

Economic Mysteries: *Using economic reasoning to understand choices.*

WRITING YOUR OWN MYSTERY

Writing and using new mysteries is a good way to continue to emphasize The Guide to Economic Thinking, whether the mysteries are written by the teacher or by students. If you are interested in writing your own mysteries, follow these simple steps:

1. Be on the lookout for things that seem odd. Pay attention to the news, which is where most economic mysteries originate. Look for discrepancies between a reported event and your own sense of what ought to be expected under the circumstances. Discrepancies invite explanation; they provide excellent focal points for exercises in economic reasoning. (For example, athletes are playing games, so why are they paid more than nurses who save lives?)
2. Develop a primary proposition. Once you have noticed a problem, describe one side of it in a straightforward manner. This proposition should state something that is generally known or that looks reasonable on its face. (For example, many professional athletes never finish college.)
3. Develop an opposing proposition. If you're onto a good mystery, the facts of the case will suggest information that runs counter to the primary proposition. State them in an opposing proposition, thus implying a mystery or area of uncertainty that begs explaining. In thinking about opposing propositions, you might find it helpful to notice that they often begin with yet, about or however. (For example, annual salaries for professional athletes are much higher than salaries for teachers, yet teachers have college educations and perform valuable services to society by helping educate others.)
4. Identify the mystery explicitly. While the juxtaposition of the two main propositions is likely to suggest what the mystery is, you should nonetheless identify the mystery explicitly. (For example, Why are grown men and women paid millions of dollars to play games?)
5. Make sure that all your clues are true and that some are irrelevant to the mystery. Help students learn to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant facts by writing six to 10 clues that are straightforward, unbiased statements, but make sure at least a few don't relate directly to the mystery. (For example, coaches may encourage competition among their players as a way to spark peak performance, but this doesn't help students explain why some athletes make more money than firefighters.)
6. Focus on economic principles in trying to explain the mystery. Emphasizing the principles of The Handy Dandy Guide to Economic Thinking will maintain your economic focus. These principles highlight, for example, the importance of getting the incentives straight in any analysis of an economic mystery. In fact, nearly all economic mysteries can be resolved or clarified in large measure by attention to incentives.