COMBINED STORY PLAN FOR A 4-ACT COZY MYSTERY

ACT ONE
Steps 1 to 4

Step 1. Characters and world building.
- Introduce the main characters in their story worlds and situations.
- Start with the sleuth to tell the reader that this is the person they are going to identify with.
- Let the reader know in the first scene/first chapter who the main character is and why they should care what happens to them.
- SHOW that she is skilled and has talents and strengths and can handle herself.
- DON’T MAKE THE HEROINE TOO PERFECT! PERFECT = BORING. What flaws does she have? What are her inner conflicts? She has to be intelligent and equal or better than the murderer.
- HOOK the reader in the first paragraph by hinting at a turning point or crisis in her life. Start with action or dialogue to draw the readers into the story.
- WHO IS THE SIDE KICK who she is going to talk to and hash things out with? They should have the skills that the sleuth does not have – and humour and quirky or even add a bit of conflict into the investigation.
Step 2. Conflict and the Inciting Incident
- Scene where future victim interacts with suspect – or show the body.
- Something happens which throws the sleuth’s world into turmoil. It could be a murder/attack or some shocking crime.
- Why is she involved in this murder investigation? Is she a suspect or is a relative or friend a suspect? Did she discover the body?

Step 3. Reaction to the crime or incident
- Sleuth debates what to do with her sidekicks/pals or family.
- Link the crime to the personal backstory and internal needs of the sleuth so that it is personal.
- Give the sleuth the tools she needs to talk to suspects and investigate the crime.

Step 4. Commitment to Finding out who is responsible for the crime
- The stakes have been set high. The sleuth commits to the investigation.
- Introduce the crime/murder and the cast of characters.
- How does she find out who the likely suspects are?
- Let the readers know that these people are all harbouring secrets.
- Put those likeable characters at risk. Make the stakes real for the sleuth – what does she stand to lose if she does not find the killer? Make her DRIVE the action, not just respond to it.
ACT TWO

Steps 5 to 8
SHOW the reader how the sleuth identifies suspects and solves the puzzle.
At the end of Act Two there will be a major event which causes the story to pivot in a new direction. At this point the sleuth has to recommit to finding the truth. No going back from this point.
This can be another murder or attack etc as the criminal’s plan gets the upper hand and the sleuth’s task becomes much harder.
Act Two also introduces a B plot, such as a romance subplot.

Step 5. The Investigation Begins
- The sleuth has now made a commitment to solving the mystery and tracking down the killer/attacker responsible for the crime.
- All of the allies and sidekicks are brought in. The sleuth assembles the investigation team – all with different quirks and characters.
- They interview key suspects and start to compile a picture of what really happened with the first crime.
- All of the possible suspects have to be identified, who appear to have had motive, means and opportunity to commit the crime.
- Then the sleuth questions them and they seem to be making real progress.
- One of these suspects will turn out to be the actual perpetrator.
- The suspects have alibis, tell lies or reveal clues that point to another real killer. There will be real evidence which turns out to be distraction clues, but also real revelations which indicate that the solution goes a lot deeper than they had expected.
- Soon becomes clear that a number of people wanted the victim dead, and several could have done it, but did not have the means or opportunity.

Step 6. Balancing Sub-Plot
- To balance out the mystery A plot, a second B plot can be introduced. This can be a romance or secondary plot, linked to the main plot in some way.
• As part of the B plot, the sleuth’s background is revealed as the sub-plot is developed. Tell the reader what missing in the sleuth’s life – internal conflict and needs.
• Show how skilled the sleuth is in her ordinary world and as she talks to people.

**Step 7. Motives and Secrets revealed.**

• Reveal motives of the suspects and the subplots- Everyone is a suspect as potential motives are unveiled.
• Make the suspects as clever and as devious as the sleuth so that they are worthy opponents.
• Characters confide in her and offer news about other suspects.
• Sleuth has friend or sidekick who can supply technical data.
• Tracing a paper trail is another way of discovering buried details.
• Isolate the sleuth – alone and out of range makes things scarier.

**Step 8 . Midpoint of No Return – the low point**

Another body or serious attack around end of Act Two – usually one of the main suspects all of the clues and information had been pointing towards.

• Major new development. Huge reveal and serious new threat from the opponent. This drives the next section of the book and provides new clues.
• Disappearance of one or more suspects/major new information emerges.
• New motives and suspects.
• Midpoint turning point. A clear shift has occurred and the stakes have increased but the main desire line is still there plus the personal line.
• Sleuth has to make major decision. This is the point of no return and there is no going back.

