It's a Mystery! Literally
Language Arts Challenge

Submission Due Date: April 7, 2023
Designed for Middle and High School Students

Table of Contents	Range of Activities
- The Challenge - Assumptions and Logistics - Genre Introduction - Process - Meridian Support Resources - Presentation of Learning - Evaluation Rubric - Essential Questions - Student Proficiencies - Curricular Correlations (W3, W4, W5, W6, SL1, SL6, L3, L5)	- Literary Genre Analysis - Mysteries - Focused Exploration of Plot, Setting, and Tone - Character and Scene Creation - Scriptwriting - Digital Literacy Skills - Video or Audio- Pre-production, Production and Post-production - Human Skills: Creativity, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Presentational Skills

The Challenge

The mystery literary genre is one of the most disciplined and exacting forms of storytelling in the world. And for exactly that reason, it's also one of the most popular and compelling. In short: it's a blast. In this Challenge, you will set up a mystery and begin to lead us down a path shaped by suspense and disbelief, toward resolution. Characters, setting, motives, red herrings, suspects, and clues will abound, fully re-imagined. To bring this all to a fast conclusion, in the last thirty seconds, you will jump to the final page of the story, dissolve the cinematic world that you have created, and read us the resolution, as if we had all just turned to the final page of your story.

This Challenge is all about story and how to tell a good one. It is Meridian Stories' belief that if you know the essential elements that comprise story; can identify the specific elements of story to which you are most attracted through this practice of story creation; and can create a cohesive and compelling story, then you and your team have a good chance to succeed in life beyond school. And there's nothing like the mystery genre to push you into the discipline and joy of storytelling.

…and one more thing. There are two categories of entry for this: This can be a video digital story or an audio digital story: a radio drama. Your call.

Deliverables include:
- The Mystery – video or audio (this is the only Meridian Stories deliverable)
- Mystery Outline (at teacher's discretion)
- First Draft Script (at teacher's discretion

Assumptions and Logistics

Time Frame - We recommend that this digital storytelling project takes place inside of a three to four-week time frame.

Length - All Meridian Stories submissions should be under 4 minutes in length, unless otherwise specified.

Slate **- All digital storytelling projects must begin with a slate that provides:**
   a) the title of the piece;
   b) the name of the school submitting;
   c) the wording 'Permission Granted' which gives Meridian Stories the right to a) publicly display the submission in question on, as linked from, related to or in support of Meridian Stories digital media; and b) use or reference it for educational purposes only, in any and all media; and
   d) We strongly recommend that students do **not** put their last names on the piece either at the start or finish, during the credits.

Submissions - Keep in mind that each school can only submit three submissions per Competition (so while the entire class can participate in any given Challenge, only three can be submitted to Meridian Stories for Mentor review and scoring).

Teacher Reviews - All reviews by the teacher are at the discretion of the teacher and all suggested paper deliverables are due only to the teacher. The only deliverable to Meridian Stories is the digital storytelling project.

Teacher's Role and Technology Integrator - While it is helpful to have a Technology Integrator involved, they are not usually necessary: the students already know how to produce the digital storytelling project. And if they don't, part of their challenge is to figure it out. They will! ***The teacher's primary function in these Challenges is to guide the students as they engage with the content.*** You don't need to know editing, sound design, shooting or storyboarding: you just need to know your content area, while assisting them with time management issues. See the **Teachers Role** section of the site for further ideas about classroom guidance.

Digital Rules/Literacy - We strongly recommend that all students follow the rules of Digital Citizenry in their proper usage and/or citation of images, music and text taken from other sources. This recommendation includes producing a citations page at the end of your entry, if applicable. See the **Digital Rules** area in the **Meridian Stories Digital Resource Center** section of the site for guidance.

Location – Try not to shoot in a classroom at your school. The classroom, no matter how you dress it up, looks like a classroom and can negatively impact the digital story you are trying to tell.

