

What is a MURDERNIGHT?



A Guide to Hosting Your Own
Murder Mystery Evening

by
Paul Falcone and Gary Simpson

 **Murdernight..**

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1 INTRODUCTION

So, what *is* a Murdernight? Well, in a nutshell, a Murdernight is an interactive murder mystery evening: interactive, because your audience very much take part - indeed, they largely define how the evening unfolds. And the words 'murder mystery evening' speak for themselves: there is a mystery for the audience to solve... a despicable murder is committed - and the audience's assistance is required to apprehend the villain who carried out the heinous deed. And it's going to take the best part of two to three hours for them to do it. Murdernights are a complete evening's entertainment.

By the end of a Murdernight, the audience have to answer three questions:

- Who committed the murder?
- How did they do it?
- What was their motive?

The Murdernights we have available vary slightly and the answers the audience are expected to provide may vary a little depending on the particular mystery, but you get the general idea. We'll go more into determining which members of your audience walk off with the prize later.

Our Murder Packs contain all the information you need to stage a Murdernight - scripts, character sheets for the actors, answer sheets and suggestions for tickets, posters, menus - all of which help create the perfect atmosphere.

2 WHAT DO YOU NEED?

The Venue

First and foremost, you need a venue in which to hold your Murdernight. As you will be aware, venues come in all shapes and sizes - ranging from the professional theatre down to the back room of the local pub. Murdernights work best when staged for an audience numbering between 40 and 150. More than 150 becomes a little unwieldy; fewer than 40 is possible but it makes for a sparse evening. Any type of venue is suitable, as long as it can provide you with the following:

- ***An acting area***
During the course of your evening your cast will perform a short (non-interactive) drama, lasting approximately 20 minutes and they need an area in which to perform. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have to have a stage - indeed, having the cast act in the main hall area has some advantages - but there should be a designated 'acting area' and if this can be raised a little, by using rostra for example, all the better. It is important that your cast can be seen by the entire audience - L-

shaped rooms simply don't work - as the drama may contain visual as well as verbal clues to solving the mystery. The acting area also serves as a seating area for the suspects when they return for questioning later in the proceedings. But more of that later on.



- ***A seating area for your audience***
In our experience, Murdernights don't work when the audience is seated in rows, as in traditional theatres: so make sure your venue can seat your audience around tables and that there is enough room for your target audience.
- ***Lighting***
It obviously helps if your actors can be seen. Elaborate format stage lighting isn't essential. We have performed Murdernights in halls which have used formal stage lights, a couple of free-standing spotlights and even no lights at all other than the overhead lighting in the hall; however lighting can be important for creating the right atmosphere and so it is worthy of consideration. In *The Mystery of Talbot Manor*, for example - a Murdernight with takes place in a 'haunted house' during a power cut - full overhead lighting could be detrimental to setting the scene whilst the judicious (and safe) use of candles can be very effective.
- ***Cooking facilities***
We usually provide some food during our Murdernights. Not only does it tend for a larger audience, but budding detectives always think better on a full stomach (and if there's a bar, all the better!). If you do decide you want to provide food during your evening (and it's not essential: Murdernights can easily be performed without), whether you cook your own, call in a friendly caterer, provide a cold buffet or simply nip down to the local take-away for 150 fish suppers is up to you. But your *choice* of food can be all-important to help you create the right

atmosphere for your night. A rich lasagne and a glass of Chianti goes down well with *The Mafia Wedding*, school dinners may be appropriate for *A Blow to the Head* (set around a headmaster's retiral party) and the potential for the 'haunted house' scenario I will leave entirely to your imagination.



The Cast

Each Murdernight is written for a cast of 8. Of these, 1 will be the eventual murder victim; 6 will be suspects and 1 will play the part of the detective. In each of our Murdernights, we have a recurring character, Inspector Foot of the Yard - who in the finest tradition of famous detectives, always seems to turn up just as a murder is taking place. (In *The Mafia Wedding*, the role of the detective is taken by Father Figure; in *The Mystery of Talbot Manor* the detective is Dr Harriet Finch. Both are related to the good inspector.)

