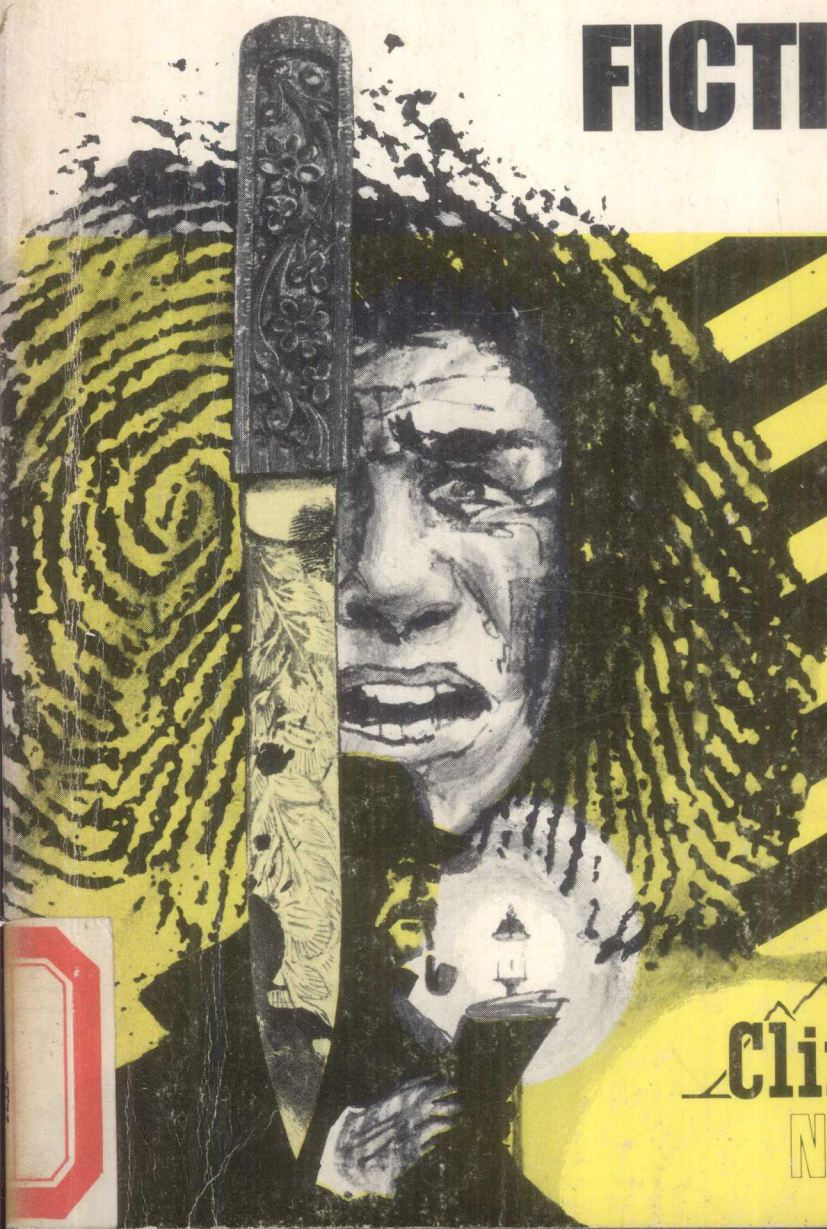
CLIFFS NOTES

$2.50

DETECTIVE IN FICTION



Cliffs NOTES INC.

DETECTIVE IN FICTION

NOTES

including
Rules for Writing Detective Fiction
What Is Detective Fiction?
"The Purloined Letter"
THE MOONSTONE
"The Adventure of the Speckled Band"
WHOSE BODY?
THE BENSON MURDER CASE
THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD
WHAT MRS. McGILLICUDDY SAW!
THE FASHION IN SHROUDS
BLACK ORCHIDS
THE LIST OF ADRIAN MESSENGER
DEATH AND THE JOYFUL WOMAN
Edgar Allan Poe Awards

by
L. David Allen, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska

consulting editor
James L. Roberts, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Nebraska

Cliffs Notes
INCORPORATED
LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68501

ISBN 0-8220-0388-0

CONTENTS

RULES FOR WRITING DETECTIVE FICTION

Many people have taken great delight in setting forth rules for the detective story, both to guide the writer and to provide criteria for judging detective stories and novels. Two of the more famous lists of rules have been set forth by Ronald Knox, in 1929, and by Willard Huntington Wright (S. S. Van Dine), in 1928. Although both lists were developed approximately fifty years ago and are somewhat dated, both of them make points well worth bearing in mind while reading detective fiction. Of the two sets of rules, Van Dine's is the most comprehensive and has the greater number of points that are still applicable today.

