

on foot. If the detective is captured, he finds himself in life-threatening situations and must use his skills to escape. He is then even more determined to catch the villain.

One way or another, the detective always accomplishes his mission, much to the satisfaction of the audience. The formula for detective stories is so successful; it is hard to imagine that it will ever be significantly altered. After all, who wants to watch a detective story without action and adventure, or in which the villain wins?

8 Reading

Before Reading

Brainstorm a list of elements in a detective story.

The Formula behind Detective Stories on TV



Detective stories have always been a favorite in literature, and now they are one of the most popular genres in TV films and series. There is something appealing about the mystery and intrigue that captivates viewers and keeps them in suspense until the case is finally solved.

But what accounts for the phenomenal success and enduring popularity of detective stories? Is it the charismatic and fearless hero and his uncanny ability to uncover the truth? Is it the action and adventure—the high-speed chases, danger, and exotic settings? Is it the psychological wit and hi-tech gadgets that the detective has at his disposal? Or is it the simple fact that the viewer knows the hero will triumph over the villain in the end?

Clearly, the TV audience enjoys the mystery and non-stop suspense of detective films. However, ironically, there is also predictability to the story that is tremendously appealing. Certain elements and sequences of events appear over and over in detective stories and are eagerly awaited by fans. TV films and series with such predictable elements are known as *formula* films. The TV audience knows the plot will be puzzling and sometimes have unexpected results. They know the hero will confront dangerous villains. They know there will be complicated steps involved in piecing together all the clues, and they are challenged to try to figure out the mystery before the detective.

The most basic element in the formula of a detective story is the hero—the detective. This is the character the viewer identifies with throughout the film. He is usually a courageous individual with superior intelligence. He is often charming and outgoing, which helps him socialize with others, while, in fact, he is collecting information from witnesses and gathering evidence for his case. Another type of hero is the gruff and serious detective, who rarely smiles, but is very efficient at his job. In contrast, the hero in detective comedies is a naïve and clumsy character who accidentally stumbles across clues to eventually solve the crime.

Of course, the villain also plays a crucial role in the story. On occasion, the villain's identity is a mystery and is only revealed at the end, but more often he is introduced to the TV audience. Just as there are formulaic types of heroes, there are stereotypical villains: cold-blooded, greedy criminals, evil geniuses, and mad scientists. Most villains also have physical or psychological defects that add to the ugliness of their character, such as a scarred face, a missing limb, or a split personality.

The detective is challenged to find the villain by following clues. To assist him, he uses special talents in intellectual reasoning or has help from technological devices. These range from a simple magnifying glass to sophisticated DNA analysis and electronic tracking devices. Some detectives even use high-tech gadgets that are disguised as everyday objects, such as an explosive pen, a laser watch, or a computerized, talking vehicle!

When the hero confronts the villain, there are always scenes of action and danger. These involve high-speed chases on any kind of vehicle imaginable—cars, motorcycles, helicopters, speed boats, skis, and more.