

Scene of the Crime:

Criminal Investigation in Savage Worlds

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The *easiest* way to run a criminal investigation in *Savage Worlds* is certainly fast, and easy: have the player make a single Investigation roll. If they make it, they crack the case; if they fail, they don't.

In many cases, this may be all you want to do, particularly in situations where only one player is doing the investigating, or if investigation isn't a key factor in the game.

There may be other times where you'd like to have something a little more detailed, without dedicating the entire game session to crime solving. This system is here to fill that gap; it requires only a few minutes of preparation time and won't take too big a bite out of your gaming time. If you have more than one detective character, they'll all have the opportunity to participate, too.

This system breaks down into four parts:

1. *Initial assessment.* The detective examines the big picture, and attempts to determine which avenue of investigation has the most merit.
2. *Develop the case.* Based on his initial assessment, the detective examines the evidence, questions witnesses, following one or more of the three avenues of investigation: means, motive, and opportunity.
3. *Final questioning.* The process of developing the case will point to one or more prime suspects in the crime. In this step, the suspect is brought in for questioning and presented with the evidence in an attempt to elicit a confession.
4. *Present the case.* Having gathered the evidence and (possibly) obtained a confession from one of the suspects, the detective must present the case to the DA's office, to determine if they feel the case is worth pursuing.

Part 1: Initial Assessment

In this part of the investigation, the detective is called to the scene of the crime. He collects a few initial clues, and based on these determines what the next step in the investigation should be.

The GM calls for an Investigation roll, modified from -4 to $+4$.

A $+4$ indicates that the evidence is obvious and damning (fingerprints all over the gun, a video of someone committing the murder, or a videotaped confession); the CSI team and coroner are top-notch professionals; your captain has given you free reign to investigate as you see fit, with plenty of assistance from other detectives or uniformed officers; etc. The deck is stacked in your favor.

A -4 indicates that there is little, if any, evidence, or the evidence doesn't point clearly to anyone; the CSI team or coroner is overworked and makes one or more mistakes; there's pressure on you from your captain, the police commissioner, the mayor, etc., to close the case quickly; the other detectives are slammed with work, and the uniformed officers lack the skill, desire, or time to aid you; etc. You *hate* cases like this, but they happen a lot more than the easy ones.

Most cases will fall somewhere in between, and will generally be in the -2 to $+2$ range.

With a success on your assessment roll, you'll know which of the three avenues of investigation – means, motive, or opportunity – will most likely bear further investigation. With a raise, the detective will know what number two and three on the list will be. The 'best avenue' is determined by the base modifier that will be applied to the Investigation roll for each avenue, which we'll cover in Part 2.

Deep Investigation Option: *You can, if you wish, allow the detective to use a secondary skill to get a bonus to any of his Investigation rolls; Intimidation, Notice, Streetwise, or Knowledge (Criminal Psychology) are examples. A success on this supplementary roll will give a $+2$ to the Investigation roll, with an additional $+2$ for each raise. Failure is no effect; you simply didn't turn up anything useful. A snake eyes means you're following a red herring; you take a -2 to your Investigation roll.*

Example: Detective Mills is investigating the death of a prominent lawyer. He visits the crime scene, and the GM calls for a Notice roll. Mills rolls a d6, and gets a 5; he finds a scrap of paper taped to the bottom of the lawyer's desk, with several strings of numbers.

Mills returns to the office, and looks over his notes and the initial findings of the CSI team, who've determined that the numbers are foreign phone numbers, to an off-shore bank. He makes his Investigation roll to assess the case; he gets a +2 for the successful Notice roll to find the paper, but has to take a -2 as well, since he's under pressure from the DA's office to close the case quickly. Mills rolls his d8 Investigation, and gets a 7. Success!

The GM tells the player that the off-shore bank information was the real tip-off; it screams motive, so that should be where he begins the investigation.

Part 2: Develop the Case

Regardless of whether or not the character succeeded in their assessment roll, they'll need to proceed on to the core of the investigation: developing the clues that they turned up in the initial stages, as well as any that turn up in the course of the investigation.

There are three avenues to follow:

1. *Means.* In this case, means refers to the physical evidence in the case: the murder weapon, DNA evidence, blood spatters, a matchbook, fingerprints, etc.
2. *Motive.* Who would profit from the crime? Who stands to gain? While motive won't win you any court cases, it can be a valuable tool to narrow down a wide field of suspects.
3. *Opportunity.* A person with the opportunity to commit a crime has no alibi for the time required to reach the crime scene, commit the crime, and perform any subsequent actions (like disposing of a body), as well as being physically capable of the act itself (a 4'11" housewife probably couldn't beat a 6'6" Hell's Angel to death with her bare hands, unless she were a black belt or the guy were out cold, for example).

Just as with the initial assessment, each avenue will have a modifier from -4 to +4 applied to it, based on the clarity, availability, and volume of the evidence and/or witnesses.

When the character successfully makes their assessment roll, the GM tells them which avenue of the investigation has the best modifier, if there is one.

(Note to the GM: Do NOT tell them what the modifier is, however!)

Successful Investigation rolls will also help you get a confession in Part 3, and are necessary to sell your case to the DA in Part 4.

Don't forget, if you're using the Deep Investigation Option, you can use your secondary skills to get a bonus to your Investigation roll on any or all of the three avenues.

Example: Mills made his assessment roll earlier.