Monsignor Ronald A. Knox was well known as an essayist and religious apologist, but he also wrote detective stories noted for showing great learning and for the way the reader was provided the necessary information about the case. His "ten commandments" for detective fiction were originally published in his introduction to *The Best* [English] *Detective Stories of 1928* (London: Faber; New York: Liveright, 1929).

Knox's first rule is that the criminal must be mentioned early in the story, though the reader should not be allowed to see his thoughts; this is a matter of playing fair with the reader without making the solution too obvious. Second, the supernatural should not be involved in solving the detective problem. Third, only one secret room or passage should be used, and that should be mentioned only if the setting is one in which a secret room or passage is likely. Fourth, undiscovered poisons and any device needing a long scientific explanation should be avoided. Each of these four rules aims at preserving the reader's equal, or near-equal, status in attempting to solve the mystery.

Knox's fifth rule seems particularly strange now, though there was a period when it was a worthwhile caution: Chinese should not be involved in the story; more often than not, the presence of a Chinese was a sign of a bad story. Rule Number VI requires that accidents should not assist the detective in solving the case and that his flashes of insight have a chain of logical reasoning behind them.

Seventh, if the author vouches for the detective's status as detective, then he should not be the criminal, though a criminal may legitimately try to pass himself off as a detective. Eighth, all

clues must be produced for the reader's inspection as soon as they are discovered: The ninth rule is a rule of perfection: if the detective has a friend who accompanies him and reports his deeds, that friend's intelligence should be somewhat less than that of the average reader, and all his thoughts should be presented to the reader. Finally, the tenth rule requires that twins, doubles, and make-up artists not be used without sufficient preparation and reason for their use.

All of Monsignor Knox's rules aim at allowing the reader to have a chance at solving the problem before the detective's solution is presented. At the same time, of course, the solution should not be too easily arrived at, for that would spoil the challenge. Above all, these rules expect the solution to be logically arrived at, without any kind of improbabilities intervening; the detective should arrive at the conclusion without undue outside assistance from the author.

Willard Huntington Wright, who wrote detective stories under the pseudonym of S. S. Van Dine, was the creator of Philo Vance, often cited as America's first classic detective. Though this claim can certainly be disputed, it is clear that he had carefully considered the genre before setting down his rules for writing detective fiction. These rules, which cover most of the points made by Knox, as well as others, first appeared in the *American Magazine* in September, 1928. They were later included in *Philo Vance Murder Cases* (New York: Scribner's, 1936).

Wright's first rule is that the reader and the detective should have equal opportunities to solve the case, with all clues clearly and fully presented to the reader. Second, though the criminal may trick the detective, the author should not otherwise willfully trick or deceive the reader. Third, a love interest interferes with the business of bringing the criminal to justice and, therefore, should be avoided; this is one point, made by many commentators on detective fiction in the 1920s and '30s, which is rarely used today. Wright's fourth point requires that the detective, or any other official investigator, not be the criminal; Wright states this idea more strongly and positively than Knox does, and inadvertently disapproves of several very fine detective stories in which the detective is indeed the culprit.

Logical deduction leading to the solution of the problem, rather than accident, coincidence, or unmotivated confession, is called for in the fifth rule. The sixth rule insists that a detective novel requires

a detective who detects; that is, it must have a person who gathers clues and reaches conclusions through the analysis of these clues. Seventh, Wright feels that murder is the only crime that should be the subject of a detective story; any lesser crime, he claims, will not repay the energy that the reader puts into reading the story. The eighth rule demands that recourse to a supernatural means of reaching the solution be avoided; the reader has a chance in matching wits with a detective using logic, but none at all against the world of mysticism.

The ninth rule suggests that more than one detective scatters the reader's interest, breaks the chain of reasoning, and takes unfair advantage of the reader, who doesn't know who his competitor is. The tenth through the thirteenth rules are closely related: there should be only one culprit (Twelve)—certainly, there should be no secret societies or criminal groups involved (Thirteen)—who has played a reasonably prominent role in the action (Ten)—and who is not a servant (Eleven)—; this should be the case, no matter how many murders are committed (Twelve). If it were otherwise, the author would not be dealing fairly with the reader.

