

# Building the Puzzle Behind Your Mystery's Plot

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LORI PUMA

PROWRITINGAID CRIME WRITERS' WEEK

JUNE 17, 2024



# Mystery quiz mishap

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If Writing a Mystery Is a Case...  
...How Close Are You to Solving it?

Get the PDF version

<https://prowritingaid.com/crime-week/hub>

<https://loripuma.com/mystery-extras> – Quiz

+ the resource list!

# About Me

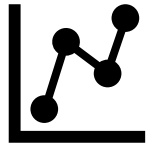
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Est. 2017

- Developmental editor since 2017



- Vision impairment



- Trained as an epidemiologist



- I write jokes!

# What We'll Cover Today

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Puzzle  
Anatomy

3 Puzzle  
Problems

The  
Universe of  
Clues

Clues in  
Scenes

Clues,  
Suspects,  
Plot

Resource  
List &  
Q & A

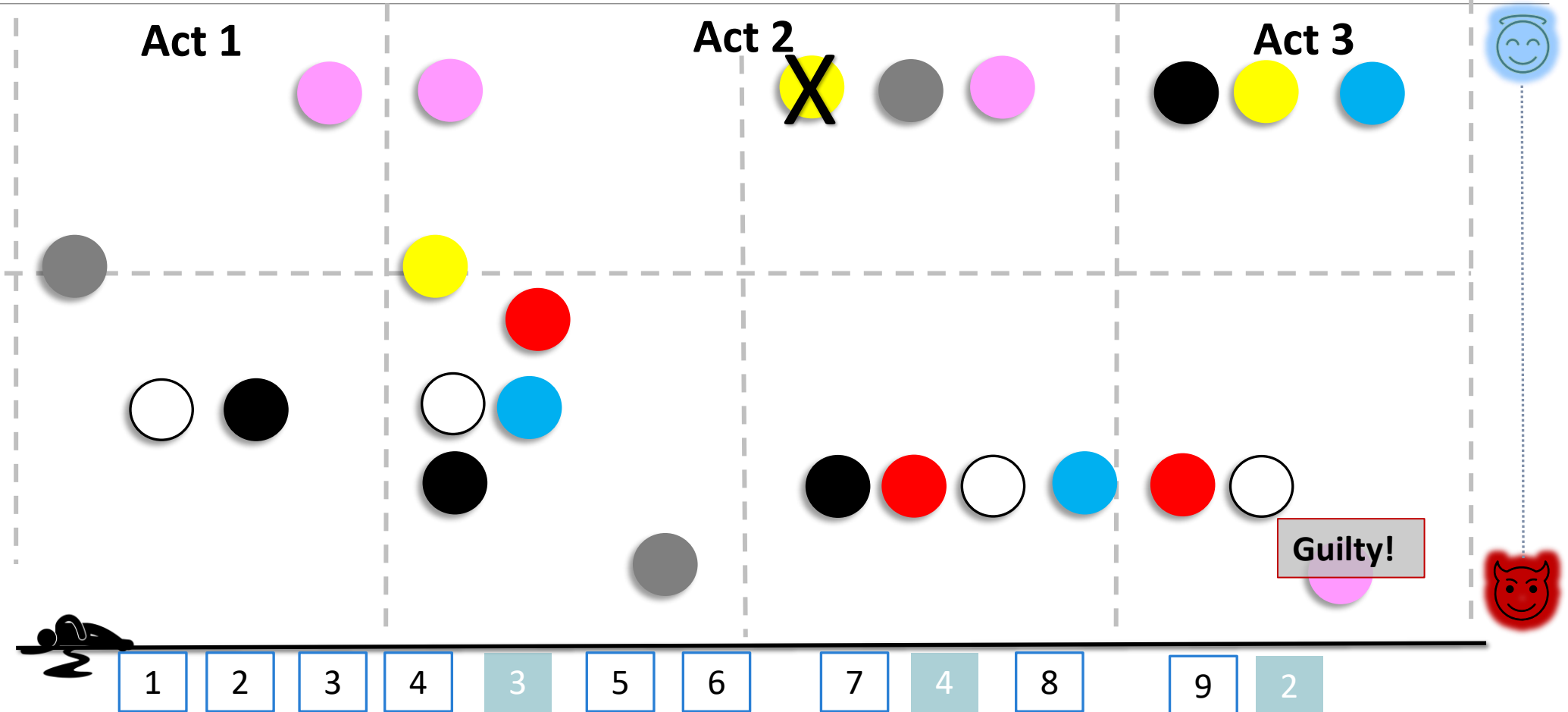
# Puzzle Anatomy

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THE OUTLINE OF A MURDER MYSTERY NOVEL



