



Mystery Elements

Unit Summary

In this project, students deconstruct the elements of a good mystery by analyzing many books and stories. They use those elements to craft their own mystery stories. The *Visual Ranking Tool* is used in a pre-writing activity to help students create ordered lists of the elements that make mysteries compelling. The lists can also be used in assessing student writing.

Curriculum-Framing Questions

- **Essential Question**
What drives people to find an answer?
- **Unit Questions**
How do authors plan stories?
What makes a story compelling?
- **Content Questions**
What elements are most important to create a mystery that will hold your reader's attention?
What makes writing a mystery different from writing in other genres?
What are the characteristics of good writing?

Assessment Processes

View how a variety of student-centered [assessments](#) are used in the Mystery Elements Unit Plan. These assessments help students and teachers set goals; monitor student progress; provide feedback; assess thinking, processes, performances, and products; and reflect on learning throughout the learning cycle.

Instructional Procedures

Prior to Instruction

Examine the *Visual Ranking Tool* as you plan instruction to learn about the tool and how to use it with your students..

Setting the Stage

Divide students into small discussion groups and have them brainstorm possible responses to the Essential Question, *What drives people to find an answer?* Assign one student to record responses. Bring the groups back together and have them share their answers with the entire class. Tell students that they will continue to explore this question as they work through the unit in order to identify and ultimately use the techniques and elements that drive others to develop a compelling mystery story of their own.

Tell students that they will be reading many types of mystery stories, thinking about the common elements within the stories, and then using these elements to write their own mystery. Prior to beginning the project gauge students' prior knowledge by leading a class discussion and creating a T-chart comparing and contrasting the elements of a mystery story to other genres.

Post the Unit Question on the board, *What makes a story compelling?* and ask students to write their thoughts in a journal. Inform students that they will revisit this question throughout the project.

Before the students start reading, lead a discussion on the following topics:

- Qualities of good writing (for example, create a visual image in the reader's mind, point of view, plausibility)

At a Glance

Grade Level: 6-8

Subject: Language Arts

Topics: Literary Elements, Writing, Mystery

Higher-Order Thinking

Skills: Metacognition, Generalization

Key Learnings: Writing process, Writing components, Using mystery literary elements

Time Needed: 4 weeks, 45-minute lessons, 3 times per week

Things you Need

[Assessment](#)

[Standards](#)

[Resources](#)

- Literary elements (for example, foreshadowing, characterization, setting, plot, misleading clues), and their role in stories
- The writing process (pre-write, draft, revise, edit, publish) and strategies on how to write a quality story (reading, talking to someone, drawing, or sketching)

Provide mystery novels or short stories and monitor student selection, suggesting titles when appropriate. Give students a purpose to their reading by asking them to read the stories as if they were writers. Ask students to keep notes in their journals citing examples of where in the stories they find qualities of good writing and discussing the roles of the literary elements in the stories they read.

Allow time for students to read mini-mysteries and compare their structure and elements to the novels and short stories they read previously. Possible questions to help in the comparison:

- *Which elements do you see in the mini-mysteries?*
- *What is different about the plots, characters, and endings?*
- *Which type of mystery do you find the most compelling? Why?*

Ranking Literary Elements

Split students into groups. Ask them to create a list of the literary elements that made the stories gripping and enjoyable to read. To encourage higher-level thinking, ask them to make generalizations about all of the stories they read and to generate a list of elements that are common to all. Have each group present its list. As a class, ask students to agree on 8-12 story elements that should be part of a mystery. If needed, add items to the list to assist students with items for discussion.