Wright's fourteenth rule requires both the murder and the means of detecting it to be scientific and rational; flights of fancy and speculative devices have no place in the detective story. Rule Fifteen expects the solution to the problem to be apparent throughout—if the reader is shrewd enough to find it; any reader should, on rereading the book or story, be able to perceive all the clues which would have allowed him to solve the problem without the final chapter. Rule sixteen suggests that the primary business of a detective story is recording the crime and its detection; thus, long descriptive passages and character analyses should not be part of the detective story (this is one rule which has been somewhat modified as detective fiction and fiction in general have changed over the years; characterization, in particular, has become increasingly important).

Rules seventeen, eighteen and nineteen are another closely related group: professional criminals, who are the business of police departments rather than authors or amateur detectives, should not be the guilty parties (Seventeen). In addition, the crime (murder) should be a definite crime, not an accident or a suicide (Eighteen). Finally, the motives for the crime should be personal; international intrigue belongs in a different, though related, category of fiction

(Nineteen). It might be noted that the sharp line which Wright drew between detective stories and stories of international intrigue has been blurred since 1928; though there are still distinct sub-genres of each type, mixtures are much more frequent.

The final rule that Wright lists is something of a catch-all, since he wanted to have an even twenty items. He includes devices which, he feels, should be avoided in detective fiction: comparing cigarette butts to determine the guilty person; frightening the culprit into a confession through a rigged seance or some similar device; forging fingerprints; using a dummy-figure to establish an alibi; establishing the familiarity of an intruder by a dog's behavior; employing twins or doubles; hypodermic needles and knockout drops; locked room murders after the police have broken in; guilt determined by word-association tests; and code letters which, when broken, solve the problem. These devices, Wright says, have been used too often; using them today would reveal the author as lacking originality and creative ability.

There are, of course, other sets of rules that have been proposed for detective fiction; these are among the best known and they have lasted well. Any such set of rules should be taken rather lightly; any attempt to apply them too rigidly would be a grave mistake. Nevertheless, these two lists clearly state a number of assumptions that many people make about detective fiction. They are useful as guides in more detailed explorations of detective fiction, such as the one which follows.

WHAT IS DETECTIVE FICTION?

Detection stories, mysteries, adventure thrillers, spy stories, suspense stories, puzzle stories, stories about criminals – all of these kinds of fiction, and others as well, have, or can have, an interest in crime of some sort. Each type, naturally, approaches the subject differently, both in attitude and method of handling. In addition, each type often has sub-types that vary the basic pattern of the general category. For example, detective fiction is divided into "classical" detective stories and "hard-boiled" detective stories. Classical detective fiction has distinctive characteristics that set it apart from its hard-boiled brother and from all other fiction with an interest in crime.

The pattern of detective fiction is quite rigid, allowing only slight variations from work to work. In this pattern, the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story are usually clearly defined. In the beginning section of the story, the crime – most often a murder – is either committed or revealed; frequently in detective fiction, the beginning also introduces a stable situation before the crime disturbs it. The arrival of the detective marks the transition from beginning to middle. The middle of the detective story follows the detective as he finds the clues and the other information that will lead to the solution of the problem posed in the beginning. The completion of the detective's inquiry and his announcement of the solution marks the transition from middle to end. The end of the detective story focuses on the solution to the case, which is usually the detective's explanation of his chain of reasoning which led to the solution. Then, the murderer is usually disposed of, normally through arrest or suicide (the detective does not "shoot it out" with the criminal in classical detective fiction). Finally, the society is left in equilibrium again, though this is more likely to be suggested than described in detail.

Thus, classical detective fiction is often built around this sequence:

1. Stable society at rest
2. Commission of a serious crime, usually murder
3. Arrival or commissioning of a detective to solve the problem of who committed the crime
4. Finding the clues and tracking down the information necessary to reach the solution, as well as eliminating innocent persons from suspicion
5. Completion of the inquiry and announcement of the solution
6. Disposition of the criminal
7. Wrapping up the case, usually featuring an explanation of how the solution was reached, and
8. Society restored to equilibrium.

Most of these elements are found in all detective stories. Numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5 are always present, either directly described or as necessary conditions of the detective story. The other elements are less mandatory, though they, too, are normally present; if there are variations on the basic formula, they are usually achieved by varying numbers 1, 6, 7, or 8.