The murder victim takes part in the drama, but after their unfortunate demise, takes no further part in the Murdernight. The six suspects will be open to interrogation by the audience - as we shall see later - while the detective acts as Master of Ceremonies for the evening.

3 SETTING THE SCENE

We have already mentioned 'atmosphere' several times in this booklet and creating an atmosphere is essential to the truly successful Murdernight. The action for any Murdernight begins the moment the audience arrive, and each has a particular flavour which can be supplemented by room and table decorations, costumes, music so that the audience feel more a 'part' of the drama.

To illustrate what we mean, let's look at some of the current Murdernights available. (More are being released all the time, and an up-to-date list is available on our website, www.murdernight.co.uk)

A Blow to the Head

A headmaster's retiral party. The setting is a secondary school, so a blackboard and easel, a notice board, teachers wearing gowns, a couple of school children in uniform acting as prefects showing guests in, school books and jotters on the tables can all add atmosphere. Not to mention some light classical music on the CD player (or the school orchestra in the corner, if you're *really* ambitious!)

The Mafia Wedding

The scene is a wedding reception. Obviously everyone is dressed up to the nines, including any extras you can muster - including a couple of young bridesmaids or page boys if you can. A table could be set aside stacked with presents; balloons and streamers could be placed on the tables; favours for the ladies. And don't forget the Italian connection - the theme from *The Godfather* can be playing as the guests arrive, or some Italian folk music.

The Mystery of Talbot Manor

The scene is a haunted house, during a power-cut. The entire room is dimly lit with candles; creepy music or sound effects can be playing as the guests arrive. Menus can be placed on the tables then artificial cobweb applied... Cringe the butler can provide every guest with a free drink presented in a smoking glass as they arrive. As you can imagine, this particular Murdernight works best on a dark winter's evening rather than in the height of summer...



Death by Radio

The scene is a village hall during World War II, where the BBC have set up a temporary studio to broadcast a radio play. Again, as it is wartime the blackout is in force; masking tape can be applied to the windows, black curtains drawn later as the audience arrive. Drape the hall with patriotic bunting or wartime

propaganda posters. Have Glenn Miller or Vera Lynn playing on the CD. If you have access to some old military uniforms, have some extras wearing them to give a wartime feel; encourage the audience to come in fancy dress...

Of course, we could go on but you get the general idea. All adds to the enjoyment of the evening and makes it more of an event rather than a simple murder mystery night.

In fact, preparation for creating the atmosphere begins before the actual performance. In our Murder Packs we provide you with templates of tickets which you may wish to use, personalised with your own details. The tickets explain the nature of the evening, so that your potential audience already has some idea of what to expect. The tickets tend to reflect the nature of the evening: for example, in *The Mafia Wedding* the ticket is in the form of a wedding invitation. While further instructions will be given to them on the night, it's a start - and there's always the chance that they will read the ticket and tell their friends to come and join in the fun.

4 THE PREAMBLE

Setting out the tables

So... you've sold your tickets, arranged your venue and decorated the place as best you can. Before your audience arrive, there are one or two last minute preparations to make:

- ***Number your tables***
When the audience arrive, they will form themselves into 'teams' seated at the tables in the hall. Number the tables, so that the teams can be identified later. Teams of up to six are best. If your tables seat more than six, place two numbers on each table, together with two sets of the documents below. Templates for each of these documents is included in your Murder pack. Each team needs:
 - ***A menu***
Of course, the menu may contain details of the food available during the evening, but more importantly, it gives details of the programme of the Murdernight and tells the audience what to expect. We'll go through the various stages of the Murdernight as we go.
 - ***An answer sheet***
For teams to write their final answers on; collected at the end of the evening.
 - ***A 'think' sheet***
For teams to jot down notes during the evening - not collected.
 - ***One or more handouts, if any***
Handouts are distributed to the audience during each of our Murdernights. The handouts may take the form of a coroner's report, notes made by the detective at the scene of the crime, or a set of press cuttings. *When* these handouts are distributed depends on the individual Murdernight scenario. It is rare for handouts to be placed on tables at the beginning of the evening, but does occur

occasionally, for example a set of press clippings awaits the audience in *The Curse of the Willoughby Diamond*.