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ACT THREE

Steps 9 to 12
Something unexpected occurs, such as the appearance of a second body, the death of a major suspect, or discovery of evidence which clears the most likely suspect. The story must take a new direction. Change of focus and scope of the investigation after what happened. This is the pivotal point in the story where it become evident that the sleuth was on the wrong track.

This new crime is critical to the case – it provides vital information.

Step 9. Killer is Blocking the Investigation
After the shock of the Major Turning point at the Mid-Point end of Act Two, the characters will have to regroup and come up with new plan in response to this new attack /new death.

- More interviews. Follow up on alibis and clues and gather info on the second murder. Suspects will become more resistant to questioning.
- Reveal hidden motives and secrets for the key suspects. This could be linked to previous clues and revelations.

Step 10. More Complications. Stakes increase

- The sleuth is blocked and goes over what they know so far with the sidekicks and other investigators so that all the options are explored.
- Some major new revelation has to be explored, but they do not seem to be getting any closer to finding the killer. Have they missed the crucial piece of information? Or misinterpreted the information they already have?
- The killer uses clever misdirection to put them on the wrong track.

Step 11. Suspects narrowed down

- The sleuth starts to discover more about the real killer and their motivation.
- More secrets are revealed and the number of suspects narrowed down as the real crime becomes clearer.
• The focus shifts as more evidence come to light about what happened in the second attack/murder and how it links to the first.
• The killer was careless in the second attack and left a crucial clue which nobody has picked up on until now. The real chain of events starts to emerge.

**Step 12. APPARENT DEFEAT – all is lost.**
• Huge set-back for the sleuth. The killer’s plan is working and all seems lost. Perhaps someone betrays them or they are threatened/people they care about are hurt.
• Their whole investigation seems to fall apart, but they cannot give up at this point, they have come too far to see the killer escape.
• Stakes increase more and more and in a fast paced sequence.
• Moment of danger for the sleuth or moment of increased tension etc = story climax.
• **This has to be a huge turning point which forces the sleuth to change tactics and give a new response to the threat from the killer.**
• This is the beginning of the way back where they push against the killer.

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ACT FOUR
Steps 13 to 16

**Step 13.** Heroine sleuth gets her mojo back and is back on track.
The sleuth evaluates the clues, evidence and information gleaned from the other characters.
- The sleuth discovers a secret about one or more of the suspects which sets them on a new path that will lead to the real killer.
- All secrets revealed. Motivation has to be powerful – why they did it.
- More complications and set-backs. They need the evidence to prove that their suspect is the killer etc.

**Step 14. A New Action Plan**
- She has a sudden revelation about a clue and suspect, and realizes that she been going about things in the wrong way.
- She needs a new action plan and has to work quickly.

**Step 15. The grand finale.** One to one confrontation with the killer where the sleuth demonstrates their skills and wins the day.

**Step 16. Resolution**
Has to be a solid resolution which makes sense to the reader. Strong ending.
- Heroine discusses clues with her family and friends and how she solved the case.
- The sleuth comes to a realisation about herself which demonstrates the character growth/character arc – which occurs because she steps outside her comfort zone to investigate this death. Plot-B: Scene showing full character growth of HERO.
- SHOW hero in the old world - but changed. A static heroine who never changes will lose readers interest over time,
- New equilibrium – and balance bookend to the opening scene.
• Use the last chapter to tie up the loose ends and perhaps frame/bookend the story to match the opening sequence. The mystery has to be completely solved – but maybe add a hint or a hook for the next story in the series.

My Story Development Process

I develop a simple template story structure for my cozy mystery story. This is what I feel SHOULD be in each sequence of scenes for the mystery plot to work.

I see these elements as signposts that take the reader from the start to the end of the murder mystery journey in this book.

This template is based on a 4 Act story structure with 4 scenes per Act, so 16 scenes or scene sequences.

This is my starting point.

I can move these 16 steps around to create the most compelling version of my story for the reader. I may not need 16 sequences of scenes in 40,000 words, or I might need to add more steps, but it is somewhere to start.

Important. My story structure template is not a formula, or join-the-dots writing, but rather a story pattern that I think cozy mystery readers (like myself) will recognise and enjoy. This works for me, but it may not be a good fit for your project or your writing process.

Then I start to develop around the outline for this story, adding in dialogue and detail as ideas emerge as I work on the elements of the story.

This is very much freewriting using the signposts in each scene sequence to guide me as I create a first draft.

I don’t always work in chronological order. In fact it can make sense to write the first scenes to establish the story world and characters, and then go to the end and work backwards from the resolution to create the reveals and clues that lead the sleuth to the real killer.

Whatever works for you and your creative process.