



After the Midnight Train – Mystery Development Exercise

We strongly suggest you complete the Genre Exercise (Midnight Train Exercise) to set you up for the mystery exercise before you.

You have finished your Midnight Train scene. At this point, you were not asked to create a novel. You were concentrating on character voice, point of view, genre, atmosphere, what your character notices, and how information can be suggested without being directly explained.

For the next part of the workshop, we are going to assume that the scene you have just written was Chapter One.

You do not need to know what happens next. You are going to discover it.

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What Makes a Mystery?

Mystery is not simply about murder. At its heart, a mystery creates a gap between what appears to have happened and what actually happened.

The reader keeps reading because they want that gap closed.

A mystery therefore needs a question. It could be:

- Who did it?
- Where did someone go?
- Why did something happen?
- Who is lying?
- What is being hidden?
- How was something apparently impossible achieved?
- Is the protagonist's version of events correct?

The writer is effectively telling the reader: There is an explanation. I will give you pieces of it, but I will not tell you how those pieces fit together until the right moment.

The Mystery Rules

- Something does not make sense. There is a gap between appearance and truth.
- The reader needs a question they want answered.
- Clues should be present before their significance is understood.
- People should have secrets. Not every secret needs to relate to the main mystery.
- Answers should create new questions.
- The protagonist should become increasingly involved.
- The eventual reveal should change our understanding of earlier events.

These same techniques can strengthen romance, fantasy, historical fiction, science fiction, Gothic fiction, thrillers, comedy, and other genres.

The Challenge

What Happened After the Midnight Train Stopped?

Choose one Mystery Scenario from the table below. Do not worry about whether it will become your final plot. You are exploring possibilities.

Mystery Scenario	What Happens	The Question It Creates	What It Could Develop Into
The Missing Passenger	When the train starts again, someone is gone.	How could they have left?	Disappearance, identity mystery, crime
The Extra Passenger	Someone is now sitting in the carriage who was not there before.	Where did they come from?	Imposter, conspiracy, supernatural, crime
The Abandoned Suitcase	A suitcase remains but nobody claims it.	Who does it belong to?	Hidden identity, smuggling, secrets
The Wrong Suitcase	Your character leaves with someone else's luggage.	Was the swap really accidental?	Pursuit, blackmail, hidden past
The Dead Passenger	Someone is found dead elsewhere on the train.	What happened during the delay?	Murder mystery
The Empty Compartment	A compartment occupied before the stop is suddenly empty.	Where did everyone go?	Group disappearance, conspiracy
The Stranger Outside	Your character saw someone standing in the	Why were they outside in the middle	Witness, pursuit, hidden meeting

	snow.	of nowhere?	
The False Explanation	Staff blame the delay on weather or signalling.	Why does your character know that is wrong?	Cover-up
The Message	Your character receives a strange message before the train moves again.	Who sent it?	Threat, warning, secret connection
The Forgotten Passenger	Everyone insists someone your character remembers was never there.	Who is mistaken?	Psychological mystery, conspiracy
The Missing Time	Your character remembers a much longer stop than official records show.	What happened in the missing time?	Psychological thriller, crime, sci-fi
The Open Door	A train door is found open despite the snow.	Who opened it and why?	Escape, murder, hidden arrival
The Bloodstain	Blood is discovered but nobody appears injured.	Whose blood is it?	Hidden crime
The Photograph	A photograph shows someone from the train years earlier.	Why were these people connected before tonight?	Historical secret
The Warning	A passenger tells your character not to mention what happened.	What are they afraid of?	Cover-up, coercion
The Missing Member of Staff	The conductor or driver disappears.	Who is controlling the situation?	Sabotage, crime
The Passenger With Two Names	Your character hears someone addressed by a different name.	Which identity is real?	Imposter, hidden past
The Phone That Is Not Theirs	Your character finds a phone among their belongings.	Who put it there?	Surveillance, mistaken identity
The Voice Message	A message arrives from someone supposedly missing or dead.	When was it recorded?	Timeline mystery
The Train Stops Again	Shortly after restarting, the train stops a second time.	Is the first incident happening again?	Escalation

Choose Your Character Development Prompt

Your original narrator remains your protagonist. The mystery should now reveal more about them.