# Puzzle Anatomy – murder mystery



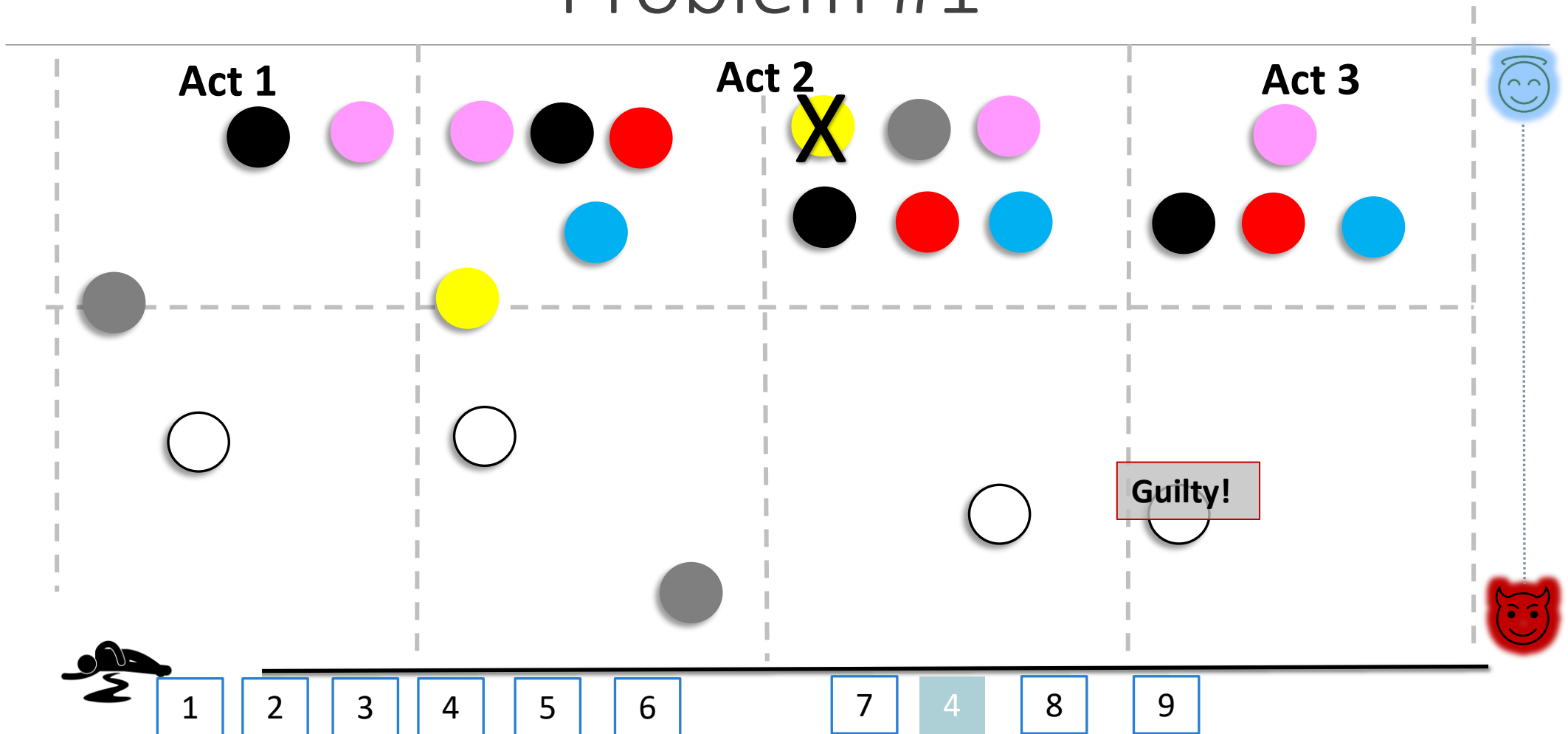
# 3 Puzzle Problems

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HOW WORKS-IN-PROGRESS GO ASTRAY

