



In this easy to use PDF mini-course, you'll get 5 short, actionable lessons that will help you create a durable mystery series that you can expand with book after book and still keep fresh for readers.

It's how the most prolific authors build a series that turns readers into fans and keeps them hungry for the next book, and the next, and the one after that.

If you have ambitions of writing a series that lasts, these tips will see you on your way.

Drop me a line at carmen@carmenamato.net and let me know how it goes as you set off on your SHARK journey.

Good luck!

All the best, *Carmen Amato*

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Introduction

When I worked for the CIA, diving into real-life mysteries, I loved reading mysteries like the Spenser series by Robert B. Parker. So much so that I wanted to write my own.

When I wrote the first Detective Emilia Cruz story, drawing on my counterdrug experience, the plot came together easily. The rest was a hard slog.

Inventing a compelling main character was just the start. What about the secondary characters and the tensions they bring to the story? Plots had to be unique to the setting. What cultural elements helped do that?

Beyond all that, each book had to create anticipation for the next. I wanted readers to stay up all night navigating complicated plot lines, wondering if the main character had what it takes, and devouring every book in the series.

By the time I finished the 3rd book, I had unknowingly created a blueprint for the series. Each book wasn't a one-off, but part of a richer whole.

Maybe you've drafted an outline or developed a character. But taking your ideas to the next level seems hard.

What is the secret of the most successful mystery series authors? How do they continually produce top quality books? How do they hook us with compelling settings and characters?

They don't have a secret.

They have a strategy.

The **Mystery Shark Method** is the strategy I used to create the Detective Emilia Cruz series, although I didn't think of it as such when I started.

The Mystery Shark Method is a formula for mystery series writers to:

- Build a setting that firmly anchors the series,
- Create a compelling main character,
- Craft a lure that builds anticipation for each book in the series, and
- Keep readers engaged with consistent pacing and plotting.

There are **5 elements** to the Mystery Shark Method:

S = Setting

H = Hero/Heroine

A = Arc

R = Run time

K = Killjoy

Keep reading to understand each element and personalize them into your own mystery series. By the last lesson, you will have a unique blueprint to follow.

PART 1: S = SETTING

The setting of a mystery series is the foundation upon which all the other elements rest upon. You want the setting to be visual. Let readers “see” where the mystery series is located. In this way you will ground the series and make it believable.

Setting means both time and place.

A setting could be:

- Today’s Oslo, Norway
- London in 1865
- Bangkok in 1960
- A tech-filled future on Mars
- A small town bakery in contemporary Kansas

The setting creates expectations for the reader. You need to fulfill those expectations by being faithful to the time and place you choose.

For example:

In today’s Oslo, Norway, cold temperatures, Viking history, and dramatic fjords can influence the story.

In Bangkok, Thailand in 1960, the characters won’t use cell phones or know the outcome of the Vietnam War.

But few of us like to read pages and pages of description. The challenge for an author is to capture the mood of a mystery setting with just three or four evocative sentences, especially in the beginning.

The description should not only talk about physical environment but capture a sense of emotion. What reaction do people have to this environment? Does it make them happy, worried, tense? Setting can be conveyed using all the senses. Sound and smell, as well as visual descriptions are powerful tools to describe a setting to the reader.

Sprinkle these short descriptions throughout each book in a mystery series. Never try to “front-load” hefty descriptions in the beginning of a book and then leave it to the reader’s imagination for the next 200 pages. You’ll bore, then irritate your readers.

Use the Setting to Define Characters

A mystery series can often leverage the setting to show the characters doing something that is only done in that place, such as the legendary guga bird hunt in Peter May’s *The Blackhouse*, set in the Hebrides islands off the coast of Scotland.

In Harriet Steel's Inspector Shani de Silva mysteries set in 1930's Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka) her main character has to navigate the cultural differences between himself and his British colonial bosses that are apparent in dress, food preferences, treatment of servants, etc.

Use local devices to help you build story elements:

- Holidays and special events
- Cultural norms
- Food
- Physical environment including landscapes, architecture, ocean, landmarks
- Type of people and professions commonly found there

Think about how the characters relate to the setting. Are the characters from that place, born and bred? Or from somewhere else—the outsiders looking in?

Or have they been gone from the place for a long time and can now look at it with fresh eyes, such as May's character Fin Macleod who was raised in the Hebrides, left for the mainland, and comes back 18 years later to investigate a murder.