Before proceeding with the next activity, click [here](#) to set up the Elements of a Mystery project in your workspace. Revise the current list with the class list. Create teams of two to three students to rank the elements in order of importance. Ask student teams to respond to the prompts: *What elements are most important to create a mystery that will hold your reader's attention?* and *Why have you chosen to rank the elements in this order?*

As teams work, remind them to use the comment feature of the tool to add explanations about why they have ranked the top three and bottom three elements in that order. Ask questions to foster discussion and help students formulate their rationale:

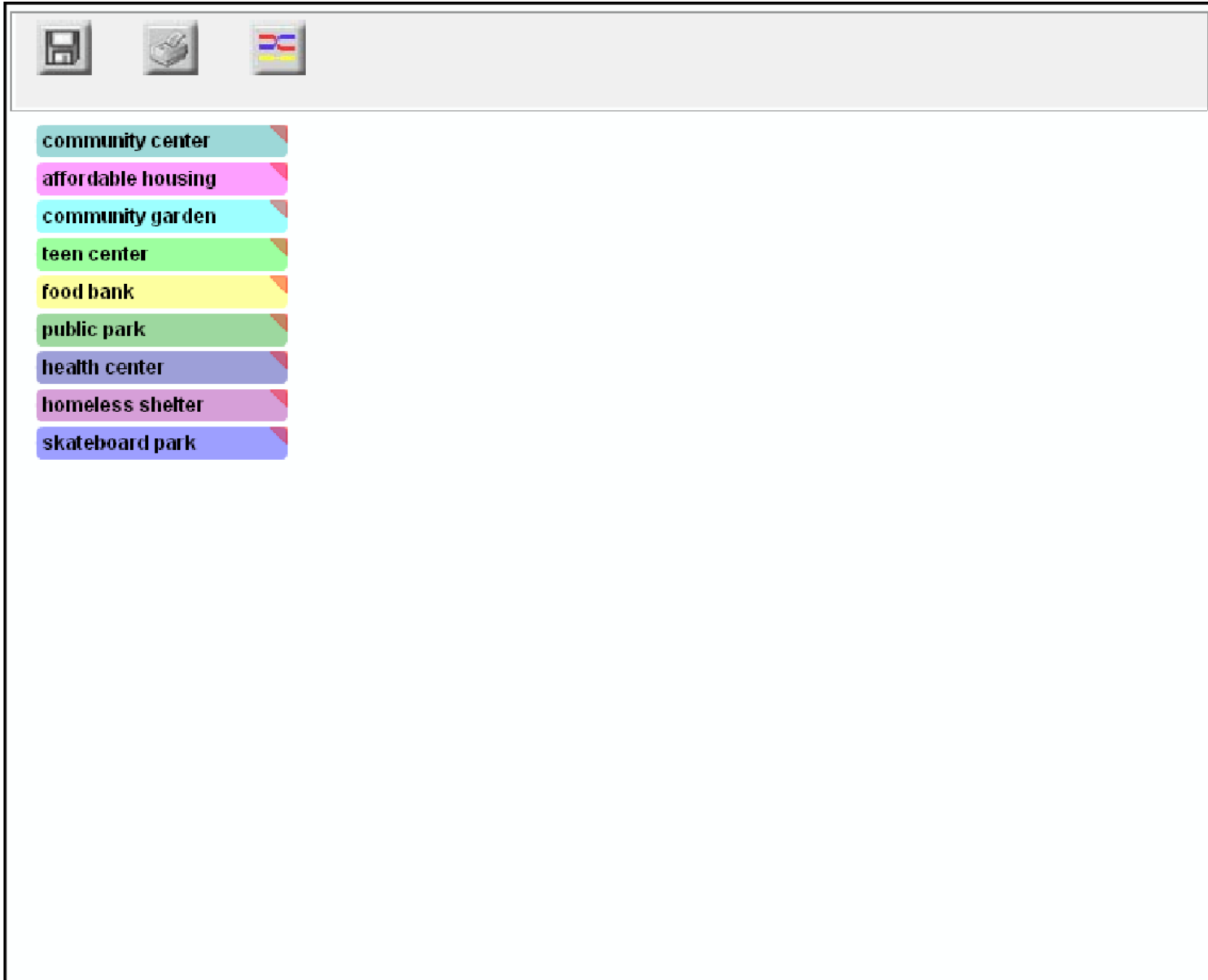
- *Why have you chosen to put the items in the order you have?*
- *Why do you think certain elements are especially important and others not so important to a story's success?*
- *What makes a story compelling?*
- *Why do people like different things in a mystery?*

Examine the Visual Ranking Activity

The space below represents one team's ranking using the *Visual Ranking Tool*. The view you see is functional. You can roll over the red triangle to see the team's comments and click the compare button to see how different teams ranked the items.

