

Ever wonder why the great detectives hold our attention? And bring "reality" to life? While making tough choices and complex situations exciting? Daunted by a vast project in 2013, I began wondering, and soon moved from Why to HOW.

We nonfiction producers -- authors, editors, publishers -- might have thrilled to Holmes and Watson, Perry Mason and Agatha Christie, McGarrett and Williams, or Karl Malden ("Mike Stone") before he did those TV spots for American Express.

A journalist or science writer who is 38 might have gotten through college on reruns of *Matlock* or recently ordered the latest DVD collection of "CSI."

Does such a past inform your present? If it could do so, would you let it? Would you allow it to run wild for a day here or a week there? Not for purposes of escapism, but rather: As a place to go to study why Americans STILL PAY ATTENTION, in this era where attention spans hold as much as shot-up cans?

Rigorous nonfiction professionals can preserve the footnotes without losing the appeal of Cops and Robbers. We can even introduce CHARACTERS to dramatize the data, policy dilemmas, and other ongoing struggles that are meant to be taken seriously because they really are serious -- AND also COMPLEX.

What is this Exacting Editor guy Gregorsky talking about?

Historical novels? Not at all. I'm not suggesting James Michener, brilliant though he was, as a role model. "Creative Nonfiction"? Definitely not! It's an absurd category that gives awards to authors who've made up hundreds of statements and put them in the mouths of real people. (Made-up statements should only be attributed to made-up people, i.e. "characters.") Becoming a TV scriptwriter? No -- although we should study scripted dialogues for their edifying power.

This web document argues for putting two elements of suspense and crime drama -- CHARACTERS and DIALOGUE -- into documented analytical nonfiction. Why even consider it? Because the building blocks of "escapist" entertainment -- specifically, the great crime-fighters and their sagas -- can expand your nonfiction audience's attention span and readiness to absorb complexity.

-- Frank Gregorsky, for ExactingEditor.com, February 2015

What Can Nonfiction Authors See in, and Learn from, Mystery Shows and their Crime-Battling Characters?

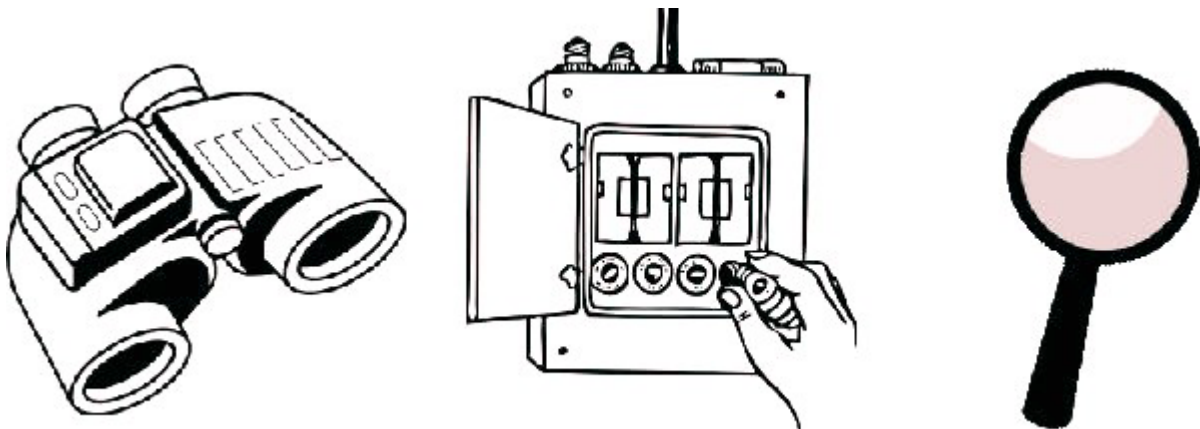
I worry that parts of what you're about to be offered resemble the lifelong conclusions of a seasoned academic or master scriptwriter. If so, please hold off on any legal threats. My ignorance of similar documents is authentic. I come by it honestly. And I preserved it by not looking at any of the research. Using what I didn't know, and had never thought about before May 2013, I stuck with a "blank slate" experiment.

The aim: Perceive and define how detective, cop and other "suspense" episodes grip an audience while, at the very same time, allowing that audience to see, hear and process high levels of complexity. Isn't this what rigorous nonfiction books and similar products also strive for? Furthermore -- in an era of tiny screens, 77 micro messages per day, cable-TV cacophony, and "text without context" -- aren't you finding it harder and harder to deliver depth and complexity to jittery minds?

