

STEALTH MYSTERIES

CHEAT SHEET

Poe's Favorite Tricks

The game: Narrators must put across their cover stories—*without actually lying*. Here are five ploys to watch out for.

1 WAFFLING

Leave things just uncertain enough to keep you guessing.

"I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw," a ghost put poison in his wife's wine cup. ["Ligeia"]

"Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability." ["The Fall of the House of Usher."]

2 HEDGE WORDS

Soft words that dodge a direct claim.

"As if excited to frenzy." ["The Tell-Tale Heart"]

The dead cat "must have been" thrown through his window, "probably" to wake him up. ["The Black Cat"]

3 "FANCY"

Blame it on imagination—not facts.

"I fancied a ringing in my ears." ["The Tell-Tale Heart"]

"I saw, indeed, that [the features] were his, but I shook as if with a fit of the ague, in fancying they were not." [William Wilson]

4 QUESTIONS

Make them wonder—never make a claim.

"Is she [Madeline Usher] not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair?" ["The Fall of the House of Usher"]

"Have I not indeed been living in a dream?" ["William Wilson."]

5 WEASEL WORDING

Say something without saying what matters.

"I found that the noise was not within my ears" (This doesn't say that it was anyplace else.) ["The Tell-Tale Heart"]

"I buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot without a groan." (He's not saying this is what killed her.) ["The Black Cat."]

Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see.
—Poe

READER-DETECTIVE RULE:

When in doubt, look for the trick. Poe leaves clues—so should you.

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POE

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