Project Name: Elements of a Mystery ([Click here to set up this project in your workspace](#))

Question: What elements are most important to create a mystery that will hold your reader's attention? and Why have you chosen to rank the elements in this order?



Once teams have completed their ranking, have them click the "Compare" button, in order to compare and contrast their rankings with their classmates' results. Lead a class discussion about the different reasons groups used to rank their lists. Review each group's list to clarify any misconceptions and questions that have arisen and give feedback to the students using the comment feature within the tool. Have the groups return to the tool, read the comments, and decide if they'd like to change their original order. If they do decide to change their order, remind them to include reasoning for doing so.

Pre-Writing

Ask students to set goals for the project by responding to the following questions in their journal:

- *What can I do in this writing assignment that will challenge me as a writer?*
- *What problems do I usually have trouble with when I write, and how am I going to deal with them?*
- *How am I going to use my writing strengths in this project?*

Before students begin working individually to plan their own mystery story, introduce the class to the [Mystery Short Story Rubric](#) to help guide them during the writing process. Pose the Unit Question, *How do authors plan stories?* and ask students to share their ideas with the whole class. Then ask the students to meet with their small groups to brainstorm story ideas.

Have students plan their story idea using [graphic organizers](#), lists, timelines, storyboards, or any technique that works for them. Observe students as they work, asking questions, and taking notes on their progress.

After students have generated their initial story ideas, bring the focus back to the ranked lists of literary elements. Ask students to meet in small groups to get feedback on ways to incorporate the important elements in their stories. They can then refine and elaborate their plan by using the suggestions from their peers.

Drafting

As students create the first draft of their story, remind them to review their notes on the characteristics of quality writing. Have students create their rough draft using paper or word processing software.

Set up conferences with the students during the drafting stage. The most important consideration during this stage is structure and organization. Use [Sample Conference Questions](#) to guide these discussions.

Editing and Revising

Through observation and conferences, monitor student understanding, and provide mini-lessons as needed (for example, using vivid verbs, creating detailed descriptions, building suspense, incorporating misleading clues effectively). Have students meet in writing groups and use the [Peer Editing](#) guide to provide feedback on the story draft. Then ask students to revise their stories using what they've learned from the mini-lessons, peer and teacher feedback, and the project rubric.

Publishing and Sharing the Mysteries

After publishing, have students read each others' stories. Ask the student readers to write a response to the author that addresses the Essential and Unit Questions:

- *Which parts of the story were the most compelling? Give your reasons, and cite specific examples.*
- *How did the story drive you to find the answer? or if it did not, how might the author improve the story in this regard?*

To celebrate the publications, post the stories to a class Web page, email to epals, or share with other classes in the school.

Assess student work using the [Mystery Short Story Rubric](#) and share the results with the students. To wrap up the unit, have students complete a [self-reflection](#) in their journals.

Prerequisite Skills

- Basic word processing and desktop publishing skills
- Basic understanding of the elements of literature, such as plot, setting, and characters

Differentiated Instruction

Resource Student

- Read short story or easier to comprehend novel.
- Work in pairs to create short story instead of individually.
- Use the dictation feature in a software application to assist creating the story and talking text to assist in editing the student work.

Gifted Student

- Challenge students with a more difficult mystery novel.

English Language Learner

- Allow the student to complete work in the student's first language and then have it translated into English later.
- Have a more proficient bilingual student help the English language learner.
- Create a story template to guide the writer's process.
- Pair the student with others during project work when the language load indicates this and while completing visual parts of the project independently.