Choose one.

Character Development Prompt	What It Reveals
They hate confrontation	The mystery will eventually force them to challenge someone.
They distrust authority	They are reluctant to involve police or staff.
They always follow rules	The investigation will require them to break one.
They are naturally suspicious	They may jump to the wrong conclusions.
They are too trusting	Someone may manipulate them.
They cannot leave unanswered questions alone	Curiosity becomes obsession.

They are hiding something themselves	Investigating someone else risks exposing them.
They have recently suffered a loss	The mystery connects emotionally with grief.
They desperately want a fresh start	The train incident pulls them back into something they wanted to escape.
They avoid responsibility	Someone unexpectedly relies upon them.
They need to feel useful	Helping someone draws them too far into the mystery.
They are frightened of being disbelieved	Nobody initially believes what they witnessed.
They have excellent instincts but poor judgement	They notice the right clues but interpret them badly.
They are very observant but socially awkward	They see things other people miss.
They have a secret connection to another passenger	The mystery becomes personal immediately.
They recognise something from their past	The train incident is not as random as it first appeared.

Add a Complication

Now choose one complication. This should make the story harder rather than simply add more information.

Complication	Effect on the Story
Nobody believes your protagonist	They must investigate alone.
Police begin to suspect them	They need to clear themselves.
The person they trust most is lying	Relationships become part of the mystery.
A key witness disappears	The mystery escalates.
Someone starts following them	The investigation becomes dangerous.
Evidence vanishes	Someone knows they are investigating.
Another passenger dies	The stakes rise.
A second person receives the same message	The mystery expands.
Their belongings have been searched	The mystery enters their personal life.
Someone knows information about their past	The train journey may have been deliberate.
Two passengers secretly know one another	Relationships are not what they seemed.
CCTV contradicts their memory	Their reliability becomes uncertain.
A supposedly innocent character has lied	Suspicion shifts.
The official timeline is impossible	Time becomes part of the mystery.
Someone asks them to keep a secret	Moral conflict is introduced.
They discover they have taken something from the train	They now possess evidence.

Someone breaks into their home	The mystery follows them away from the train.
They receive another message saying, “Stop looking.”	Somebody is watching them.

Put the Three Together

You should now have: Mystery Scenario + Character Prompt + Complication.

For example:

- The Missing Passenger + frightened of being disbelieved + CCTV contradicts their memory = the beginning of a psychological mystery.
- The Wrong Suitcase + always follows the rules + someone breaks into their home = an ordinary person pushed into behaviour completely out of character.
- The Dead Passenger + secret connection to another passenger + police begin to suspect them = an external mystery tied directly to the protagonist’s personal story.

Exercise One – Continue the Scene

The train begins moving again. Write 300–500 words. Your chosen mystery should appear, but do not explain it.

Think about:

- What does your character notice first?
- What do they initially think is happening?
- What information are they missing?
- What seems unimportant now but could matter later?

End the scene with a question rather than an answer.

Increase the Mystery

Once you have written the first continuation, choose one escalation scenario. Do not choose what logically solves the mystery. Choose something that makes it more complicated.

Escalation	What It Does
The first suspect has a perfect alibi	Forces a new theory.
The missing passenger's luggage contains someone else's belongings	Introduces identity questions.
The victim was travelling under a false name	Expands the mystery.
Two passengers give identical rehearsed accounts	Suggests collusion.
Someone produces a photograph contradicting the timeline	Challenges what we believe happened.
The protagonist realises they recognise the victim	Makes the story personal.
A clue points towards someone who appears completely innocent	Shifts suspicion.
An apparent clue has an innocent explanation	Prevents an easy solution.
The train stop was deliberately caused	Makes the original event more important.
Someone else was supposed to be on the train but was not	Introduces another mystery.
The wrong person may have been targeted	Changes motive.
A passenger has vanished from all official records	Deepens identity mystery.
Someone claims the protagonist spoke to them during the missing time	Challenges the protagonist's memory.
The mystery began before the train journey	Expands the timeline.
The person who appears most suspicious saves the protagonist	Complicates judgement.
Someone helping the investigation is feeding false information	Creates mistrust.
A clue from Chapter One suddenly means something else	Creates retrospective mystery.