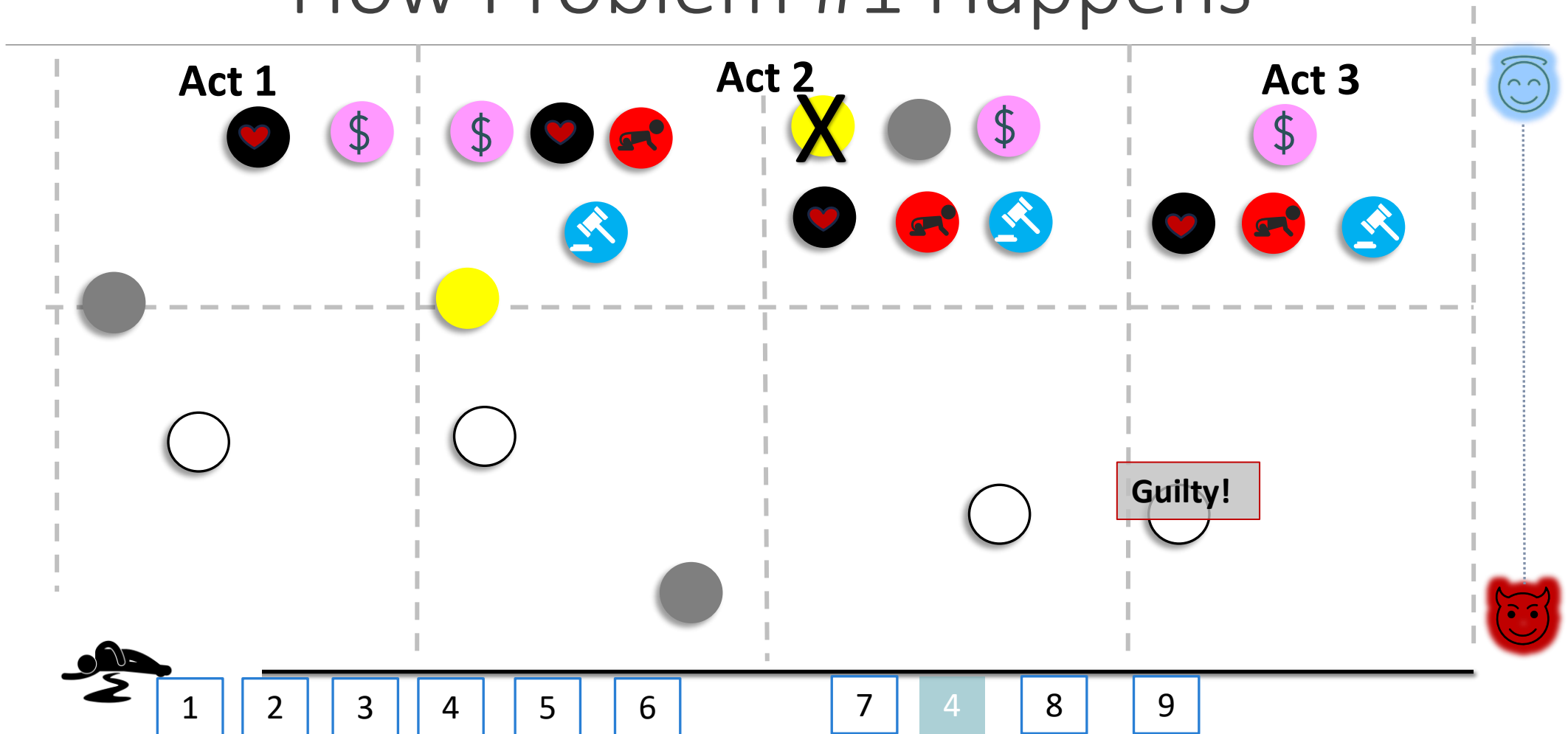


# Problem #1





# How Problem #1 Happens



# Solution: Part 1. Tie subplots to main

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## Example - subplots

- Love interest
- Friend who owes money to some dangerous characters
- Legal dispute with neighbor
- Relative who needs help with child care