Setting as a Character itself

You can also make the setting a character in its own right. The best example of this is Harry Potter's Hogwarts. It changes shape, hides secrets, and is a prize to be fought over. Lots of opportunities for action, discovery, and surprises. The right setting gives you an additional dimension with which to create tension and atmosphere.

Accuracy

Readers won't forget if you get it wrong unless you tell them up front this is fantasy or a parallel universe. They'll remember if your characters drive on the wrong side of the road in Australia or mess up the dates of the Crimean War. Even if your mystery series is in that bakery, they'll catch if a cake only bakes for 5 minutes.

Use maps, guidebooks, cookbooks, websites, and reference guides to research and get it right. YouTube is a great resource, too. There is video on whatever it is you want to see to make sure your description is right. When I was researching the first Emilia Cruz novel, CLIFF DIVER, I wanted the big climax scene to take place under Acapulco's famous Maxitunnel. While I'd driven through the tunnel myself, I didn't recall details. Someone had posted a video of a drive through the tunnel, letting me see the specific placement of lights, the curve of the road, etc.

The Fixed vs Wandering Setting

Having a fixed setting, like Robert B. Parker did with the Spenser series, lets an author build consistency and familiarity. Spenser is a private investigator in Boston. The city's iconic landmarks are often featured as is Spenser goes to Faneuil Hall, Harvard Yard, the famous Locke-Ober restaurant, and the fictional Harbor Health Club. Boston helps the series be consistent and familiar, yet never stale. We know what we are going to get with a Spenser novel and Boston is part of that successful formula.

The same goes for Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series set in Trenton, New Jersey. There's always trouble on Stark Street and we want to know how Stephanie gets out alive yet again.

Consistency helps meet the reader expectations we talked about earlier. As an added plus, you don't have to keep researching new places. Readers who live in that location or have an interest in it (clubs, regional magazines) are already primed to want your mystery series.

But the setting shouldn't feel like a straightjacket. If you want to set the books in your mystery series in different places, create a home base. Let your readers know where the series comes from. It doesn't mean all the books in the series take place there. But they come and go from there. Spenser travels to other locations, but Boston is always home. He sees the other places through the lens of his life in Boston.

Martin Cruz Smith also did this with his Moscow-based Russian detective Arkady Renko. One of the best Renko books, POLAR STAR, took place on an Arctic fishing trawler.

Writing Exercise for Setting

When it comes to time and place, the possibilities are endless. The choice for where to set your mystery series is likely to come down to how much you know and how much you are willing to research.

Think of 2-3 possible settings. Answer the following questions for each:

1. What resources will help me be accurate? List websites, Google Earth, history or science websites, etc.
2. Does the setting offer unique events, culture, or characteristics that can be used to build a plot or cause tension? List them here.
3. Why am I interested in this location? How interested am I in learning more?
4. If someone asked why I chose this location, what would I say?
5. Is there a local audience that could help promote my series? List libraries, cooking classes, specialty restaurants and stores, reading clubs, professional societies, etc. interested in book signings interviews, and author readings.
6. After making your lists, which location gives you the most to work with?

PART 2: H = HERO/HEROINE

With your setting nailed down from the previous lesson, your next job is to design, develop, and deliver a main character. This character is your hero or heroine.

This requires you to answer 2 basic questions:

- Who will be the main character in your mystery series?
- What is wrong with them?

You can see from question number 2 that we'll use the terms hero and heroine loosely.

In most mystery series, this main character appears in all the books, takes the lead in solving the mystery, and may or may not be part of the mystery itself. Some of my favorites are:

- Robert B. Parker's iconic Boston private detective, Spenser
- Janet Evanovich's bounty hunter Stephanie Plum
- Alexander McCall Smith's Isabel Dalhousie, a philosopher
- Swedish cop Kurt Wallander from the series by Henning Mankell
- Troubled Norwegian cop Harry Hole series by Jo Nesbo.
- Acapulco detective Emilia Cruz series by Carmen Amato

Does a mystery series always have to have the same main character? No, but it is a great way to build consistency and fan interest. Irish novelist Tana French has been very successful in making a fictional police unit, the Dublin Murder Squad, the main character. Several of her books is narrated by a different member of the squad.

6 Elements of a Believable Main Character

I've identified 6 elements to help create 3-D main characters. For each element, sketch out how it applies to your character.

Occupation: While many of the main characters in a mystery series are cops or private investigators, there is really no limit to the occupations you can dream up and how you can use a job to create tension:

What do you know or want to research?

What sort of people would someone in that occupation normally interact with?

Is there equipment, skills, or places that someone in this occupation has to know? Can any of it be subverted for a mystery plot?