After a few years of depending solely on inspiration, nonfiction writers learn to rely on structure. Our problem is that "structure" -- whenever it's lacking in pace and color -- becomes a sparsely inhabited building with malfunctioning elevators. Structure can't rescue a manuscript that comes across like a diary -- too much *I, me, my* and *mine* -- or an intellectual excursion full of concepts while lacking a single compelling individual.

One response: Pacing and color, characters and sequencing -- of the sort basic to cops-and-robbers fiction -- as a fresh way to grab, hold, and enlighten our nonfiction readership. It's the kind of fun that takes some work, though: One has to suspend lectures, charts and power-point slides -- in favor of scenes, clues, and clashes.

Accordingly, as you review the list, please remember that I arrived here through an odd route. Not the intensity of a lifelong mystery and crime buff. Nor did I wish to be "taught" it or have it served up in a "Cop-Show Scripting for Dummies" book. Rather, the plan was to sense it, grasp it, assemble it -- piece by dawning piece. What follows comes from absorbing 700+ radio and TV examples of detectives being suspenseful. Later on, I'll explain why all the samples come from four to seven decades ago...



Detective Fiction's Basics, Early 1940s to Late 1970s

(1) **Very high-stakes choices** among the bad guys and good guys, with script-design either masking their struggle or floodlighting it. By putting the viewer "step by step, on the side of the law" -- recall the *Dragnet* radio language -- the early "police procedurals" put solving the mystery ahead of showing the struggle. [Gene Barry](#) and Gary Conway in *Burke's Law* (1963-65) lifted the latter element to mind-boggling, zany, and often goofy levels by having four to six plausible suspects for a single murder.

Then *Hawaii Five-O*, *Columbo*, *The Streets of San Francisco* and other shows began by showing the crime in detail, catapulting us viewers ahead of [Steve McGarrett](#), [Peter Falk](#) or [Mike Stone](#). Gripped by this kind of opening, we would absorb, from the perpetrators, extreme tension. (Can't turn it off now!) Among the probers and pursuers, we'd get some tension, but mostly trial-and-error confusion. What happened? How? At what time? We've already met the criminals; we then watch the cops try to catch up.

(2) Those moves and countermoves add up to **strategy**. A methodical band of crooks started off ahead of the game; after all, they defined it. Sometimes we watch them, other times they'll be uncovered slowly. They do earn points for calculation -- which is supplanted by improvisation, and finally desperation. This happens as McGarrett, [Marlowe](#), [Mannix](#) or (plug in your favorite) push for clues and statements that will allow the criminals' strategy to be reverse-engineered, and then blown apart. The flaws in the logic and tactics of the perpetrators often allow some kind of trap to be set.

Vintage detective drama makes use of intelligence -- the need to concentrate -- plus urgency. The purpose of deducing these elements, and laying them out so clinically, is to learn how nonfiction producers can use them to make complexity compelling...

(3) Once the crime is known -- either a spectacular event, or low-level hits that reveal an m.o. -- **linearity can't hold up**. Each "choice" leads to a consequence, and each consequence compels another choice -- among both sides in a brutal game. Rather than "the action" escalating smoothly to a fever pitch, the level of suspense keeps rising and falling, based on the next approaching risk. Think of having to play a whole chess game, during an erratic windstorm, with windows and ceilings not secure.

(4) This **modulation** -- lull, gale, lull, roadblock, lull, crash -- delivers two huge benefits. One, **it keeps the listener or viewer paying attention**, devoting scarce mental minutes to an exercise that is, let us never forget, wholly made up. Two, the up and down of the tension and risk level allows the listener or viewer to **absorb new info**, **appreciate dilemmas**, and sometimes **feel like a participant**. Complex situations are being defined engagingly, and given space to gel, yet never freeze.

(5) But most of the complexity is in the competition -- spotlighted by the screw-ups, the lucky breaks, and the gripping interaction between the two "teams." **The complexity is rarely in the characters**. Once a viewer has gotten to know Joe Mannix or Lieutenant Stone or Inspector Clover, these leading characters are comfortable, not complex. Often their deputies become even more liked, and just as dependable.

(6) And the criminals -- well, their actions and motivations reveal a certain depth due to those individuals creating the competition as aggressors. But, as people, they are in the episode **only to do bad things**, and do them ever less effectively. They don't get to become characters because they hardly ever come back. Professor [James Moriarty](#) or McGarrett's 12-season "Chi-Com" nemesis [Wo Fat](#) aside, the bad guys have no staying

power. In the pre-1965 shows especially, they tend to be Caricatures -- props with voices -- rather than Characters we've come to know and trust.