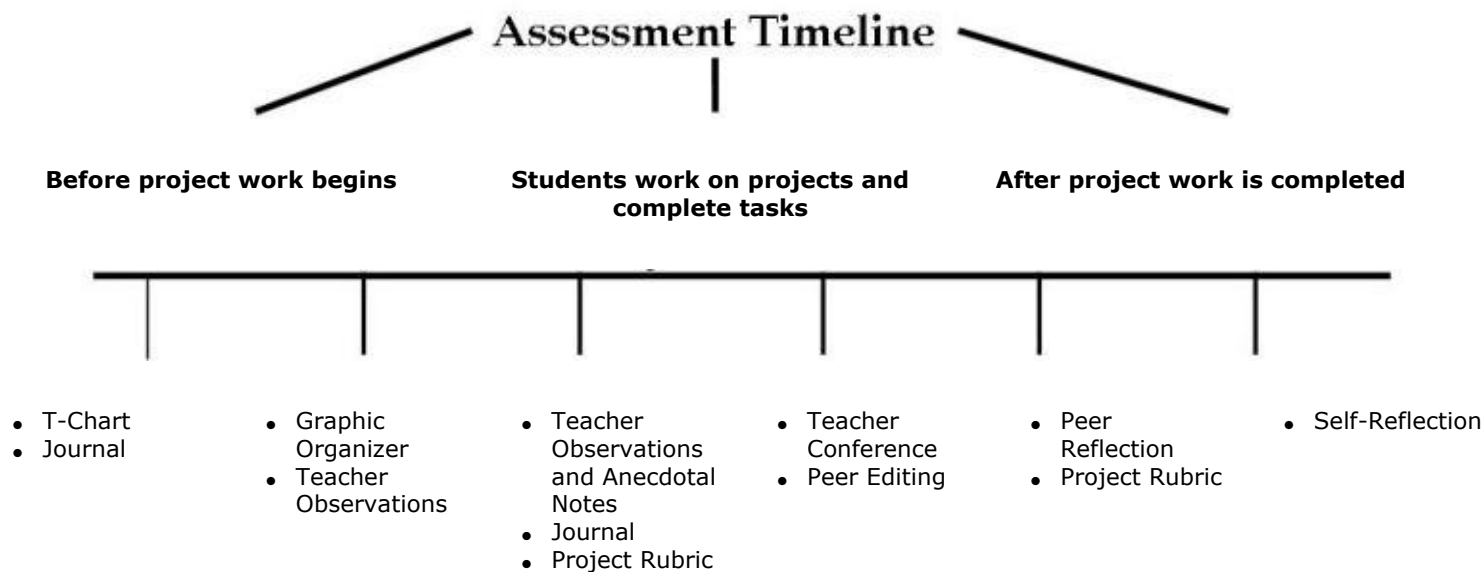
Use the talking text feature in a software application to assist in editing the student work.

Credits

A classroom teacher participating in the Intel® Teach Program developed the idea for this unit plan. A team of teachers expanded the plan into the example you see here.

Visual Ranking Tool: Mystery Elements Assessment Plan

Assessment Plan



Gauge prior knowledge by creating a T-chart comparing literary elements of different writing genres. Review student journal entries, *Visual Ranking* comments, story idea plans, and story drafts to monitor progress, target areas for instruction, and provide timely feedback. Use the [sample conference questions](#) to help students progress through the pre-writing, drafting, and revising process. Throughout the project, make observations, ask questions, and take notes during group meetings and individual writing times to assess student understanding.

Have students use the [peer editing](#) checklist to foster discussion during group meetings and to provide feedback to the authors. To help students direct their own learning throughout the project, have them use their initial goal setting, [graphic organizers](#), journals, peer and teacher feedback, and the [mystery short story rubric](#).

Review the students' response to each other to assess their ability to generalize their learning about qualities of good writing and the role of literary elements in story development. Assess the published mystery using the [mystery short story rubric](#). Ask students to complete a [self-reflection](#) at the conclusion of the project.

Visual Ranking Tool: Mystery Elements

Content Standards and Objectives

Targeted Content Standards and Benchmarks

Arizona State Standards

Writing Grade 6

Strand 1: Writing Process

- Concept 1: Prewriting: Prewriting includes using strategies to generate, plan, and organize ideas for specific purposes.
 - PO 1. Generate ideas through a variety of activities.
 - PO 5. Use organizational strategies (e.g., outline, chart, table, graph, Venn Diagram, web, story map, plot pyramid) to plan writing.
- Concept 5: Publishing: Publishing includes formatting and presenting a final product for the intended audience.