The cast mingle



As the audience arrive, there is an opportunity for certain cast members, and any extras, to mingle with them as they take their seats. There is nothing quite like being frisked by a large heavy wearing an overcoat draped over his shoulders and sunglasses to set the scene for *The Mafia Wedding*, especially as he greets you with a terse smile and the timeless words 'Are you with ada bride or ada groom?'. Similarly opportunities arise in other Murdernights: in *The Mystery of Talbot Manor Cringe*, the eerie monosyllabic butler can approach guests and leer at them before offering to take their 'coat' (he never takes 'no' for an answer).

In other Murdernights, such as the headmaster's retiral party of *A Blow to the Head*, some characters may freely mingle - the school secretary and PE teacher, for example - who play an active part in the drama later and are open to questions after the murder has taken place - can introduce themselves to the audience and even answer questions asked during their conversations if the audience are astute enough. Of course, there is always the opportunity for more comedy: a 'dressing down' from the headmaster for not appearing in school uniform, or a 'Ah, yes, I remember you. Taught your father - he was no good either.'

There are a couple of important points that should be mentioned here. Some characters, much as they would like to, shouldn't mingle at the beginning if the drama dictates that they haven't arrived on the scene yet. Secondly, the actor or actress who plays the murderer is the only character who can lie - if they want to. We'll come more to the potential for the murderer to lie later, when we come to discuss the questioning of the suspects.

5 THE DRAMA

In many ways, the drama is the easiest part of the Murdernight to describe, as the actors simply follow the script. However, there are one or two points worth mentioning:

- **Starting the action**
Make sure that everyone in the cast (and any backstage team who may be working sound effects, background music, *etc*) know when the action is going



to start. We usually agree on some pre-arranged signal, given when the audience is completely settled, so that cast members who are mingling with the audience can get into position at the right time. If food is being served, caterers will ask how long the drama is likely to last. Aim to start the drama approximately 25 minutes before food is ready to serve, and you should be about right.

- ***Entrances and exits***

We try, wherever possible to arrange the ‘acting area’ in a part of the hall which gives access to an entrance/exit both stage left and stage right. This makes for easier direction and a smoother flow of the action. Occasionally scripts dictate the exact nature of Inspector Foot’s arrival on the scene, but if not Inspector Foot (or his equivalent) can arrive from anywhere in the hall.

Murdernights vary: some are ‘straight’ murder mysteries (such as *The Final Act*, set backstage at an after-show party or *A Blow to the Head* – the headmaster’s retiral party) while others are much more comedic in nature and strictly for laughs. In *Death by Radio*, for example, an unsuspecting member of the audience is asked to help out with sound effects for the radio drama being performed; in the *Talbot Manor* Murdernights the action is played strictly for its comic potential. But whether straight or comic, the drama portion should always be looked on as entertainment.

6 INSPECTOR FOOT

A word about Inspector Foot of the Yard. Whilst he (or his equivalent) is a character in their own right, they serve a very special function during the Murdernight. For as well as appearing in the drama, they also act as Master of Ceremonies for the evening. They should answer any questions the audience may have about the format of the Murdernight, and help to guide the question-and-answer sessions which come later. More on the role of Inspector Foot as we move through the evening.

7 THE FIRST INTERVAL

So... the dastardly deed has been done. The murder has been committed and now Inspector Foot has arrived on the scene. There now comes a welcome pause when the actors and the audience can catch their breath and gather their thoughts. The following sequence occurs at this point:

- ***Inspector Foot leads off the suspects***
At the end of the drama, Inspector Foot leads the cast backstage, informing them (and the audience) that no-one should leave the building until his enquiries are complete. Enquiries, of course, for which he will need the audience's help...
- ***Food is served***
If you are serving food, serve the first course now. If there is also a pudding, this can be left until the second interval.
- ***Handouts are given out***
As the food is being served, Inspector Foot should distribute handouts as required by the script of your particular Murdernight. This may take the form of a post-mortem report, a detective's notes, a photograph of the scene of the crime... it varies depending on the Murdernight.
- ***Place six chairs in the acting area***
Inspector Foot should also place six chairs side by side in the acting area. This is where the suspects will sit when the questioning begins.
- ***Inspector Foot explains the next stage of the Murdernight***
Once all the handouts have been distributed and the chairs are in position, Inspector Foot can briefly explain to the audience what will happen next. He should announce that the audience will, in a few minutes, have an opportunity to question the suspects. He will move from table to table, and through him they will be able to ask one question of one suspect. For the purposes of this round, the suspect can only answer YES, NO or DON'T KNOW and throughout the evening, *only the murderer can lie*. They should prepare their questions now...
- ***The cast, and Inspector Foot, should familiarise themselves with the handouts and their character sheets***
We will deal more with the actors' character sheets in a moment, but at this point it is worth mentioning that the actors (and Inspector Foot) should make sure they are familiar with the contents of the handouts that have been distributed. These handouts often contain additional important clues to solving the mystery and it is entirely possible (indeed usual) that the cast will be asked questions pertaining to the information they contain.

The length of the first interval is a matter of individual judgement. Here, Inspector Foot should mingle with the audience and gauge when is the best time to carry on with the next stage of the proceedings.

8 THE QUESTIONING: ROUND ONE

The next stage begins when Inspector Foot leads the cast back out and they take their seats on the stage. Depending on their characters and inter-relationships, it may be important who sits next to who. Mrs A who has just discovered that her husband is having an affair with Miss B is unlikely to want to sit next to her and if she does is likely to scratch her eyes out at the first opportunity. This may make for an interesting round of questioning, of course...

Characters should not be afraid to improvise comments between questions. Indeed, it is to be encouraged in moderation – as long as the audience can hear what is going on. Remember that you will be watched by the audience at all times, even between questions and sometimes a snide sideways glance, a holding of hands, a change in body language can convey important clues to the audience. Besides, it makes sitting there a lot more fun!



At the beginning of the questioning, Inspector Foot can begin at one end of the hall, proceeding from table to table asking them if they have a question they would like to ask. A radio microphone is especially useful if one is available, for even in a small hall with the best acoustics, it is difficult for the audience to hear the questions which other tables are asking. The audience will soon become bored if they can't hear what is going on.

Whether you allow the audience to ask the question themselves or whether they relay the question through Inspector Foot is up to you. Often if the audience ask the question themselves it is helpful for the Inspector to repeat the question for all to hear.

Let's take an example. In *A Blow to the Head* the PE teacher, Geoffrey Anderson, is a suspect. Inspector Foot commences the round by going to Table 1, who wish to ask Mr Anderson if he was in the gym at the time of the murder. Remember, in this round questions can only be answered YES, NO or DON'T KNOW. We usually find it best if the Inspector asks the suspect to stand up first, then ask him the question. The actor responds, and then sits down. The inspector proceeds to the next table, and so on.

The cast respond using the information which is contained within their character sheets, which are included in your Murder Pack. There is usually one character sheet for each of the six suspects. Some Murdernights also come with character sheets for the deceased (not really necessary as the dead rarely answer questions, but it sometimes gives the actor a feel for the part) and/or Inspector Foot himself. It is important to realise that Inspector Foot can be asked questions, in the same way the suspects can – but during the questioning round, it counts as a turn and the inspector too can only answer YES, NO or DON'T KNOW.

The character sheets supplied vary in complexity but give you all the information you should need. Some character sheets are quite elaborate and give you *far* more information than you will ever need – but they can help to give you a feel for the character.

Whether you let members of the cast see the other members' character sheets is a matter for your director. It's quite useful *not* to let them see each other's sheets, because there will occasionally be a genuinely surprising *denouement* which should produce a genuinely surprised reaction! However, if you decide not to let everyone see the others' sheets, it sometimes to have some discussion between the cast members before the questioning, an opportunity for them to clear with each other's characters their inter-relationships.