<u>Collaboration</u> - We strongly recommend that students work in teams of 3-4: part of the educational value is around building collaborative skill sets. But students may work individually.

Genre Introduction

The genre of mystery writing is simultaneously vast and intricately detailed and does not easily fit into a four-minute digital story. So, we need to be selective about the elements that we can include to create an effective story. Think of these elements like ingredients in a recipe: you need to be familiar with them before you can begin to cook. These elements include the following:

1. **A Hook and a Mystery** – From the very first moment of your story, you need to hook your audience into your mystery. This means that you will want to state the mystery that needs to be solved in the first 30 seconds. Generally, the mystery can be any one of these three things:
    a. <u>A crime</u> – Most notably a murder, but it could be a theft or a kidnapping.
    b. <u>A secret</u> – For example, …where did your deceased mother hide the rare rose-tinted emerald that you must find before your sister? Here's the situation: Your mother left each of you with one clue about its whereabout, but your clues are different, and you don't know the other's clue, …which leads you to wonder: should you focus on solving the riddle of your clue or on retrieving your sister's clue which, when paired with your clue, may lead you directly to the precious stone?
    c. <u>A problem</u> – This usually involves an event that simply can't be explained. Like, how could your best friend, whom you saw yesterday afternoon, simultaneously be 1,000 miles away …in jail?
2. **The Characters** – There are notably two kinds of characters in a mystery: the good person and the bad person. The good person most likely is your problem solver: your detective or sleuth: the lead in your story who is trying to solve the mystery, whether professionally trained or not. The bad person is the murderer, the secret holder, or the deceiver. But here's the issue: you need your audience to believe that several people can be the bad person, *or* that the bad person is actually a good person. So, consider creating two to three people as potential bad persons.

3. **The Setting** – Is your story taking place in a classically atmospheric setting where thunder storms are rolling across the corn fields toward an isolated ranch house? Or is taking place in an abandoned urban basement? Or, say, an empty baseball stadium with echoing corridors in the off season: a place where nobody is expected to be? In a mystery, setting is often your third major character. So, where is your story going to take place?

4. **The Plot** – In this genre, this is the most intricate narrative knot to tackle. Mysteries are plot driven. Think about it. Young Adult Fiction is often character-driven. Comedies are character-driven. Fantasies are often location/setting driven. Adventure stories are a balanced mix of plot, character, and location. But mysteries: they are fully and wholly about plot first, and then the other story elements follow. This is the tough element to unravel and here are a few suggestions to help you do so.

   a. We recommend beginning at the end, at the solution, and work your way backward to the crime or secret or problem. This requires you to brainstorm the big 'Ah hah' moment that solves the mystery. But that is just a recommendation. You can begin at the start and narrate yourself into a corner, …and then figure a way out. Either way, map out your plot points from start to finish or finish to start, in detail. For this Challenge, we recommend aiming for five plot twists (at a maximum) or turns before reaching the solution.

   > **An *Ah Hah* Moment!**
   > In Agatha Christie's seminal work, ***Murder on the Orient Express***, the big 'Ah hah' moment (huge spoiler alert coming!) is that it wasn't one person who committed the murder on that train. Inspector Clouseau was looking for one person and yet everyone had a motive: what to do?? The solution to the mystery is that it was *all* the people – every single one, from different walks of life, deliberately came together to participate in the murder. That's the grand 'Ah hah!' moment in that murder mystery.

   b. Red Herrings and Distractions – One of those plot twists is going to be a red herring. Mysteries can't follow a straight line to the solution, like a mathematical problem. We need to be led astray. We need to see a clue and think to ourselves, "Of course, now I know who did it! OMG. And the detective doesn't." But, you have been tricked. You were given a red herring - a false clue – and you took it. Give your watchers some false leads.

c. Tone – The final element of plot that you will want to focus upon is the creation of unremitting suspense. This is the tone of your story. From the hook on, we should be sitting anxiously wondering how the mystery is going to be solved and if, during the solving of it, anyone else is going to, perhaps, get hurt?