Strand 2: Writing Components

- Concept 1: Ideas and Content: Writing is clear and focused, holding the reader's attention throughout. Main ideas stand out and are developed by strong support and rich details. Purpose is accomplished.
- Concept 2: Organization: Organization addresses the structure of the writing and integrates the central meaning and patterns that hold the piece together.
- Concept 3: Voice: Voice will vary according to the type of writing, but should be appropriately formal or casual, distant or personal, depending on the audience and purpose.
- Concept 4: Word Choice: Word choice reflects the writer's use of specific words and phrases to convey the intended message and employs a variety of words that are functional and appropriate to the audience and purpose.
- Concept 5: Sentence Fluency: Fluency addresses the rhythm and flow of language. Sentences are strong and varied in structure and length.
- Concept 6: Conventions: Conventions addresses the mechanics of writing, including capitalization, punctuation, spelling, grammar and usage, and paragraph breaks.

Student Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Evaluate and analyze parts of literature as they relate to writing.
- Compose a mystery short story.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the writing process.
- Demonstrate competency of the writing components.

Visual Ranking Tool: Mystery Elements

Resources

Materials and Resources

Printed Materials

- Variety of mystery novels, short stories and mini-mysteries at different reading levels

Internet Resources

- Urban Dreams - Lesson plans
<http://urbandreams.ousd.k12.ca.us/lessonplans/himes/>*
Lesson plan ideas on teaching how to write a mystery
- How to write a mystery
www.figma.com/howto/rkemp/rk_mystwriting_01.htm*
Ideas on how to write a mystery
- Forensic Files
www.courtstv.com/onair/shows/forensicfiles/index2.html*
Summary of television show that deals with forensics and solving cases
- Mystery Net Kid Mysteries
<http://kids.mysterynet.com/>*
Short mysteries that kids can solve and mysteries written by kids
- Mystery Net
www.mysterynet.com/learn/main.shtml*
Ideas and background information to support the teacher
- FBI Youth
www.fbi.gov/kids/6th12th/6th12th.htm*
Follow a case with the FBI. Good background information for the young author.
- Yale-New Haven Teacher Institute
<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1989/4/89.04.06.x.html>*
Lesson ideas and supporting information for the teacher

Technology – Hardware

- Printer to print out stories to share
- Computer with Internet connection for searching Web resources

Technology – Software

- Word processing software to write and publish stories

Mini-Mystery: Mini Conference
Name of Student:

Sample Conference Questions

These are suggested questions for the teacher to help coach the student through writing a rough draft. Depending on the need of each student the teacher may ask more content specific questions.

Conference questions	Conference date and comments	Conference date and comments
What is your story about? Please provide a brief summary.		
Are your characters well developed (behavior, motivation, plausibility)?		
How does conversation contribute to your story?		
Have you woven in compelling details or clues? (foreshadowing)		
How have you thought about your word choice for your story (vivid, enhance meaning, concrete)? Show me some examples.		
How are you including the relevant elements from <i>Visual Ranking</i> in your story? (Have these elements helped set the stage? Are you concentrating on your most important one? Do you still feel it is the most important, or are there others equally important?)		
What have you done that is working well for you? Not so well?		
What are you going to do next? Is there an idea you would like to discuss before you write?		
Do you feel that you are making progress?		

Peer Editing

Guidelines for successful editing:

- Find and share at least two areas in the story that you liked and are written well.
- Use the Reviewing toolbar if editing is done on the computer in Microsoft Word.
- Use highlighter or different colored pens to paper edit.

Editing Points	Peer Edit Comments
Ideas and Content: Story includes characters, setting, clues, and misleading clues.	
Organization: Story is easy for the reader to follow, has a clear beginning and ending, and has a logical storyline.	
Voice: Story is appealing, full of the unusual and unexpected, and natural to read.	
Word Choice: Story has interesting words, strong imagery, and uses the language of mystery.	
Sentence Fluency: Story is easy to read aloud, has good phrasing, and varied sentence length.	
Conventions: Story has correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.	