## Tie in by...

- Make a subplot character a suspect or witness in the main mystery
- Add a true clue or red herring
- Give sleuth access to people, locations, information, or tools
- Complicate the investigation
- Raise the stakes of catching the culprit

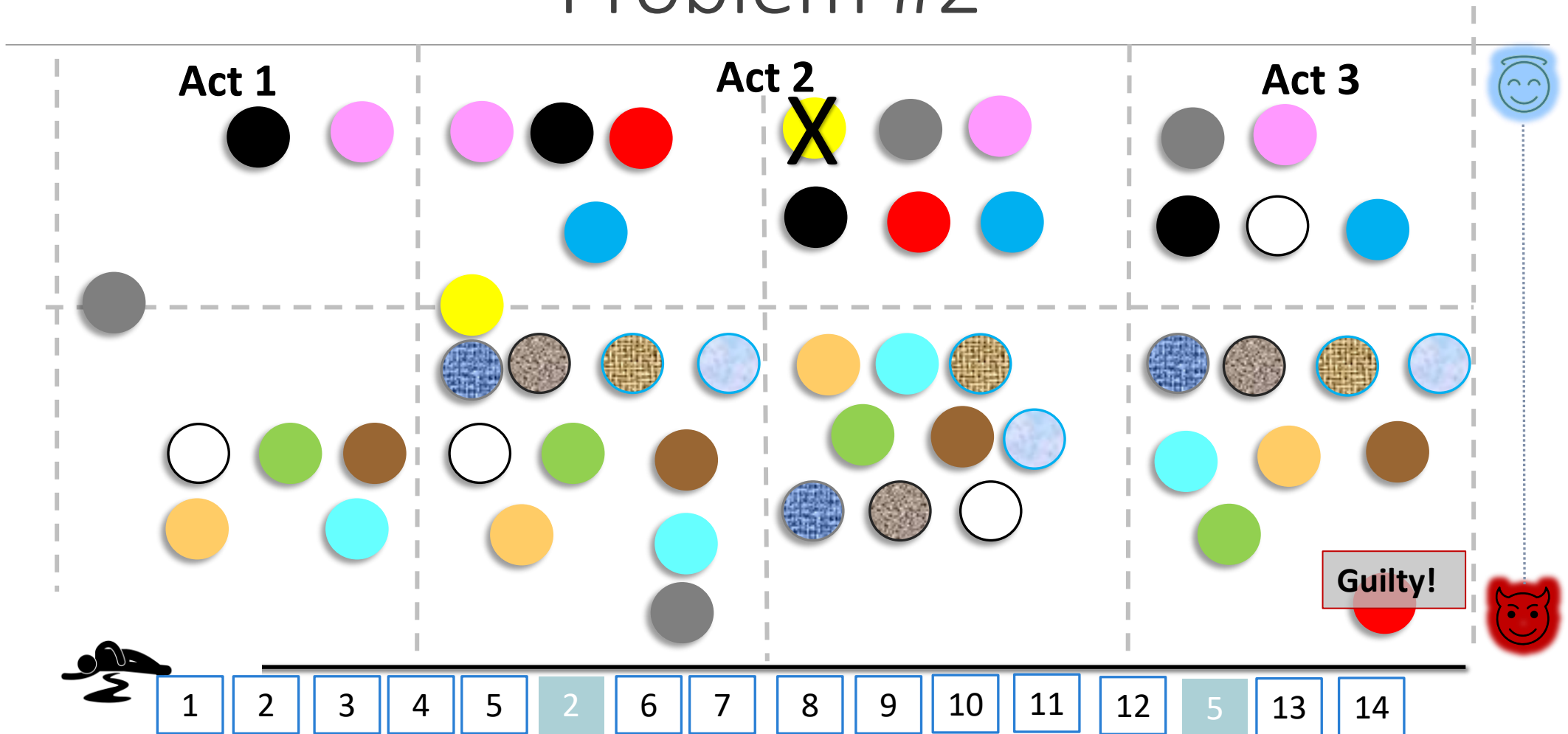
# Solution: Part 2. Add more suspects!