Visuals: How old? Ethnicity? Gender? These basic characteristics are essential to give your reader a visual of the character. They also help in terms of marrying the character with the setting.

Are they part of the local scene or an outsider?

Is there tension with respect to how they align with the setting or not?

How can you make the character's world view accurately reflect their age and experiences?

Education: Don't just think in terms of formal education.

How smart is this character? How analytical?

Are they street-smart or book-smart? Or both?

Personal likes/dislikes: This is where you can decide the character's fashion statement, food and drink preferences, etc. In my Detective Emilia Cruz series, Emilia is a cop in Acapulco whose standard work uniform is skinny jeans, tee shirts, and a lightweight jacket to cover her shoulder holster. She's fond of mojitos and in every book can be found either eating or cooking recipes common to the Mexican state of Guerrero, where Acapulco is located.

How does the character dress?

What do they like to eat?

Are they religious?

Family: Everybody comes from somewhere and your character is no exception. Even if they are an orphan (which could be a key part of their psyche) tell us what sort of family circumstances helped shape them into the person the reader meets today.

What type of family is the character from?

What issues, if any, does the character have with their parents and/or siblings?

Is the character a parent? Are their children grown, young, dead?

Back story: Many things have gone on in the hero or heroine's life before the reader meets them. This backstory can be used to create situations that promote suspense. Emilia Cruz is an

Acapulco native forced to grow up too fast, and the backstory begins a process of describing why she is as tough as she is and the circumstances which pushed her up the police career ladder.

The Fatal Flaw

These six elements of character building are your baseline. Not you will add the finishing touch, the element that makes the real.

Your hero or heroine must have a Fatal Flaw.

The Fatal Flaw means your character will be vulnerable. Able to make mistakes.

This vulnerability adds a layer of suspense running through all the books of your mystery series without having to think up more plot twists. The Fatal Flaw will create them for you!

It will drive more authenticity, which we know readers love.

Here's a breakdown of the Fatal Flaws of the abovementioned characters:

Author	Character	Flaw	Impact
Robert B. Parker	Boston private detective Spenser	Lives by his "code" of honor which sometimes leads to additional trouble/obstacles	Adds plot twists and shoot-em-up action
Janet Evanovich	Bounty hunter Stephanie Plum	Not good at her job; cannot choose between 2 men in her life	Adds big dose of humor and silly tension
Alexander McCall Smith	Philosopher Isabel Dalhousie	Concerned that relationship with much younger man will unravel; inner arguments over moral choices complicate resolution of mystery	Ethical issues lead reader to ponder own choices
Henning Mankell	Swedish cop Kurt Wallander	Alcoholism; unable to commit to the women in his life	Character self-generates obstacles
Jo Nesbo	Norwegian cop Harry Hole	Multiple addictions, faithless to woman he loves	Self-destructive narrative keeps readers guessing
Carmen Amato	Acapulco detective Emilia Cruz	Accomplished and habitual liar	Readers empathize with emotional life's perpetual tailspin

Writing Exercise for Hero/Heroine

1. Write your character's backstory, including family relationships, childhood issues/pivotal events, romantic aspirations, education, how they came to be in the situation at the point the reader "meets" them?
2. What is your character's Fatal Flaw? List 3 ways in which it can impact the way they approach others and the main challenges of the plot.

PART 3: A = ARC

By definition, if you are writing a mystery series, you are writing more than one book. Multiple books give you a built-in opportunity to add another layer of suspense with a series arc.

Big plot, little plot

The arc in a series is a big plot or question that remains unresolved until the end of the series or the end of a “series within a series.” The arc can in the background, like theme music, be a continuing secondary plot, or remain an outstanding question. At the same time, each book in the series has its own plot that is somehow impacted by the arc.

Along with quality writing, interesting settings, and relatable characters, the arc is yet another element that pulls readers from one book in a series to the next. Getting to the arc resolved is like a prize waiting for them at the end.

From the author’s point of view, writing the arc is like leaving breadcrumbs.

Think of elements you can use from the baseline created for your series using setting and characters. Can the arc be drawn from a character’s personality or backstory, their occupation, the setting, a conflict between characters, or an enduring external challenge?

Examples

To illustrate what I mean, let’s look at some examples:

Harry Potter: How will the link between Harry and Voldemort be resolved? Will Harry ever confront and defeat Voldemort? This series arc is based on conflict between characters.

Emilia Cruz: Will Emilia ever find teen Lila Jimenez Lata, one of the women missing amid Mexico’s drug war? This series arc is based on the setting.