Prewriting Graphic Organizers

The follow are two examples of graphic organizers that can be used to assist the pre-writing process.

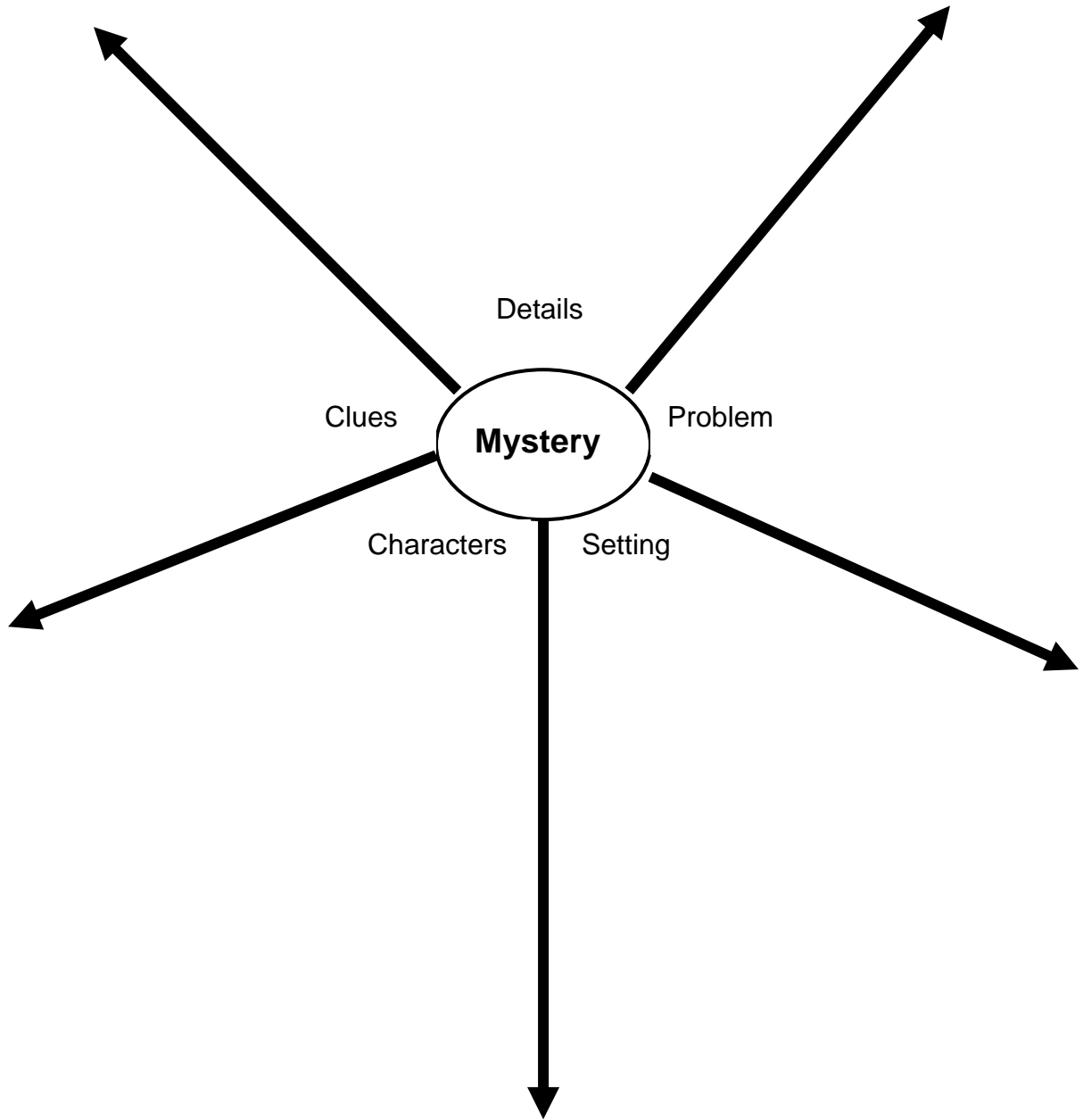
OUTLINE

Generate ideas that will help you write your first draft of the story.