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## **Suspect types**

- The most obvious suspect
- Family members of the victim
- Friends of the victim
- Community members
  - With a shady past or murky present
  - With a motive
  - With an opposing viewpoint
  - From an opposing group
  - Without an alibi
- Outsiders
- The least likely (a.k.a. the hidden) suspect

# Problem #2



# How many suspects do \*you\* need?

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- Somewhere between 3 – 10 suspects
- Novel considerations
  - Word count
  - Subgenre expectations
- Your goals as a writer – examples:
  - Writing a classic puzzle mystery
  - Make readers laugh with eccentric characters and a zany plot
  - Explore the impact of crime on the inner lives of characters
  - Bring attention to a social issue or an underrepresented historical perspective

# Solution: Streamline the Suspect List

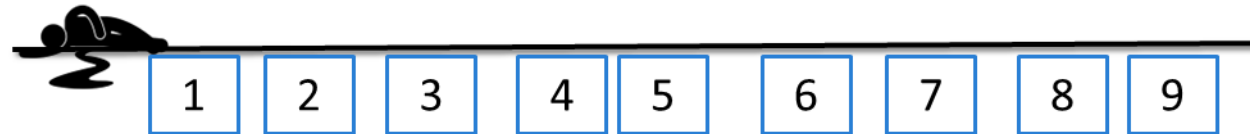
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- Cut suspects out entirely, or....
  - Combine characters (especially if have same motive or other similarities)
  - Downgrade a character from a suspect to a witness or bit character
  - Have similar suspects appear in scenes together so they feel like one group rather than multiple individuals.
  - Completely clear some suspects
    - They're the next victim
    - Clues convince sleuth that they could NOT have committed the crime

# Problem #3. Trouble with Investigation

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## Clues too straightforward



## Clues have too many twists



# Solution: Craft a “Just Right” Investigation

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- Clues
  - Not too obvious
  - Not too obscure
  - Some reversals, but not too many
- Investigation
  - Challenging, but not completely impossible
  - Plausible number of twists



# The Universe of Clues

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AND WHICH ONES YOU NEED FOR YOUR MYSTERY

# Clues

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- **What** – dead body is discovered. Is it murder?
- **How** – the murder method
- **When** – the precise timing of events leading up to murder, and right after the crime
- **Where** – within the discovery crime scene & other associated places
- **Why** – motive
- **Who** – who's dead, innocent, guilty

# Does this death need investigation?

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- Investigators arrive at scene where body is discovered
- What kind of investigation does this death need?
- Laws vary but these kinds of deaths are usually investigated
  - Suspected homicide, suicide
  - Deaths resulting from injury, violence, or trauma
  - Deaths involving controlled substances
  - When manner of death is undetermined
  - When the victim can't be identified

# How – the murder method

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## METHODS

- Poisoning
- Strangling
- Stabbing, throat-cutting
- Shooting
- Drowning
- Burning, exploding
- Suffocating
- Pushing someone from a height
- Hitting with great force, compressing

## CLUES

- Biological
- Physical – objects and/or observations
- Witness testimony
  - what characters say about what they sensed
- Records –
  - audio or video, CCTV, live stream, phone call, doorbell camera, EMS calls

# When - Establishing Time of Death with...

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## **MEDICAL EVIDENCE**

- Body temperature
- Degree of rigor mortis
- Degree of decomposition
- State and quantity of bacteria in the mouth
- Eye conditions
- Contents of the stomach
- Blood pooling
- State of trauma
- Insect activity

## **NON-MEDICAL EVIDENCE**

- Interviews
  - What witnesses observed and report
- Records
  - Audio or video recording
  - Social media, photo
- Stuff with timestamps and a location
  - GPS data, tickets, receipts

# Where – Within Discovery Scene & Beyond

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## AT THE CRIME SCENE

- Observations
  - Drag marks, blood pooling, tire tracks, fingerprints, vehicles nearby
- Physical objects
  - Identifying what *should be* at the discovery scene vs. unexpected items
- Forensic science
  - Soil, insects, or traces of plants that aren't present near the scene
  - Chemical residue