Exercise Two – Question → Answer → Bigger Question

Mystery pacing is not necessarily fast. It is progressive. Each answer should alter what the reader thinks they know.

The first question is:

The answer appears to be:

But then we discover:

So the new question becomes:

Repeat this once more. The aim is not to solve the story. It is to learn how a mystery grows.

Developing the Supporting Characters

Return to the people on the train. Choose three passenger roles. They can become suspects, allies, witnesses, victims, or red herrings.

Character	Possible Story Function
The Friendly Stranger	Gains the protagonist's trust.
The Nervous Passenger	Appears guilty but may simply be frightened.
The Helpful Passenger	Knows more than they initially reveal.
The Arrogant Passenger	Creates conflict.
The Vulnerable Passenger	Gives the protagonist someone to protect.
The Silent Passenger	Watches more than they speak.
The Passenger Who Knows Everyone	Becomes a useful source of information.
The Passenger Who Remembers Nothing	Creates uncertainty.
The Passenger Who Is Too Interested	May have their own investigation.
The Passenger Who Wants to Leave Immediately	Raises suspicion.

The Passenger Who Changes Their Story	Creates a natural red herring.
The Passenger With a Personal Connection	Brings character history into the plot.
The Passenger Who Dislikes the Protagonist	Creates interpersonal tension.
The Passenger Who Needs Help	Forces involvement.
The Passenger Who Appears Harmless	Could become important later.
The Passenger Who Seems To Know What Happened	Could become ally, suspect, or victim.

Exercise Three – Give Everyone Something to Hide

The best red herrings grow from real secrets. Not every lie should relate to the central mystery.

Passenger 1

What do they want?

What are they hiding?

Passenger 2

What do they want?

What are they hiding?

Passenger 3

What do they want?

What are they hiding?

Which secret actually relates to the central mystery?

The others can become red herrings.

Clues: Show the Truth Before the Reader Understands It

Mystery writing is not about concealing everything. Often the most satisfying technique is to show the clue but hide its significance.

A clue might be:

- Snow melting beneath one passenger's seat.
- A suitcase in the wrong luggage rack.
- Someone repeatedly checking a watch.
- A passenger using a name they should not know.
- A door that was supposedly locked.
- Footprints beside the train.
- A coat left behind.
- A light seen outside the carriage.
- A passenger returning from the wrong direction.

Quick Exercise – Plant a Clue

The detail my character notices:

What they think it means:

What it could really mean:

Red Herrings

A red herring should not feel as though the author is deliberately pointing the reader in the wrong direction. There should be a logical reason the protagonist misinterprets something.

For example, a passenger lies about leaving the carriage. That makes them suspicious. Later, we discover they did leave, but they were secretly meeting another passenger. The clue was true. The assumption was wrong.

Quick Exercise – Build a Red Herring

What suspicious thing did the passenger do?

What does the protagonist think it means?

What is the real explanation?

Mystery in Other Genres

The mystery does not have to replace the genre you originally used. It can strengthen it. Choose a direction that suits the tone and conventions of your original Midnight Train scene.

Genre	Mystery Direction	What It Adds
Romance	The person the protagonist is falling for becomes a suspect.	Can I trust this person as well as what happened?
Romance	The two leads investigate together but neither fully trusts the other.	Investigation creates intimacy and conflict.
Gothic Horror	The train incident connects to an old family secret.	Hidden history, atmosphere, dread.
Gothic Horror	Something supernatural may have a human explanation.	Uncertainty between rational and uncanny.
Psychological Thriller	Everyone remembers the journey differently.	Can the protagonist trust their own memory?
Historical Fiction	A passenger carries information that could destroy a reputation.	Social restrictions complicate investigation.
Science Fiction	The train arrives at the right place but the wrong time.	The mystery structures the speculative idea.
Fantasy	The crime appears to break the established rules of magic.	Magic must still obey fair mystery rules.
Comedy	The protagonist repeatedly misreads genuine clues.	Humour comes from interpretation, not lack of stakes.
Spy Thriller	The stopped train was used for an exchange.	Identity, surveillance, secrecy.
Drama	The mystery exposes relationships between passengers.	Solving it has emotional consequences.
Noir	Every apparently innocent person has a motive.	Moral ambiguity and mistrust.
Cosy Mystery	A small group of passengers becomes a contained suspect pool.	Community, observation, secrets.