How does one create suspense? By withholding information. By giving your viewer more information than your lead character. By creating a time crunch and severely limiting the amount of time that the mystery can be solved …or else! By surprises and the unexpected suddenly intruding into your story. By a simple turn to camera by your main character who suddenly stops because they see something intensely frightening, or …interesting. Camera cuts to Cuckoo Clock. Viewer thinks: what is about that Cuckoo Clock that is mesmerizing our lead character?? What is it? What is it?!!

The Process

Below is a suggested breakdown for the students' work.

During <u>Phase I</u>, student teams will:

- Brainstorm about your story, starting at the end or the beginning. How do you even start? Here's one suggestion: What topic or place or subject or profession interests you? Think in terms of things like circuses, sports teams, religious institutions, arcades, museums, dairy farms, banks, and public libraries. These are places that often contain valuable items, emanate strong atmospheric qualities, and are filled with interesting and often eccentric people. What could possibly go wrong in any of these places? That's your job. Begin by making a list of these segments of society that interest you and then brainstorm.
- Outline your story, citing the four or five plot turning points and put that outline aside. The assumption is that you do not have an airtight mystery yet: just the general direction of your story. Step away from your plot development.
- Decide which medium in which you are going to tell your story: video or audio? Now that you have a sense of the kind of story you want to tell, decide if that story is begging to be seen or heard? Does your story rely, for example, on a visual effect or moment to be effective? Or can your story work

exclusively inside the realm of sounds to re-create, in the imagination of your listener, a location and story that will linger long after the sound has been turned off.

- Begin to develop one of your lead characters. Perhaps begin with the good person. Good people are often harder to create and develop than bad people, in stories. Look for one or two characteristics that will make your protagonist unique.
- Go back to your plot development now that you have developed a few other narrative elements more deeply. At this point, asking 'What If' questions may help to tighten your story.

What If…?

The process of story creation - especially mysteries - constantly runs into dead ends. For example, the characters don't appear to have any way out of a situation. Or the characters aren't making interesting decisions. Or your team has landed on a very implausible solution that, in the end, will sink the story, and make your audience roll their eyes and think, 'No way.' Story creation is hard. Really hard. But the 'What If' question can help your team find ways out of sticky situations or bring life to an otherwise lifeless tale. For example:

- What if there is black out right at that moment.
- What if he is, in fact, her son, and he doesn't know it?
- What if, as she is storming out of the room, the door gets stuck? Or the elevator gets stuck?
- What if there's a knock at the door? Or your character gets a text message from her mom…right at that moment?!
- What if he's highly allergic to …those eggs he's eating? Or the cat he's snuggling with? What then?

Identify the problem moments in your story, and then have each member of your team write down three 'What if 'questions and then share.

Plot problem solved?

Most likely.

- Write an outline of your story, adding as much detail as you can. Keep in mind that we recommend that the solution be presented in the final minute of your

story. We recognize that you may have to skip ahead in time to the solution. In other words, in the first few minutes the story brings us right to the precipice of the mystery where we are all confounded. And then we need to cut to the very end, where the detective (for example) is explaining the mystery and how she/he/they solved it. This last bit is called exposition: it's less about action than about explaining. This is not a required format to follow: just a suggestion, given the constraints of telling a mystery in four minutes or less.

- o *Teacher's Option*: <u>**Mystery Outline**</u> – Teachers may require that teams hand in an outline of their mystery for review and feedback.