## VICTIM INFO

- Social history
  - Where they worked, lived, visited frequently, did their banking, got takeout, romantic partner, disputes etc.
- Conflicts
- What happened day of and leading up to the murder
  - Last known location
  - Any big changes

# Why – the murder motive

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## MOTIVES

- **Money or financial gain**
- **Revenge**
- **Strong feelings**
- Mission-oriented
- Thrill-seeking
- Power/control-oriented
- Visionary /Mentally ill
- Love

## MOTIVE CLUES

- Character statements
  - What suspect says
  - What others say about suspect
- Character behavior
  - How suspect behaves now and in the past
- Bureaucratic records (e.g.)
  - Wills, insurance policies
  - Land ownership or business documents
  - Bank or financial records
  - Vital records

# Who - was the victim and is the culprit?

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- What, How, Where, When, Why clues
- Revealing Secrets
  - Victim
  - Suspects
- Identify hidden connections between suspects and victim



# Recap – The universe of clues cover

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- Murder method
- Victim's identity (if not obvious)
- Identify of the true culprit
- Time of death
- Location of the murder
- Sequence of events leading to the murder
- Alibis or lack of alibi for your suspects
- Motives for some, if not all, of your suspects
- Reasons to cast suspicion on innocent suspects
- Victims's secrets
- False clues to obscure any of the above

# Clues in Scenes

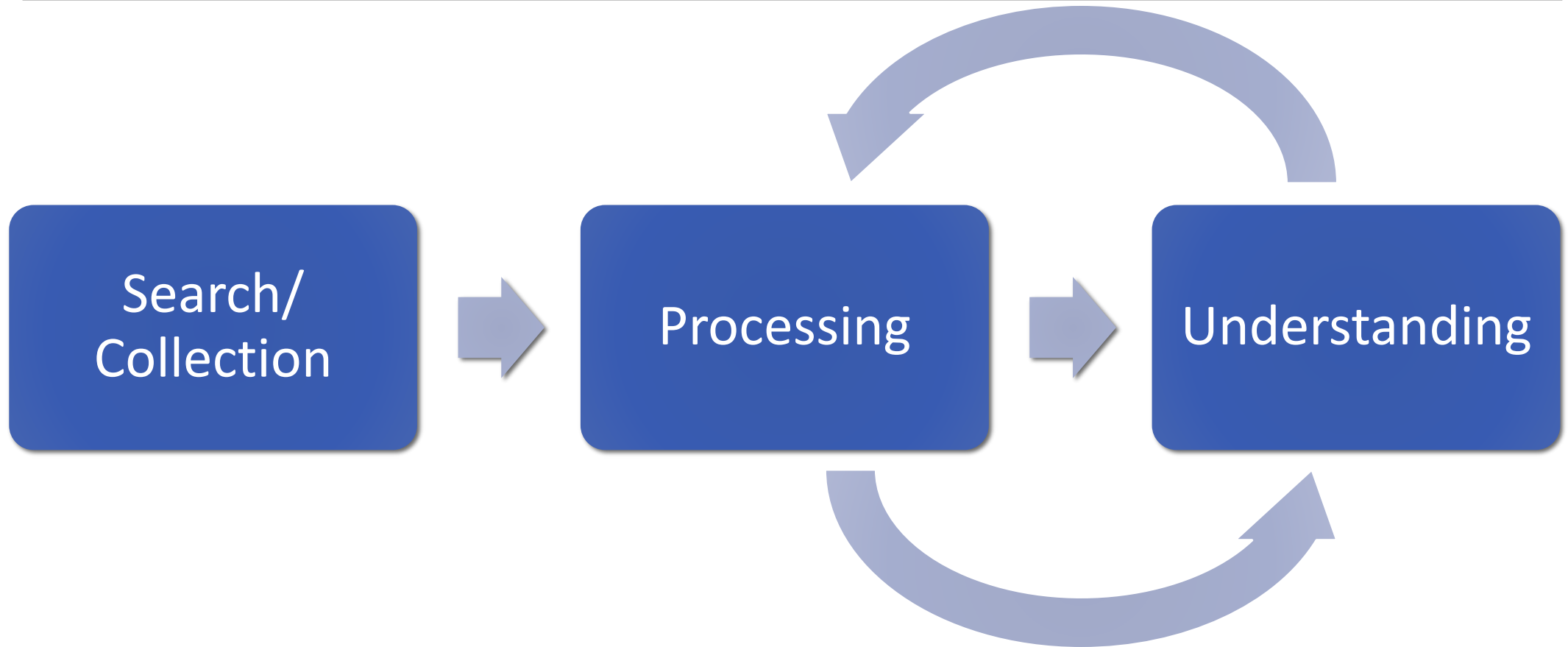
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MAKING CLUES INTERESTING IN THE MOMENT