John Rebus: Will Rebus ever sober up or will his alcoholism prove his final undoing? This series arc is based on the character’s Fatal Flaw.

Writing Exercise for Arc:

Determine an arc by casting it as a question.

1. When/How will X be resolved/found/ended?
2. What does Hero/Heroine want? What do they need to be able to resolve the arc? Does their Fatal Flaw help/hinder?
3. What other characters are needed to resolve the arc?
4. What happens if the arc is never resolved? For example, will the character always have their Fatal Flaw?
5. Name one or two relationships the character has in every book. Do these relationships help or hinder resolution of the arc?

PART 4: R = RUN TIME

When you download a movie, there's usually a notation of how long it is, like "Run time: 109 minutes." When planning a mystery series, it's a good idea to decide on your run time, too, by determining two basic things: length and pace.

Length

You want all the books in the series to be about the same length. Popular writer's blog Reedsy offers these word count suggestions:

Mystery: 75,000 – 100,000

Thriller: 90,000 – 100,000

Cozy mysteries tend to be shorter than suspense thrillers, averaging 60,000 words. Some police procedurals/private detective authors are also moving in that direction, for an audience used to consuming shorter bites of online content.

Length will determine how many twists and turns you can fit into a single novel. This brings us to pacing, the second element of Run time.

Pacing

To set reader expectations from the start, plan how fast the action in each book will move.

Walk

You may be comfortable writing a book that walks through a clue-studded landscape, like an Agatha Christie novel. Mystery series like Alexander McCall Smith's No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency and the Thomas and Charlotte Pitt series by Anne Perry move at this pace. It makes for a comfortable, immersive read and ample time to enjoy the stroll.

Run

Alternatively, you may aim for books that set a brisk pace with multiple plot turns. This cadence calls for more physical and/or psychological action sequences and cliffhanger chapter endings. The reader is more aggressively pulled from chapter to chapter. Books by Louise Penny, Peter May, and Ann Cleeves are all good exemplars of a running pace.

Race

Many military, psychological, and techno thrillers move at racing speed. This pace is easiest to achieve when your characters are hunted, trapped, on the run, or at war. Action and plot twists happen in tandem. A point of view driven by high emotion like fear, anger, or revenge, also speeds the pace. A great exemplar is *STILLHOUSE LAKE* by Rachel Caine, with a desperate protagonist who is trapped and hunted yet still fighting.

Writing Exercise for Run time:

1. List your 5 favorite mystery series. Rank their pacing from 1 to 5, with 5 being the fastest.
2. Let your reading preferences guide your approach and decide which pace you are most comfortable writing.

Author Ken Follet (*EYE OF THE NEEDLE*, *KEY TO REBECCA*, etc.) once said that when writing a thriller, the action has to shift every 4-6 pages. No matter which pace you write, this is a good benchmark to aim for.

PART 5: K = KILLJOY

A mystery novel generally includes a few plot twists before the mystery is resolved. There's a red herring or two, obstacles abound, there are multiple suspects, etc. I feel cheated if the Hero/Heroine simply follows clues laid out like a trail of breadcrumbs.

Killjoys

Killjoys mess up the trail of breadcrumbs. This is my term for all the diversions, twists, suspects-who-are-innocent and other obstacles from a neat and swift resolution of the mystery. The more killjoys, the better, in my humble opinion.

Here are a couple of killjoys:

Misleading or conflicting information,

Inadvertent mistake,

A deliberate act by one character to conceal or sabotage,

Absence of information.

Use your work

This is the work you put in to create a framework for your series pay off. Your character's Fatal Flaw and the setting of your series can be used to good effect.

A killjoy can be unique to your setting's time and place. For example, killjoys in Donna Leon's *Commisario Brunetti* series set in Venice are often the result of Italy's notoriously inept civil administration.

Fatal Flaws mean that your character self -creates a killjoy. Addiction is the Fatal Flaw of Oslo police detective Harry Hole, brilliantly written by Jo Nesbo, and creates multiple killjoys that impede his investigative work, notably in *KNIFE*.

Beyond the killjoy

How can your characters solve the mystery despite the killjoys? Here are some ideas, drawing from the Detective Emilia Cruz series:

1. **Snitch** (also known as stoolie) on the street tells her: Emilia pays somebody for information.

2. **Online research and discovery**: criminal posts a YouTube video, information is about a business with a website or listed in a business registry, etc.

3. **Part of a parallel investigation:** another cop finds out something relevant to her case and shares it.

4. **Forensic evidence:** DNA testing; fibers or dirt provide context and additional information, tire treads, etc.