Setting: Where does the story take place?	
The problem or mystery: What is missing, who is dead, etc.?	
Characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who solves the mystery?• Who are the suspects?• Who are the witnesses to the mystery?• What other characters will be added to the story?	
Clues or evidence: What clues or evidence are included to help uncover the mystery? Who discovers them?	
Additional ideas or details:	

IDEA MAP

Generate ideas that will help you write your first draft of the story.



Mystery Short Story Rubric

	4	3	2	1
<p>Ideas and Content: Story includes characters, setting, clues, and misleading clues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mystery elements are well-developed. • Use of characters, clues, and misleading clues are creative, surprising, original, and appropriate. • Major and minor characters are fully-developed and add flavor to the story. • Setting appropriately enhances the plot. • An appropriate number of logical and subtle clues match with the setting and plot. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All mystery elements are included and most are fairly well-developed. • Use of characters, clues, and misleading clues is appropriate. • The mystery has some well-developed major characters. • Setting is appropriate for the plot. • Clues are logical and match the setting and the plot. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One or two mystery elements are well-developed while others may be described superficially. • Some characters, clues, and misleading clues are frequently unbelievable or undeveloped. • The setting is inappropriate, vague, or not mixed in with the plot. • There are few clues, and they are obvious and unsurprising. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few mystery elements are included in the story. • Characters are unbelievable and/or poorly written. • Setting is not described or is inappropriate for the plot. • There are no clues or misleading clues.
<p>Organization: Story is easy for the reader to follow, has a clear beginning and ending, and has a logical storyline</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mystery story grabs the readers' attention immediately and holds it throughout the story. • Story has several "cliffhangers" that make the reader want to keep reading. • The logical, yet surprising, storyline keeps readers' attention. • The ending pulls the story together in a suspenseful manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story invites the reader in. • Story is easy for the reader to follow. • Story has logical storyline. • Ending makes sense and leaves the readers satisfied. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning or ending is weak and the reader struggles to get started or finish the story. • The story is not logical in places. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reader can not follow the direction of the story.
<p>Voice: Story is appealing, full of the unusual and unexpected, and natural to read</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story has voice that is intriguing and appealing. • The mystery story was written to be enjoyed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story has voice that is expressive and honest. • Story appeals to the reader. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story has voice that is artificial and insincere. • Writer has no sense of the reader. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story has voice that is mechanical and lifeless. The story is flat.

	4	3	2	1
<p>Word Choice: Story has interesting words, strong imagery, and uses the language of mystery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story shows creative use of intriguing, interesting, and surprising language, especially strong verbs and nouns that add to the mystery. • Word choice builds suspense and adds to the voice and content of the story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language is creative. • Word choice is natural to mystery story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are a few uses of creative language. • Some words are used incorrectly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language is vague and redundant. • Words are used incorrectly. • It is hard for the reader to make sense of the words.
<p>Sentence Fluency: Story is easy to read aloud, has good phrasing, and varied sentence length.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentences are varied in length and structure. • Good phrases and sentence structure are used throughout the story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence structure is varied. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence patterns are repetitious. • Some sentences are either too long or too short. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence structure is awkward. • Sentences are either too long or too short.
<p>Conventions: Story has correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no convention errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few slight convention errors do not take away from the content of the story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convention errors detract from meaning and the content of the story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many convention errors. Story makes no sense because of so many convention errors.

Self-Reflection Questions

Required:

- What did I learn from writing this story that I could use on my next piece of writing?
- How was writing a mystery different from writing another kind of story?
- What did I do that challenged me?
- How did I deal with problems?
- How did I use my strengths?

Optional:

- How was the project successful?
- What might I do differently next time?
- What do I understand now that I didn't understand before?
- How might I apply this understanding to other problems?
- What surprised me about working on this project?
- What do I still wonder about?
- How do I think other people involved with the project felt it went?
- How did other people help me with my writing?