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# The Lifecycle of a Clue

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# Search & collection

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## WHAT COUNTS

- Collection of objects, forensic evidence, the victim's body
- Interviewing characters (witness, suspect, people who know victim, etc.)
- Gathering phones, laptops, other devices
- Requesting paper or digital records and picking them up

## WHEN TO SHOW VS TELL

- Show
  - Show when there's conflict and/or clues discovered are key to your puzzle
- Tell
  - When similar clues have already been found
  - If you're interviewing a character again and no new information is shared
  - When someone else (e.g. your sleuth's ally) does the actual collecting

# Processing

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## WHAT COUNTS

- Reviewing verbal statements or discussing them with other characters
- Googling, using law enforcement databases, searches at the library
- Lab work
- Consulting with experts

## WHEN TO SHOW

- Unexpected results
- Active conflict
- An opportunity to interview a witness, suspect, or POI
- Results will inform later questioning
- Something goes wrong
- When you want a backdrop for other action

# Understanding a Clue

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## WHAT COUNTS

- Completely clearing a character of suspicion
- Moving a character from innocent or neutral to the suspect list
- Filling in gaps about how the crime was committed
- Identifying possible motive
- Putting all of the above together into a theory of the case

## WHEN TO SHOW

- Show
  - When understanding sparks conflict (with others or sometimes within oneself)
  - When understanding changes sleuth's plans
  - When theory is first formed or when it changes
- Show absence of understanding
  - When you want to show that the sleuth is struggling

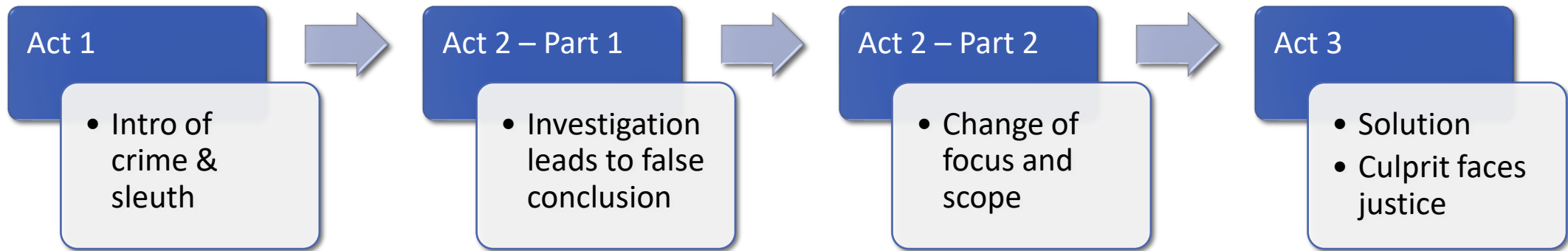
# Clues, Suspects, Plot

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FITTING YOUR PUZZLE INTO A PAGE-TURNING PLOT

# Building the Plot

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# Act 1: Intro of crime and sleuth

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## **INGREDIENTS**

- Body is discovered
- Investigation
- Clue processing starts
- Meet the sleuth
- Sleuth interacts with a few plausible suspects. Formal or informal
- Sleuth collects leads they'll pursue as story progresses

## **ADDING MORE UNCERTAINTY**

- Secondary mystery
- Victim's hard to identify
- No clear motive
- Create problems establishing time of death, death location, or murder method
- Witnesses refuse to talk, blatantly lie, and/or can't be found
- Delay sleuth in accessing resources needed for investigating