Exercise Four – Change the Scene, Not Just the Information

If your protagonist needs information, do not automatically put two characters in a quiet room and let them explain the plot. Change the circumstances of the scene.

Choose a setting:

- Police station
- Hotel
- Café
- Hospital
- Funeral
- Railway station
- Someone's home
- Workplace
- Another train
- Isolated village
- Library
- Pub
- Roadside
- Hotel corridor
- The snow-covered location where the train originally stopped

Now choose an obstacle:

- The person refuses to talk.
- Somebody else is listening.
- The protagonist is not supposed to be there.
- The person lies.
- Somebody interrupts.
- The protagonist realises they are being followed.
- The person they came to meet is missing.
- They find something they were not supposed to see.
- The conversation becomes emotional.
- The protagonist recognises someone.

Build the Scene

My protagonist goes to:

because they want to discover:

but:

during the scene they discover:

which creates the new question:

Cliffhangers and Chapter Endings

A mystery chapter should not simply stop because the scene has ended. It should leave the reader with something unfinished.

Cliffhanger Type	What It Does
Revelation	Something new changes the story.
Contradiction	Two facts cannot both be true.

Discovery	The protagonist finds something.
Threat	Someone reacts to the investigation.
Recognition	The protagonist suddenly understands something.
Reinterpretation	Something from the Midnight Train scene suddenly means something different.

Exercise Five – Pick Your Cliffhanger

Choose one, or use it as the starting point for your own:

- A passenger you thought was missing walks into the room.
- The protagonist receives a message from the victim’s phone.
- Someone says, “You weren’t supposed to remember that.”
- The protagonist finds their own name on a passenger list dated twenty years earlier.
- The person they suspected produces proof they were somewhere else.
- A photograph shows two passengers knew one another long before the train journey.
- The protagonist realises the footprints outside the train were not leading away from it. They were leading towards it.
- The police reveal that the train never officially stopped.
- The protagonist discovers someone has searched their home.
- A passenger they trusted disappears.

Then write only the final three to five sentences of the chapter.

Character Development Through Mystery

The mystery should not simply happen around your protagonist. It should test them.

Choose something your character avoids or struggles with:

- They distrust people.
- They avoid conflict.
- They need control.
- They assume the worst.
- They are too trusting.
- They want to be needed.
- They are frightened of authority.
- They cannot let unanswered questions go.
- They carry guilt from their past.

Quick Exercise – Give the Mystery a Personal Cost

At the start, my character tends to:

The mystery will force them to:

The thing they most do not want to confront is:

Now the mystery has the beginnings of a character arc.

Use the Other Passengers to Reveal Your Protagonist

Characters develop through interaction. Choose one passenger who:

- Challenges them.
- Needs them.
- Attracts or fascinates them.
- Reminds them of someone.
- Distrusts them.

Who is this passenger?

What does this person bring out in your protagonist?

What might the protagonist reveal to them that they would not reveal to anyone else?

The Final Development Exercise

By the end of the session, you do not need a complete plot. You need a collection of strong possibilities that can grow into one.

The central mystery begins when:

After the train starts again:

When they arrive at their destination:

The protagonist becomes involved because:

One passenger they mistrust is:

That passenger is actually hiding:

A clue from the train is:

The protagonist initially misinterprets it as:

Later it turns out to mean:

The next event that makes the mystery bigger is:

The investigation becomes personal when:

The mystery forces the protagonist to confront:

A future chapter could end with:

One question I deliberately do not know the answer to yet is:

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Mystery is not only a genre. It is a storytelling tool. Secrets, questions, withheld information, misdirection, revelation and reinterpretation can strengthen almost any story.