During <u>Phase II</u>, student teams will:

- Return to your focus on character development. Brainstorm as a team and write up a half to full page description of your lead characters.
  - o It's worth asking at this point: who is telling the story of the mystery? Is this being told from the third person whereby none of your characters know the answer until the end? Or from the first person, where we are only getting one perspective into what is happening? Is this a narrator we can trust?
- Write a first draft script, now that you have a stronger sense of your characters and their voices. Additionally, be sure to spend time on how you are going to resolve the mystery.
  - o *Teacher's Option*: **First Draft Script**– Teachers may require that teams hand in their first draft scripts for review and feedback.
- It's time to focus on the production: how are you going to produce this story? If this is an audio production, we recommend the following:
  - o Rehearse the voices over and over, reading the script and trying on different character voices until your team finds one that works.
  - o Research and develop a sound design plan that will include a mix of atmospheric sounds, sound effects and music. Creating and incorporating your own Foley sound effects can be very compelling in a mystery.
- If this is a video production, we recommend the following:
  - o Scout your locations to find the place that will visually deliver your story with full impact. Think in terms of shape of the space, the colors, the light, the room to move your characters (action), the texture of the atmosphere, including the props and your character costumes. In short, what are the visual contours of the place where your mystery is going to take place? You probably want to shoot this in just one or two locations.

- o Block the actors and rehearse. The director is a key figure on your team in this genre of storytelling. Mysteries require precise and thoughtful direction and that can only come about with lots of rehearsal. Try it this way. Try it that way. What if the camera is high? Or how about shooting from the feet, looking up?
- For both video and audio, pay close attention to timing and pacing. It's the timing that creates the suspense. It's the timing that allows for surprise. Will your story work best as a slow and steady build that suddenly erupts? Or will it work best as a series of sharp, quick patter exchanges amongst the characters? Mysteries rarely operate as evenly paced stories with edits every X number of seconds. No. Shots linger and faces slowly morph. Or a series of quick video or audio edits create confusion, …allowing the bad person to get away. For a moment. Timing and Pacing: play with it.

During Phase III, student teams will:
- Pre-produce the scene (for video):
  - o Complete the location scouting for shooting;
  - o Finish costumes, props and other set pieces, as needed;
  - o Prepare the logistics for the actual shooting of the scene; and
  - o Execute your final rehearsals.
- Shoot the video/ Record the audio
- Edit the video, adding stills and graphics as desired.
- Post-produce the video/audio, adding music and sound effects as desired.

Meridian Support Resources

Meridian Stories provides two forms of support for the student teams.

1. Media Innovators and Artists – This is a series of three to four-minute videos featuring artists and innovative professionals who offer important advice, specifically for Meridian Stories, in the areas of creativity and production.
2. Meridian Resources – These are short documents that offer student teams key tips in the areas of creativity and production.

Recommended review, as a team, for this Challenge include:

Meridian Innovators and Artists	Media Resource Collection
Radio Plays – Margaret Heffernan	**Creative Brainstorming Techniques**

Acting – Janet McTeer	**Video Editing Basics**
The Importance of Character in Storytelling – Scott Nash	**Sound Recording Basics**
Elements of a Successful Horror Film – Aviva Briefel	**Producing: Time Management**

Presentation of Learning

Meridian Stories is a proud partner of the non-profit ***Share Your Learning***, which is spearheading the movement of over **five million** students to publicly share their work as a meaningful part of their educational experience.

The workforce considers Presentational Skills to be a key asset and we encourage you to allow students to practice this skill set as often as possible. These short digital stories provide a great opportunity for kids to practice their public presentational skills.

According to *Share Your Learning*, Presentations of Learning (POL) promote…

- **Student Ownership, Responsibility & Engagement**. POLs can serve as a powerful *rite of passage* at the end of [a project]. By reflecting on their growth over time in relation to academic and character goals, grounded in evidence from their work, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning. Just as an artist wants their portfolio to represent their best work, POLs encourage students to care deeply about the work they will share.
- **Community Pride & Involvement**. When peers, teachers and community members come together to engage with student work and provide authentic feedback, they become invested in students' growth and serve as active contributors to the school community.
- **Equity**. POLs ensure that all students are seen and provide insight into what learning experiences students find most meaningful and relevant to their lives.

Meridian Stories' own research indicates this to be a really useful exercise for one additional reason: Students actually learn from their peers' presentations – it is useful to hear a perspective that is not just the teacher's.

