The Mystery Plot Twist Checklist

Design fair-play detective mysteries your players can actually solve.

Use with Case Starter Prompt 2 before any code is generated.

A great mystery is a contract with the player: every clue needed to solve the case must be findable before the reveal. Run every case plan through this checklist before you approve it.

1. Fair-Play Foundations

[ ] The culprit is introduced early enough that the player meets all three suspects before the midpoint.

[ ] Every key clue is obtainable through player action (inspecting, comparing, questioning) - never revealed only in the ending narration.

[ ] The solution follows logically from the clues; a player who found everything could name the culprit before the reveal.

[ ] No clue depends on real-world knowledge the player may not have (obscure trivia, niche expertise).

[ ] The timeline of events is physically possible - map who was where, when, and check for contradictions.

2. The Three-Suspect Rotation

[ ] Each suspect has a distinct motive, means, and opportunity - written down, not implied.

[ ] Each suspect has at least one clue pointing toward them AND one clue pointing away.

[ ] The real culprit's 'away' clue is explainable (not a contradiction that breaks the logic).

TIP: The classic structure: suspect A looks guilty early, suspect B looks guilty mid-game, the evidence quietly exonerates both and implicates C - but only if the player connected the clues.

3. Clue Planting

[ ] Plant each critical clue at least twice, in different forms (a record, a line of dialogue, an object detail).

[ ] Every clue has a 'so what' - it changes what the player believes or unlocks a new action.

[ ] Clues are comparable: the game lets players hold two records side by side and spot the mismatch.

4. Red Herrings (Use Sparingly)

[ ] Maximum one red herring per suspect - more than that and players stop trusting any clue.

[ ] Every red herring resolves: the player eventually learns WHY it looked suspicious.

[ ] No red herring blocks progress; a misled player can still recover and finish.

5. The Ending Test

[ ] Write the reveal scene, then re-read your clue list: could a careful player have solved it? If not, add clues.

[ ] The culprit's motive is understandable, even if not sympathetic.

[ ] Playtest with one real person and watch where they get stuck - that is where your clues are thinnest.

TIP: Paste this checklist into your AI chat alongside Case Starter Prompt 2 and ask the AI to verify each item against the

case plan before you approve it.