(7) Detectives **look for patterns but thrive on anomalies**. The shows that allow use of the word "theory" do so in an eccentric way. In real life, "theorizing" is the work of scientists, visionaries, mystics, and others looking for universal truths. They aim high, ponder deeply, and strain to avoid personalizing anything. The universalizer is allergic to reality unless he or she can make the individual disappear. Unless "the philosopher's conceptions," William James wrote in 1882, "apply to an enormous number of cases, they will not bring him relief." James called this a "passion for simplification."

Opposing it is "the impulse to be acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole. Loyalty to clearness and integrity of perception, dislike of blurred outlines, of vague identifications, are its characteristics." That's exactly what makes for a satisfied, and skilled, detective. **Detective theories are peculiar and disposable**. They apply only to the immediate foe and the related situations. The whole is derived from the parts. Once the case is closed, even the best "theory" will be little more than a memory, perhaps with a few artifacts, that a cop occasionally finds of some use years later.

PAUSE. You know, it just occurred to me that this entire document could be dismissed as my own "theorizing" of how detective shows are built and why their characters can create resilient audiences. Well? -- I prefer to offer it as pattern-discernment...

(8) This one comes with apologies for discovering the obvious: In nearly every detective novel or episode, the reader/listener/viewer has implicit confidence that there will be an ending. When it's reached, **the mysteries have all been solved** -- one more reward for sitting through twisty plots and violent encounters. Excitement and disorientation give way to **clarity and closure**. Even allowing for early mishaps and tragedies affecting the good guys along the way, the ending is meant to be satisfactory.

But hold on. Satisfactory logic differs from satisfying emotionally. The related amendment to #8 is serious enough to become the next number. And it happens to be the design factor that saves detective fiction from being convicted as "escapist."

(9) **Quite often, satisfaction goes by the boards**. At least a third of the *Five-O* episodes, and a majority of the 1949-54 radio shows where Larry Thor brilliantly played Inspector Danny Clover, have endings that offer shock, defy justice, and lead us into desolation. Even the true-bluest and most resilient detectives can't avoid some of these NON-satisfactory endings. The good guys prevail, yes; but the costs are often as horrid as they were unavoidable. And it's this very desolation that confirms the complexity by demanding we account for certain tradeoffs and a bungled decision or two.

(10) Finally, what of that word "ending"? The case is solved, the episode ends. But what about the show, and one's relationship with it? Each climax is more like a cessation -- prelude to a very long commercial break; the pause that replenishes -- as

opposed to a finale. Unless the series is losing its audience rapidly, **something new, yet familiar -- and in character -- will be coming around next week.** "Bet on it." The reassuring mix of variety and reliability rolls on. Crimes and plots provide the variety, while dependable stars take care of the reliability...

By outlining the detective and suspense classics in this structural way, I figure that a nonfiction pro can see the flow, and perceive the "tools," more readily. Okay so far?

All of the radio programming was new to me, as were certain TV series -- *Naked City*, *Checkmate*, *87th Precinct*. Otherwise? Nostalgia! What a delight to go back to Joe Mannix and Gail Fisher ("Peggy"), Steve McGarrett's crew, Commissioner McMillan and sparkling TV wife [Susan St. James](#) -- 40 years later, with an editor's eye and ear.

Those TV shows are modern classics. They can be enjoyed without the deafening explosions, sense-jangling violence, and amoral dialogue that seeped into post-1980s crime drama. *NYPD Blue* might be fabulous -- I never watched it -- but I knew where to start the viewing and listening. I wanted clear lines between the good and the bad, along with dialogue much richer than 1990s grunts and computer-chip monotones.

Next time you face writer's block, and the footnoting has overwhelmed the narrative, order a whole season's worth of whatever suspense, lawyer, spy or cop show you loved 20 or 40 years ago. If it doesn't melt your block, well -- just mail those DVDs to me.

Clean Divide Between the Sides Allows for Complex Situations

To write and edit, rewrite and reshape, requires that we build in and around structures. Now, what does any structure exist in? Some kind of environment. Maybe that's too big of a term. So let's say -- the tension plays out on a terrain with parameters. That's a serious point I could not make into a number. Not because it's too small, but because it's too big -- foundational, pervasive, "environmental" -- to be an item in the inventory. Leaves me no choice but to shine a spotlight on the obvious: **The STRUGGLE.**

In crime novels, radio and TV shows -- or at least in the classic ones (pre-1980) -- only two forces are seen. Sherlock Holmes referred to them as the Benevolent versus the Malevolent. This can be simplified as Good versus Evil. Or the Light versus the Dark. Or public safety versus private violence. Or -- my favorite, despite too many syllables -- the forces of order and rectitude versus the elements of extortion and disintegration.