Remember to carry any props with you that your character may possess – even during the questioning. During the course of the drama for *The Curse of the Willoughby Diamond*, for example, Inspector Foot shows cast members a photograph and asks them if they recognise the face. During the questioning, Inspector Foot should carry the photograph and show it to any member of the audience who asks to see it: the face also appears on one of the handouts, and is an important clue...

It is difficult to give you any kind of guidelines about the *type* of question you are likely to be asked in a Murdernight. All we can say is that the questioning is not as traumatic as you might expect, and you are unlikely to be asked any questions which you simply cannot answer. You *are* likely to be asked completely bizarre questions which will lead you to question the workings of the human mind – but this is part of the beauty and attraction of Murdernights. No two evenings or audiences are ever the same.

The murderer is the only character who can lie. We would advise, however that he or she does not do so unless it is absolutely necessary. You don't want to dig a hole that

you can't get yourself back out of, and what's the point in reaching for the spade if you don't have to dig that hole in the first place? Nevertheless, if you *do* have to lie, try to do it deftly and with as little variance from the truth as possible.

How much information should you give away to the audience? This is largely a matter of judgement but on the whole it seems fair to give any important clues away if the audience get reasonably close. Let's use a hypothetical example. Suppose you are playing the part of a suspect and you are asked by Table 1 if Miss A is your daughter. You reply honestly – no. Table 2 ask you if Miss A is your sister. Again, you reply honestly – no. Table 3 ask you if Miss A is your wife. Again – no. Only when Table 4 ask if she is your niece do you say yes. It all becomes a bit protracted and a little tiresome. OK in this instance, I think to use your discretion and admit to Table 1 (even if it is a yes-no round) that 'No, she is my niece'. The action can then proceed along more speedily and purposefully.

If one of the cast gets terribly stuck with a question, the other cast members and Inspector Foot can always improvise and help out. On one occasion one of our cast members, a young girl, couldn't remember whether the answer to a question was 'yes' or 'no' and looked lost and bewildered. One of the other actresses, who was playing her aunt, stood up shouting 'Enough is enough, inspector... can't you leave the poor girl alone?', rushed across to comfort her – the other actors joined in the general hubbub - and finally the question was resolved when one of the actors said, 'I can answer that question for you, inspector...'. And the evening proceeded, everything looking perfectly natural and indeed, more entertaining. In other words, *don't panic!*

Should the deceased re-appear in the hall during the questioning? Again, the choice is yours. It seems a little unfair, if theatrically correct for the deceased to stay backstage and not witness the fun of the question and answer sessions; however you do not want to destroy the atmosphere you have created so lovingly. A discreet entrance out of costume at the back of the hall after questions have begun or a viewpoint out of sight of the audience seem favourable compromises.

Alternatives to the 'Yes-No' round



There aren't many aspects where we differ regarding Murdernights – but whereas Gary prefers the 'yes-no' format for the first round of questions, Paul prefers to have full answers to questions from the outset. There are pros and cons for both, of course and whichever format you wish to choose is up to you. The advantage to answering questions in full from the outset is that the format is simpler and more uniform. The advantage to the 'yes-no' round is that it is easier for the cast and the audience to 'settle in' and so may be more suited to a cast who are using improvisation for the first time. However, both formats have been tried and work... whichever you choose is up to you.

Once all the tables have asked a question, it is up to Inspector Foot, who should keep one eye on the clock, to determine whether any more

questions should be allowed before leading off the cast members again for a well earned rest. However, the evening is not over yet...

9 THE SECOND INTERVAL

The pattern of the second interval is similar to the first, namely:

- ***Inspector Foot leads off the suspects***
- ***Food is served***
Time for pudding, if any
- ***Handouts are given out***
Further handouts are given as determined by the individual Murdernight.
- ***Inspector Foot explains the next stage of the Murdernight***
Once all the handouts have been distributed, Inspector Foot can explain the format of the next round of questioning. Again, he will move from table to table, and again the audience will be able to ask one question of one suspect. In this round however, the suspect will give a FULL ANSWER. Once again, *only the murderer can lie*. They should prepare their questions now...
- ***The cast, and Inspector Foot, should familiarise themselves with the new handouts***

Again, the length of the interval is best judged by Inspector Foot as he mingles with the audience.