# Act 2 - Part 1. Investigation → false conclusion

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## INGREDIENTS

- More facts about suspects are revealed through interrogations and discovery of clues
- At least one secret of the victim is revealed
- Investigation broadens to cast suspicion on more characters
- Processing of evidence may change the understanding of clues
- Clues collected point toward
  - A solution to the whole mystery
  - A solution to a piece of the mystery

## CHALLENGES

- Witnesses can contradict each other
- Witness can be discredited, disappear, or die
- Evidence can disappear, or be discredited, or processing can be delayed
- Suspicion can fall on the sleuth or someone the sleuth cares about
- Sleuth can receive a threat, or be attacked, or a loved one can be threatened
- Another victim can die

# Act 2 – Part 2: Change of focus and scope

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## **INGREDIENTS**

- Sleuth reviews the case to determine where they went wrong
  - Evidence was missing, mis-processed, or misunderstood
  - False clues led the sleuth to the wrong theory
- The significance of some evidence found in Act 1 changes
- More secrets are revealed that expose hidden motives
- Chain of events that provoked the crime are revealed or theorized

## **MAKE THE CHALLENGES BIG!**

- Case seems impossible to solve
- Sleuth faces similar challenges from Act 2 – but now with greater consequences, or increased urgency
- Challenges can be a new source of clues

# Act 3: Puzzle solution & justice

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## INGREDIENTS

- Sleuth weighs evidence and forms new theory of the case
- Seeks positive proof to confirm their theory
- Climax - dramatic confrontation between sleuth and culprit
- Sleuth reveals the deductive reasoning they used to solve the mystery
- Case is solved and justice served

## MAKING THE END EXCITING

- Culprit has leverage over the sleuth
  - Personal danger
  - Professional risk
  - Social/reputational risk
- Sleuth is vulnerable
  - No match physically for the culprit
  - Injury / illness
  - Sleuth is cut off from other resources

# Recap – Building the Plot & a Puzzle

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## PROGRESS

- Collect → Process → Understand clues
- Clear suspects based on clues
- Add suspects based on clues
- Form theory about how, who, and why and keep updating with clues
- Expose the culprit, reveal reasoning, and bring about justice

## UNCERTAINTY

- Conflict at every stage of clue lifecycle
- Suspects and witnesses don't cooperate
- False clues lead sleuth astray
- Delays, distractions, and dead ends
- Theory is wrong!
- Culprit has leverage over detective / Sleuth is vulnerable

# What Did We Learn Today?

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1. Satisfying puzzle ingredients: Progress, Expectation, Uncertainty
2. 3-10 suspects
3. A “Just Right” investigation with a plausible # of twists
4. Clues cover who, what, when, where, why, and how
5. Clues have a 3 stage lifecycle: Search & collection, Processing, Understanding
6. Show in scenes when unexpected, tell when predictable
7. Blend of Progress, Expectation, Uncertainty is dynamic. Shifts within and between each quarter of the plot

# Resource List

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GET MORE TIPS TO HELP YOU CRAFT YOUR PUZZLE, SCENES, & PLOT

# Resource List – what's on it?

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## WRITING THE NOVEL

- How to hide obvious clues in a scene
- What to do when your puzzle is too easy... or too hard
- Making the ending exciting
- Novels that showcase concepts we talked about
- Classic 12-chapter murder mystery formula

<https://loripuma.com/mystery-extras>

## IRL INVESTIGATIONS

- Recommended death investigation protocol for law enforcement
- How time of death is determined
- Difference between a coroner and medical examiner

Thanks!

<https://crossexaminingcrime.wordpress.com/>



Q & A

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ASK ME ANYTHING

# All the Links!

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- Resource List

- <https://loripuma.com/mystery-extras>

- Mystery quiz

- <https://prowritingaid.com/crime-week/hub>

- Work with me

- <https://loripuma.com/workwithme>
- Schedule call to talk to me about working together
- <https://loripuma.as.me/?appointmentType=14414516>

- Social

- Scribophile: /authors/lori-puma/
- Goodreads: /loripuma
- X : /lori\_puma
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