In a typical episode of *Five-O* and especially of *Mannix*, the tension will rise and fall. But all tension is a byproduct of The Struggle. I go with upper case not to sound corny, but precisely because it is so basic. (If you want to know how fundamental it is, look at any other type of writing or TV production that aims to convey information with urgency. Nothing like the high-stakes battle of detectives versus dark forces will drive even the best economics or how-to presentation.) The **emotional** connection -- in sync with a good-versus-bad polarity -- is vital to keep us paying thoughtful attention.

"Joe Mannix" was Mike Connors, and a [Canadian newspaper review in 2010](#) gave us his take on something that has been muddled in the genre he exemplified. The Struggle remains, but ethical clarity -- especially in so-called "action" movies -- is blown away.

First quote from Connors: "What made the western popular, what makes the crime show popular, what makes good drama, is the public has somebody to pull for or pull against. That's the basis, I think, of television, is you want to root for somebody or root against somebody. And I think the writing in those days [he is referring to the 1950s and '60s] was just that."

Second quote: "Today, with all due respect, there's some very good stuff on television, but so many of the writers get so clever with their writing, that you don't know who you're pulling for, or for what, or what's going on. You turn to your wife and say, 'What did he say?' -- and I think that's a problem. You've got to have a definite feeling [of] 'I'm with her or against what's going on there'."

Similarly, before he died last year at the ripe old age of 95, [Efrem Zimbalist Jr.](#) -- 77 *Sunset Strip*, and nine impressive seasons of *The FBI* -- observed: "I don't even know the people who are making movies today. I stopped going to the movies over 20 years ago. The movies I used to be fanatic about they stopped making. They started making another kind of movie, and it's not my kind of world." My sediments exactly.

"Cleverness." "Irony." "Detachment." Interchangeable stone-faced protagonists with metallic voices and hidden eyes shrouded in black (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would have choked). Might be where the Gen-Xers -- eager to dodge Boomer melodrama and righteousness -- have sundered a Detective Fiction basic. Where amorality rules the script, it can rot the mind. If you mean to play out a struggle, let whatever's at stake, whether it's rescuing a hostage or clarifying an economic choice, show some nobility.

But, in the process of drawing such lines, do not turn the show -- or make your book! -- into a simplistic one-dimensional portrait. We can mix complexity and clarity in real time -- meaning in the same set of scenes or group of book chapters. Situational complexity enlightens your audience while ethical clarity keeps them from getting lost in the weeds. (Confine Ms. Cheeky Cleverness and Comrade Savage Irony to cameo roles.)

Once a nonfiction writer trains him- or herself to see the basics -- the building blocks along with the durable divides -- of Detective Fiction, they acquire the choice of whether to adopt, or adapt, real-world versions of the same principles.

Objections? Naturally! *Please save 'em for the next episode...*

If you are a nonfiction natural -- someone who likes books with hundreds of footnotes and despises so-called docudramas -- you're pulling back at the notion of putting wholly fictional characters into historical sequences that don't need a "plot" because "what really happened" makes for a reality more grounded than any plot.

I concur on the latter -- totally. The nonfiction "plot" is the History, or the Current Struggle, of one set of realities versus a rival set. The stories and the overall saga cannot be made up -- not without the book turning into some kind of homeless hybrid.

What else? (1) "Cops-and-robbers drama is typically about small matters. Not that a murder is trivial, but it's localized and peculiar." (2) "No academic publisher will touch the kind of book you recommend." (3) "The truth I intend to convey is stranger, and therefore stronger, than any fiction, which means it requires no made-up characters."

Those and more will be tackled -- in a new document -- later this year. The one you have here has exceeded the target length by 600 words; and, if you are still with me, I am delighted it hasn't quite exceeded your energy level!

What's more helpful now is to proceed to a sustained example of Character-Creation. Since writers and their editors rely on text, the example will be 95% DIALOGUE. This next exploration shows a serious analyst -- a "think tanker" with no use for novels -- and a Hollywood scriptwriter -- allergic to the Big Picture and having no taste for pie charts -- being slowly induced to mingle their modes without mangling them...

www.ExactingEditor.com/Detective-Nonfiction.html

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**From "R.I.P. Ed McBain -- An Officer's Final Salute"
by Jim Doherty, July 2005**

<< As both a policeman and a mystery writer who specializes in police procedurals, it goes without saying that [Ed McBain](#)'s passing saddens me deeply. In many respects, McBain had an influence on my choice of professions -- of both my professions... >>

Enjoy the rest -- www.ThrillingDetective.com/non_fiction/r019.html

**From "The Origins of Detective Fiction"
by R.D. Collins, 2004**

<< Detective fiction, as we know it today, truly began in 1841 when Edgar Allan Poe introduced Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin in the short story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*... >>

Don't miss the history -- www.ClassicCrimeFiction.com/historydf.htm