10 THE QUESTIONING: ROUND TWO

By now the format should be familiar to everyone. Although the prospect of improvising a full answer to any question that may be levelled at you may seem daunting, the information in the character sheets should be more than enough to see you through. Remember to answer in full, help each other out when needed and interplay as much as possible. Any lulls in the action (and there are bound to be some, as some tables will be able to think of a question to ask) can always be filled by comments such as ‘Is this going to take all night, inspector?’ or ‘I’ll have you know, Inspector that I am a personal friend of the chief of police...’ - all add to the atmosphere.

Again, Inspector Foot should keep an eye on the clock and gauge how long the questioning should last. Of course, everyone should be given a turn... finally, the cast are led off

11 TIME TO THINK

Once the questioning is complete the time has come for the audience to put their thoughts on paper. Our usual sequence of events is as follows:

- ***The cast are led backstage***
...and can at last relax!
- ***The audience are asked to complete their answer sheets***
Once the audience have completed their answer sheets, Inspector Foot collects the answers in and takes them backstage for marking.
- ***The answer sheets are marked***
As stated previously, the audience are usually (but not exclusively) asked to answer three questions:

Who committed the murder?
How did they do it?
What was their motive?

These questions do vary in some Murdernights, but the most important question, ‘who committed the murder?’ is universal.

Firstly, the answer sheets are separated into murder suspects - 2 for Mr A, 3 for Miss B, and so on. We work on the basis that the winner must correctly identify the murderer - or else, the wrong person would go to prison! So that any answer sheets which give the wrong murderer are immediately excluded.

Of those who *do* correctly identify the murderer, some may identify them as working *in conjunction* with someone else. At the moment (though this may change in the future), none of our Murdernights involve more than one

murderer and so these answer sheets too are excluded from the potential winners.

The winner is determined by looking at those sheets identifying the correct murderer and seeing which, if any, comes closest to identifying the method and the motive.



Sometimes, there will be an obvious winner but it is not unusual for there to be a tie between two (even three) tables. We usually recommend a prize is chosen for the evening which can easily be split, *e.g.* two bottles of wine - that usually solves the problem.

What if *no-one* gets it right? It has happened! But such events are rare. When this occurred, Inspector Foot went back to the audience, informed them all that their help had been... interesting and that none of them had got it right! He returned the papers and asked them all to choose someone else. That worked!

12 THE CONCLUSION

Once a winner has been chosen, the cast are led out again and take their seats as before. We usually proceed as follows:

- ***Inspector Foot reports on the answer sheets***
Announcing that he has solved the case and extricated a confession from the guilty party, Inspector Foot reports back on the answer sheets. We usually say 'I've looked through the answers you've given me and very interesting... 3 of you thought Miss A did it... 2 of you thought it was Miss B... amazingly, no-one thought it was Mr C...' and so on.
- ***The murderer is asked to reveal him- or herself***
Inspector Foot asks the murderer to identify himself. A bit of chair fidgeting here can be quite funny, but don't prolong it too long. Finally, the murderer (or murderess) stands to reveal themselves to the audience.
- ***The murderer reads the confession***
Included in your Murder Pack is the murderer's confession. If they can memorise this, all the better but if not, the confession - which is in Inspector Foot's possession - is handed to the murderer to read aloud.
- ***The winner is announced***
Inspector Foot announces the winner and how close they came to the solution.

- *The prize is awarded*

Finally, the evening is brought to a close. If you are performing the Murdernight as a fund-raiser for someone else they may want to say a few words, or you may want to plug your next big production, but it is always nice for the actors to come out of character and be introduced individually to the audience. We always try to remember to start with the deceased, who emerges from the side of the hall!

And there we have it... your first Murdernight.



Alternative endings

Many of our Murdernights come with alternative endings. Most involve subtle changes to the script or costume and are explained fully in our expansion packs which are available on application from Murdernight.

We hope this booklet has been helpful and we wish you great success with your production. Remember we are always happy to answer any queries you may have, either by post or by e-mail at murdernight@hotmail.com.

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