In the classical detective story, the crime committed is almost always murder, and the problem for the investigator is always a crime. Crime is involved because it calls for the kind of investigation that is required by a detective story. This crime must be a serious crime, for if it were not, it would be worthy of neither the investigation by the detective nor the energy expended by the reader. A crime committed against a person is considered to be a more serious crime than one committed against property; thus, almost all crimes in detective fiction are crimes against persons. Since murder is the most serious crime possible against a person, murder (suspected, attempted, or actual) is the crime most often used in detective fiction.

Murder is the most suitable crime for a detective story for several other reasons. It is a crime against an individual which also has implications for the society in which the murder took place. Because the victim cannot demand restitution, society must become concerned in the matter. In addition, fear of further murders, fear of the unknown, and fear of the exposure of other misdeeds or indiscretions during the course of the investigation disrupts the equilibrium of the society as a whole and of the individuals in it. Furthermore, such a crime forcibly indicates that the people did not know each other as well as they thought they did. Until the mystery is solved and the murderer named, suspicion runs rampant through the society, with neighbor suspecting neighbor. Thus, murder is the most dramatic way to disrupt the society and to involve it in the investigation. Murder also provides the most dramatic possibilities in the battle of wits between detective and criminal. The stakes in this battle are life or death, and the criminal, especially, is risking his life. Murder, then, is the most dramatic of crimes, played for the highest stakes, and producing the greatest tensions; though it is not the only crime in detective fiction, it is the most common and the most appropriate for these reasons.

In developing the basic pattern into a complete story, detective fiction stresses five elements: the setting, the victim(s), the murderer, the suspects, and the detective.

The social setting is more important in detective fiction than the physical setting. A murder may be committed in almost any physical setting and still provide the basis for a detective story. However, whatever the physical setting, classical detective fiction requires several things of the society in which the murder takes

place. The most important of these requirements is that it be a closed society, thus excluding the possibility of an outside murderer. In real life, a stranger may commit a murder, but in classic detective fiction, the murderer is always someone within the society. A major result is that all the members of the society are potential suspects. A family gathering, a close-knit geographic or economic group (an English village, or New York's monied society), an occupational group (a theater troupe or a business firm), or a group isolated in a neutral place (in a railroad train or on an island) all would meet these conditions.

A second expectation is that serious crime of any kind is virtually unknown in the society portrayed in the detective story. Murder is unexpected, and its commission creates a crisis in the society, disrupting all the normal patterns of living. Partly, this requirement is for dramatic reasons, increasing the tensions and drama that can be used to tell the story. Yet, it also stresses the fall of the murderer from the normally stable and basically ethical relationships within the society. This, in turn, increases the interest in discovering who committed the murder. In addition, such a social situation would make the corpse incongruous, increasing the shock of the crime for both the society and the reader. Finally, it is desirable if attention is paid to the times at which people do things, especially if regular rituals are observed, and to the relationships between scenes (how far it is from the bedroom to the library, for example). This may be helpful to the detective in solving the crime, but it is even more important in orienting the reader and in placing him on an equal footing with the detective in attempting to solve the problem.

The victim may or may not be considered an actor in the story before the crime is committed. It is permissible for the victim to have been killed before the story opens. Whether or not he is presented directly to the reader, the victim's character is important and must meet two basic requirements: 1) his death must cast suspicion on a number of people, which means that he must have been wicked enough to give people cause to commit murder; but, on the other hand, 2) he must not have been so wicked that his death is felt only as a relief—he should have been good enough to produce feelings of guilt among the suspects. In addition, the victim should not have been a "habitual" criminal, since then he could have been dealt with by the law, and a different type of story

would result. However, the victim may have been engaged in a questionable activity or in a crime such as blackmail, which people would be reluctant to alert the police, but such activity should be on a limited basis, within the society involved in the detective story. Furthermore, the victim, like the murderer, should be a member of the closed society or have some definite and close ties to it. Finally, if there is more than one victim, the subsequent victims should be more important and less offending than the first; the first murder may be committed because of a genuine grievance, but all others result from a sense of guilt and a desire to escape punishment.