The GM looks at the three avenues:

- *There's a very clear motive in the case, so that avenue has a +2.*
- *The killer tried to clean his tracks after him, and did pretty well, so there's a -1 to determine the means.*
- *The killer did very well establishing an alibi; there's a -2 to the opportunity Investigation roll.*

The GM tells Mills that motive is the best start. Mills decides to question the main subjects in the case very heavily; he makes a flat Intimidation roll, rolling a 3 on d6. He doesn't get any extra help, but he shouldn't need it.

Mills makes his Investigation roll for motive, rolling another 3; the GM adds on the +2 base modifier and determines that Mills succeeded. He's narrowed the suspect list down to just two people (the lawyer's wife, and one of his partners in his law firm).

Next, Mills looks at the means. He confers with CSI, who tell him that the killer cleaned up pretty well after himself. Mills decides to put his skills to the test again, making a straight Smarts roll to see if he can make something of the existing evidence. He rolls a 6 on d6, an ace! He rolls again, and gets a 5, for a total of 11. This gives him a +4 to his investigation roll; minus the -1 base modifier, this gives him a grand total of +3. He rolls his Investigation, getting a 5. A success with a raise; the physical evidence in the case clearly points to the partner in the law firm.

Finally, the detective looks at opportunity. With the evidence piling up against the partner, Mills wants to wrap up the case and move on, so he does no extra work here. He rolls a 4 on his Investigation roll, but with the -2 modifier, he fails. He can't seem to crack the lawyer's alibi, but he figures what he have may be enough to get a confession.

Part 3: Final Questioning

At this point, you should have narrowed your choices down to at most two or three prime suspects. These suspects are brought in, and you will try to wring a confession from them.

Determine a base modifier for each suspect. An innocent suspect, under most circumstances, will get an automatic +4. Guilty suspects will generally get a -2.

The detective will get a modifier to their roll based on the amount of evidence they've gathered: for each successful Investigation roll in the three avenues, they get a +1 to their roll, with an additional +1 for any raises they may have gotten (+4 maximum). Failed Investigation rolls give a -1.

With both sets of modifiers determined, the detective should make an Intimidation roll vs. the suspects Spirit. A success means that, if the suspect is guilty, they confess.

On a raise, even if the suspect is innocent, they'll still confess!

Example: Mills brings in the lawyer and, just in case, the wife too.

Mills got 2 successes and 1 raise in his Investigation rolls, but he got 1 failure as well. His total modifier is +2, and he has a d6 Intimidate.

The wife is innocent. She'll get a +4 to her roll; she has a d6 Spirit. She rolls a 4, modified to 8. Mills rolls a 6, an ace, and rolls again, getting a 1. With his +2, that's a total of 9. He wins, and has totally cowed the wife, but she won't confess to the crime, and Mills believes her. He apologizes and cuts her loose.

The lawyer is guilty as sin, but he's also a lawyer, and knows how to work the system; the GM determines that he'll get a +1 to his roll, and he has a d6 Spirit. The lawyer rolls a 2, modified to 3; not so good. Mills rolls a 5; his +2 bonus brings this up to 7. A success with a raise: the lawyer cracks under the pressure of Mills' questioning and confesses all.

Part 4: Present the Case

With the investigation complete and a suspect chosen, the detective must present his evidence to the DA, who'll decide if they want to pursue the case any further.

First, determine modifiers: The detective gets the same base modifier from the previous step, with an additional +2 if they got a confession from the suspect.

Other modifiers would be: the DA is running for re-election and only wants 'sure thing' cases (-1); the mayor is running for re-election and wants to look 'tough on crime' (+1); it was a high-profile case (varies; could be plus if a swift resolution is sought, or a minus if the suspect is well-liked in the community), etc.

The detective makes a Smarts roll, with the final modifier. With a success, the DA takes the case. On a failure, they don't, but they may direct the detective to begin the investigation over again (go back to Part 1 and start over, or let the case drop).

Regardless of whether the case is won or lost by the DA, as far as the detective is concerned, the case is closed once the DA takes the case, and they're free to move on to the next case.

It is possible that the detective could fail all their Investigation rolls, railroad a innocent into confessing, and sell the whole sorry mess to the DA through some fancy mental footwork. But then, it happens in real life, too...

Example: Mills presents the case to the DA. With his +2 modifier from Part 3, and an additional +2 for the confession, he gets a total of +4 to his roll. He rolls his d8 Smarts, getting a 7, modified to 11 with his bonus. Slam dunk! The DA can't wait to prosecute the dirty lawyer; they'll probably speed up the trial to get him put away as quickly as possible. The DA thanks Mills, who goes back to the office, where the phone is ringing...

"Mills, Homicide..."

Author's Note

Although this system is meant to reproduce a 'Law & Order' style investigation, I drew much more inspiration from real-world resources than from fictional ones.

I'm deeply indebted to the following for inspiration and information:

Vernon Geberth's Practical Homicide Investigation, 3rd Edition. An invaluable resource for anyone interested in criminal investigation, though only recommended to those of stout heart and strong stomach as its full of some incredibly grisly crime scene photos.

Michael Kurlan's How to Solve a Murder: The Forensic Handbook. While much of this book is dedicated to forensics, as the title implies, there is some very useful information on general investigation.

And finally, David Simon's Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets. One of the best television series ever ("Homicide: Life on the Streets") was based loosely on this book. Writer David Simon followed the work of one shift of homicide detectives in Baltimore for one year, and came out on the other side with one of the most thorough, fascinating, and informative books on the subject ever written.

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