It is with this in mind that we you encourage you to plan an event – it could be just an end-of-the-week class or an event where parents, teachers and student peers are invited – to allow the students to showcase their Meridian Stories projects. For more free resources that will support this planning, visit Share Your Learning.

Evaluation Rubric – *It's a Mystery! Literally*

CONTENT COMMAND	
Criteria	**1 - 10**
The Plot	The plot is well designed with a strong hook, plausible red herrings, and a satisfactory solution
Character Creation	The characters are compelling and perfectly suited to the scene
Mystery Genre – Whole Scene	The whole scene is engaging and very effective at eliciting suspense, wonder, and surprise
STORYTELLING COMMAND	
Criteria	**1 - 10**
Acting	The acting is exciting and engaging, bringing the written words to visceral life and contributing to the scene's success
Location as Character	The choice and presentation of the setting as an active and creative agent in the story significantly contributes to the power of the experience
The Solution	The way in which the ending is presented overcomes the obstacles of this condensed format and flows well and engages us through to the very end
MEDIA COMMAND	
Criteria	**1 - 10**
Directing and Cinematography (video only)	The direction and use of the camera enhance the action of the scene, creating the necessary tension and tone
Sound Design (video and audio)	The story is partially held together by a cohesive and creative sound design that helps propel the narrative
Editing and Music	The scene is edited cleanly and effectively, evoking the necessary emotions suited to a mystery The selective use of music and sound effects enhances the tensions inherent in the scene
HUMAN SKILLS COMMAND (for teachers only)	
Criteria	**1 - 10**
Collaborative Thinking	The group demonstrated flexibility in making compromises and valued the contributions of each group member

Creativity and Innovation	The group brainstormed many inventive ideas and was able to evaluate, refine and implement them effectively
Initiative and Self-Direction	The group set attainable goals, worked independently, and managed their time effectively, demonstrating a disciplined commitment to the project

Essential Questions

1. What are the driving narrative elements that comprise an evocative mystery and how do they work together for maximum impact?
2. How has your immersive dive into the narrative elements of the mystery genre changed your understanding of the power and relevance of this genre of literature?
3. In developing a new scene on paper, what have you learned about story creation and why is this important?
4. How has the concept of the story on paper taken on a new and vital life when translated to audio or video?
5. How has immersion in the creation of original content and the production of digital media – exercising one's creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy skills - deepened the overall educational experience?
6. How has working on a team – practicing one's collaborative skills - changed the learning experience?

Student Proficiencies

1. The student will have a visceral understanding and appreciation of the narrative elements that drive a good mystery, with a focus on plot, setting, character, and tone.
2. The student will have a deeper appreciation and understanding of the mystery literary genre and its complexities.
3. The student will have a newfound understanding of story and why command of story is a critical skill to have.
4. The student will become more aware of the powers, joys and possibilities of digital storytelling with all of its layers of narrative potency.
5. The student will utilize key Human Skills, with a focus on creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, in their process of translating literary content into an original story.

6. The student will have an increased awareness of the challenges and rewards of team collaboration. Collaboration – the ability to work with others - is considered one of the most important Human Skills to develop in students as they prepare for life after secondary school.

Curricular Correlations

The *It's a Mystery!* Challenge addresses a range of curricular objectives that have been articulated by the **Common Core Curricular Standards – English Language Arts.** Below please find the standards that are addressed, either wholly or in part.

Common Core Curricular Standards – English Language Arts Standards

	5th Grade	8th Grade	9th - 10th Grade	11th - 12th Grade
W3	Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.	Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.	Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.	Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
W4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
W5	With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or	With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising,	Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is	Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is

	trying a new approach.	editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.	most significant for a specific purpose and audience.	most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
SL5	Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.	Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest.	Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.	Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
SL6	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, using formal English when appropriate to task and situation.	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
RL6	Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.	Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.	N/A	N/A
L3	Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.	Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.	Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning	Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning

			or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.	or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
L5	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.