Like the victim, the murderer should be a member of the closed society; indeed, it is even more important that the murderer, and not the victim, be a member of this society. The murderer is a person who is capable of knowingly committing a violent crime, usually one who feels his rights, desires, sense of justice, or safety should override all else. No matter how the murderer may have been wronged, it is an overwhelming pride that allows him to deliberately take the law, or what he conceives as justice, into his own hands. Since this pride would normally be evident in the murderer's character, the author's skill is put to the test in presenting the murderer as a character: when the murderer's identity is revealed, the reader should be both surprised *and* convinced that the character as presented was capable of murder. In other words, the reader should not feel he has been deceived when the murderer is identified.

There are four basic ways of disposing of the murderer at the end of the detective story. First, he may escape or be allowed to escape, the latter being by far the more common of the two. This is a poor ending unless there are truly exceptional circumstances surrounding the murder, and consequently it is a rarely used ending. Second, the murderer may be insane or go insane; this, too, is a poor ending. It blurs the question of the murderer's capacity and guilt in the crime, it leaves no sense of repentance and little sense of atonement, and it reduces the detective's stature as a problem solver. Third, the murderer may commit, or be allowed to commit, suicide. This is somewhat more satisfactory, since it does indicate a repentance and an admission of guilt in violating social norms. However, it does not allow the rituals through which the society is returned to stability and equilibrium. Thus, the most satisfactory disposition of the murderer is, fourth, the arrest of the murderer, together with either his actual or implied trial and execution. This

ending allows the case to be definitely closed, the criminal to repent and atone for his misdeeds, and the society to return to normal through the ritual of trial and execution. It also enhances the detective's abilities and sharply delineates the murderer's culpability for the crime. (It might be noted that this order has little to do with the ways that crimes are brought to a close in the real world; this order is, instead, the one which brings the detective story to the most satisfying closure, leaving the fewest loose ends.)

The people in the society of a detective story are apparently innocent, people who have apparently committed no crimes and only minor indiscretions. However, these people, and especially the suspects, are guilty of something that puts them in opposition to the detective and the law. This hinders, however, the detective's path to the solution, as well as misleading the reader. For the suspects, there are five basic causes for feelings of guilt and for failure to cooperate fully with the investigation. First, the suspect may have wished to commit the murder; he may even have planned to do so. Second, the suspect may be afraid or ashamed to reveal other crimes, or such indiscretions as adultery. These crimes or indiscretions usually have little to do with the murder; the suspect's fear is for his own well-being or reputation. Third, the suspect may take great pride in his own intellect and ability to solve the crime before the official investigators do so; such a person is likely to be a subsequent victim for the murderer. Fourth, a suspect may be so proud of his innocence, or so outraged at being a suspect that he will refuse to cooperate with the investigation. Fifth, a suspect may lack faith in another suspect whom he or she holds dear, thus causing him to hide clues, to confuse matters, and/or to falsely confess. The murderer, of course, must also be a suspect, but his motives for not cooperating and for hiding and confusing clues is quite different: actual guilt, as well as pride and a desire to escape the consequences of his actions, guide his course of action in the detective story. Whatever the causes, both the detective and the reader must sort through a welter of suspects, motives, and clues to reach the proper solution to the murderer's identity.

The detective is, of course, the focus of attention in detective fiction. He or she must have two qualities, at least: he must be able to find clues to the identity of the murderer, and he must be able to connect those clues in such a way as to reveal the criminal. Any other characteristics add to the interest of the detective story,

specifying his methods of detection, as well as his personal qualities. Normally, the detective is not a part of the society in which the crime has been committed, but is usually brought in from outside the group, thus preserving impartiality. Although there are many exceptions, most detectives in the classical tradition are private persons and gifted amateurs. If the detective should be a member of the official police force, the emphasis must be on his individual efforts; otherwise, the story shades into the police procedural story. Whatever his traits and methods, the detective's purpose and function are definite and simple: he must find the murderer and, by finding the guilty person, return society to stability.

In a sense, the detective story is an intellectual problem for the detective and for the reader. In such stories, the detective stands as a surrogate for the reader, as well as being the reader's competition. That is, the detective finds the relevant information and, if the author is playing fairly, presents it to the reader. However, the author needs to emphasize the significance of each bit of information, and, thus the reader is in a competition to solve the problem first. (Usually, the detective wins this competition; the fun is in the contest and the matching of wits.)

The detective of detective fiction is usually not a realistic figure. Instead, he becomes a romantic hero who represents the possibilities of an individual. In the detective, experience and intelligence mesh, making the detective a person who finds solutions to problems and dilemmas that seem to have no solution. He makes the connections that reveal the solution, as well as revealing the truth about the situation at large. The detective is also a romantic figure in the access he has to people. He easily crosses the social and economic boundaries that hold most of us in place. He meets people well, probing into their lives—their pasts and their sins—, getting to know them intimately, in a way that most of us never do.