5. **Anonymous caller:** tip comes in through a hotline or to police station.

6. **Ballistics:** gun used has a history known to the police.

7. **Autopsy results:** something about manner of death or body provides important information.

8. **Cold case files:** the current case is linked to a past unresolved case.

9. **Photography:** video or still photos capture information relevant to her case.

10. **Witness:** witness tells all.

Writing Exercise for Killjoy:

In this exercise, you are going to reverse engineer your novel by dissecting a role model.

1. Select a book you consider a role model.
2. List events or actions (red herrings or killjoys) that led in the wrong direction.
3. Was there more than one killjoy?
4. How many steps would it take to resolve the challenge if there were no killjoys?
5. Would the book be more or less interesting without those killjoys?

BONUS EXERCISE

To develop key mystery series elements of setting, character, challenge, and story arc, it's helpful to study best practices. The easiest way to do that is by deconstructing a mystery series you have read and enjoyed.

Start by choosing a mystery series with at least 3 books to serve as a role model. Some ideas are:

- The John Rebus series by Ian Rankin, set in Edinburgh,
- The Spenser series by Robert B. Parker, set in Boston,
- The Harry Hole series by Jo Nesbo, set in Oslo, Norway,
- The William Monk series by Anne Perry, set in 1860's London,
- The Inspector Shanti de Silva series by Harriet Steel, set in 1930's Ceylon,
- The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency by Alexander McCall Smith, set in Botswana,
- The Arkady Renko series by Martin Cruz Smith, set in Russia,
- The Detective Emilia Cruz series, by Carmen Amato, set in Acapulco.

Okay, now that you have a series in mind, pick it apart using the SHARK formula to more fully understand why made it appeal to you. Use the prompts below.

There are no right or wrong answers. This is about finding best practices to adapt to your own mystery series.

1. Setting

1.2. Where is the series set?

1.3. How did the author make you understand what life there is like? For example, location descriptions, landscape features, cultural events, smells, food, regional expressions, etc.

1.4. Could the story have taken place somewhere else or did the plot hinge on a unique aspect of the setting?

2. Hero/Heroine

2.1. Describe the main character, including age, physical description, style of dress, where they are from, likes/dislikes, interesting habits or traits.

2.2. Was there a character backstory? Was it believable?

2.3. Does the character have relationships with one or two other characters that appear in all the books? Are these positive or negative relationships?

2.4. What does the nature of the relationships say about the key character?

2.5. Do these relationships help or hinder the character?

2.6. What is the character's major flaw?

2.7. What does this character want from life?

2.8. How does this character respond to a challenge?

3. Arc

3.1. What made you read the next book in the series? And the next?

3.2. What word or phrase describes how the author lured you in.

3.3. Was there an overarching question or challenge that extended over the course of several books?

3.4. Did the main character's Fatal Flaw create a series arc or unanswered question?

4. Run time

4.1. On a scale of 1 to 5, how fast a pace did the book set? Did it keep you engaged or was it easy to put down?

4.2. How long was the book? Should it have been longer, with more details or twists and turns? Should it have been shorter, with extraneous subplots or descriptions left out?

5. Killjoy

5.1. List the challenges, obstacles, or red herrings that keep the narrative from being completely linear from crime to resolution.

5.2. Were any of them tied to the setting? Or to the main character's Fatal Flaw?

5.3. Were there too many obstacles? Did your interest wane? Or did the story need more?

ABOUT CARMEN AMATO



Carmen Amato draws on her 30 years with the Central Intelligence Agency to craft crime fiction loaded with danger and deception.

Beginning with *CLIFF DIVER*, the Detective Emilia Cruz international mystery series pits the first female police detective in Acapulco against Mexico's cartels, corruption, and social inequality. Optioned for television, it's a two-time winner of the Outstanding Series award from CrimeMasters of America as well as a Silver Falchion award from Killer Nashville.

Standalone books include political espionage thriller *THE HIDDEN LIGHT OF MEXICO CITY*, which was longlisted for the 2020 Millennium Book Award.

Her award-winning Galliano Club historical fiction series was inspired by her grandfather, a deputy sheriff during Prohibition.

From upstate New York, Carmen holds degrees from Le Moyne College and the University of Virginia, plus certificates from Institut Catholique, Paris, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. She is a recipient of both the National Intelligence Award and the Career Intelligence Medal.

Carmen's popular Mystery Ahead newsletter unlocks her top secrets with exclusive content and reviews. Subscribe at <https://mysteryahead.substack.com>.

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