remember that during the game, the player portraying the murderer can lie. For example, agent Ronald Underwood is the murderer in my "Best Seller and Dead." He is not about to confess coming to the author's apartment, unless he's cornered into doing so. So I needed to reveal information about the visit—how the editor knows that Underwood has planned to visit the victim, and how a nosy neighbor spotted Underwood at the apartment. Into the nosy neighbor's file goes this note: "9:05—hears a knock and peeks, sees a man entering author's apartment, recognizes him." Into the editor's file: "The agent swore he would settle the matter of the contract with the author, no matter what. He left at 8:45." In the agent's file, add a mention that he talked to the editor. As you plot your game, you can decide whether you want the murderer to realize a witness has seen him. Make sure you place an entry for each piece of information in the file of the person who knows that information, and that nothing is overlooked.

Next, organize and rewrite the information. Be creative. You might write a newspaper article in typical journalistic style, the will and autopsy report in bureaucratic language. The "Setting the Stage" section should be dramatic, yet factual. For example: "Let me share with you what is known of the evening and Sean O'Hara's last hours. Sean's wife and the publisher last saw Sean talking to the senator and later kissing her . . ."

Write the character information sheets in the second person: "Ronald Underwood—you murdered Sean. You didn't mean to, but when he fired you after all these years, you struck without thinking."

When creating a murder game, follow these rules:

✓ *Don't withhold evidence.* The players must have all the clues. That doesn't mean, however, that you can't be devious in how you reveal evidence.

✓ *Tell each character what he did, when he did it, and in what order he did it.* People take everything literally; if it isn't on the information sheet, the player will assume his character didn't do it.

✓ *Don't surprise anyone.* If a witness is going to reveal information about another character, you should include that information in *both* characters' packets – though as in the case of the nosy neighbor, there are exceptions to this rule.

✓ *Make sure the players understand that they don't have to follow the information sheets to the letter.* They can lie, try to convince other players that clues mean something other than what they really mean, and try to frame other players. It's up to the participants to note inconsistencies, and to deduce what really happened.

If all this seems complex, don't worry. Take it a step at a time, and keep it simple. Leave the twisted, tricky endings to the movies. And don't worry about mistakes. This is, after all, a game. Besides, a mistake can lead to more fun. When I noted in "Best Seller and Dead" that a character had a glass of wine and later changed it to a martini without correcting the inconsistency on the character's information sheet, the player portraying that character simply denied having a drink at

all, which added to the suspense, because no one knew if she was lying.

And don't be surprised at the different directions the game may take. As in good fiction, the characters will come to life and start to take control of the story.

All except for the victim, of course.

---

**Writing for Fun: *Creating a Mystery Game*** appeared in *Writer's Digest Magazine*, July, 1988. It is reprinted here by permission of *Writer's Digest Magazine*. © Copyright 1988 Linda S. Melin.

**Linda Suzane** has murdered a despicable author, sat in church on a Sunday morning and plotted how to kill her husband-minister, hosted a meeting of a group of International Killers, and for her daughter's sixteenth birthday allowed her to kill whomever she pleased. No, not in mystery novels, but in murder mystery games, games that she designed and hosted. Her romantic mystery, *The Murder Game*, about a mystery game designer whose game goes murderously wrong, is available from Kudlicka Publishing at [www.kudlickapublishing.com](http://www.kudlickapublishing.com). Learn more about mystery games and help Linda create her next mystery game at [www.playmurder.com](http://www.playmurder.com).