Finally, the detective is a romantic figure because he is a specialist in detecting clues and finding solutions, an expert who is called in whenever a problem arises. Even while testing ourselves against the detective and trying to outguess him, we give him a trust we rarely give others. We feel that he will use every bit of intelligence he can muster and follow up all evidence that has any relationship to the problem. In doing this, the detective gains our trust that he will find whatever alternatives there are in a world where alternatives often seem to be non-existent. This trust invests the

detective with the status of a protector of innocence and of what nobility there is in man. At the same time, the detective forces us to face and to acknowledge criminal activity. Because the detective is persistent in following all clues, wherever they lead and discerning the less desirable aspects of human behavior, we must face the truth: he holds up the unknown and the undesirable to rational examination, allowing motivations to be observed and understood. Though murder is not an uplifting topic, the detective's investigation forces us to recognize and admit both the sinful and the noble sides of human nature, leading us from a dangerous and misleading ignorance and innocence.

The character and qualities of detective fiction assure us that there will be answers to crimes committed. It suggests that answers and solutions can be found by people who are dedicated to the search for truth and who know where and how to look for the information that can lead to those solutions and answers. As we follow the detective's progress and compete with him, we are encouraged to use our powers of observation and logic, to construct hypotheses and test them, and to develop and examine alternatives. We are encouraged to pay attention to seemingly trivial details, and to learn that such apparently insignificant things may hold the key to the solution of a crime. Indeed, the classical detective story suggests that observation and a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning can solve any mystery and any problem.

Detective fiction employs two underlying assumptions which allow these characteristics full play. First, detective fiction assumes that the universe is orderly and logical, that cause and effect not only operate but that they are inevitable, and, therefore, that justice is possible. This is essential, for otherwise the clues would not necessarily indicate the solution, and logic would not necessarily yield an answer. Second, detective fiction assumes that men have free will. This allows them the freedom to commit or not to commit a murder, to cooperate or not to cooperate with the investigation, and to pursue or not to pursue the truth vigorously. Such freedom of will also allows men, even requires them, to take full responsibility for their actions. Thus, the consequences for their actions are earned rather than given, arbitrarily. This both increases the fascination with detective fiction and adds to its drama and interest. However, detective fiction assumes that human behavior and motivation can be logically followed; in other words, although human

beings freely determine their own behavior, they determine that behavior according to patterns that have a logic that can be followed by the detective and by the reader.

If the reader is to participate in detective fiction, matching wits with the detective, two contradictory requirements must be met. On the one hand, the author and the detective must play fair with the reader. All clues and the basic information necessary to solve the crime and to determine the murderer must be made available to the reader, preferably at the time that these clues and information become available to the detective. It is for this reason that Wright (Van Dine) requires that long, technical explanations at the end should be avoided; such explanations mean that the solution depends on information that few readers could reasonably be expected to know. Another aspect of playing fair with the reader requires that the author be scrupulously accurate with small details, as well as with large details. If he is not, then the information that the reader has cannot lead to the proper solution.

On the other hand, the tasks must not be made too easy for the reader. Indeed, it is desirable for the detective's solution to come as a surprise. The reader's reaction should be "Well, of course! Why didn't I think of—or see—that?" In order to achieve this kind of ending while still presenting the clues and preserving fair play, the writer must mislead the reader in some way. One of the most prominent methods of doing this is by using a Watson-figure—a person who is solid and ordinary but slightly less intelligent than the average reader—to present the findings of the observant and perceptive detective. In this way, all the clues can be presented to the reader, but since the Watson-figure is somewhat obtuse, he cannot organize the information into the relevant and irrelevant or the important and unimportant. If this method is used, all the information given to the Watson-figure must be passed on as he gets it, to the reader, and it is desirable for this person's thoughts and conclusions to be available to the reader. Reserving special knowledge, though openly presenting all clues, is another method that is frequently used to mislead the reader; some writers also use an open display of observation and deduction which turn out to be wrong. Although they are quite common, neither of these methods is completely fair. Another method, much preferred to these two, is keeping the reader occupied with the narrative. If the narrative is sufficiently interesting, and if the facts are presented separately and without their logical