

What is a detective?

A detective is a person, usually with some specialized training, who investigates people, places, or events. Everyone is a detective at some time in their life.

Have you ever lost something, and then found it by asking questions and investigating in a step-by-step method? For example, if your parent lost their house key and asked you to help them find it, you may have done some of the same things that detectives do in order to solve the mystery of the missing key. This would be true especially if you used good thinking and problem-solving skills to narrow down where the key could be located, instead of just walking around the house lifting up every pillow and piece of furniture to find the key.

If you and your parent just came home from grocery shopping, and then dad says “can you help me find the house key?”, you may be a detective if you:

1. Ask dad what rooms he has been in since he walked in with the groceries. If dad hasn't been to the basement, you don't need to waste time looking there. If he hasn't been in any closets, or the bathroom, then you definitely don't need to look there.
2. If dad says “I just brought the groceries in and put them on the table – I haven't left the kitchen!” then you definitely have a good start on where the key might be.
3. If you lift up all the grocery bags, and there's no key, where else could it be? Did you look inside each bag to see if the key fell in there? You look and the key isn't in any bags.
4. Did dad put the key in his pocket and forget it was in there? Dad checks his pockets. No key.
5. Could the key be outside? No, because you needed the key to unlock the door. Is this a clue?
6. Check the door lock. There is the key! Dad used it to unlock the door, but his hands were so full of grocery bags that he just pushed the unlocked door open and started putting groceries away. Then he couldn't find the key. It was still in the door lock all along!

This may seem like a very simple story, and you may not believe that this is detective work – but it is. You asked questions and used a systematic approach to find the key; you didn't waste time just tearing apart the house. You didn't chase after crazy ideas (after all, you didn't say “maybe aliens took your key”). You went step by step until you found the answer. ***That's what a good detective does; they “dig deeper” – just like the Peotone Library Summer Reading Program encourages you to do!***

All types of detectives

You might watch television shows that claim to show all sorts of different detectives:

1. “Paranormal detectives” that investigate the possibility of ghosts and hauntings. These are not police detectives; they don't arrest people.
2. “Homicide detectives” are police detectives that investigate crimes where there is a loss of life
3. “Missing persons detectives” that find people who no one else has been able to find
4. “Cold case detectives” are police detectives that study criminal cases that have been classified as unsolved.
5. “Private detectives” who are not part of the law enforcement community; they don't arrest people, but they may be hired by companies or individuals to gather evidence of misconduct, like someone who sells information about their company to a competing company.

Because we are police detectives, we are going to focus on the kind of work we handle, which is *criminal investigations*. Police detectives work for a law enforcement agency. That means that we not only try to figure out who committed a crime and how and why they did it, but we also arrest them so that the evidence and the person can be brought before court.

Police officers and police detectives do not find people guilty or not guilty. We do not send people to jail. Rather, we gather the evidence and present it to a person called a prosecutor who works for the State of Illinois. A *prosecutor* is a special attorney (an attorney is often called a “lawyer” – they are the same thing) who argues the merits of the case in front of a judge or jury in a courtroom. The judge is one person, and a *jury is a group of people*, who listen to the case and decide whether the person brought before the court is guilty. The judge or jury may also decide on the punishment if the person is found guilty. Sometimes the punishment is jail. Sometimes it’s a fine. Sometimes the person is sentenced to probation, which means that they don’t go to jail but they must obey certain rules otherwise they will be sent to jail. And many times, they find that there is not enough evidence to declare someone guilty. In that case, the person is free to go.

Police detectives can be found in many places. In a smaller police department, there may not be enough officers to have a dedicated team of detectives. There may be only one detective. And that detective may also have to perform regular patrol work – like respond to calls that come from the 911 dispatcher. Those detectives have a very hard job, because they have to be good at everything, and they have a lot going on. In our case, we work for the Will County Sheriff’s Police. We are a pretty big department, so our detectives are assigned different specialty areas:

1. Financial crime: Detective Eiden specializes in these types of crimes. They involve people breaking the law by using trickery, theft, deceit, counterfeiting (counterfeit means “fake”, like fake money, fake credit cards, etc) and other tactics to get money or things they have not earned or bought themselves. For example, if someone hacks into your parents’ computer and steals their bank account number, and then uses their bank information to buy a lot of things on the internet, that is a financial crime. They have stolen your parents’ money by using a criminal method, like illegally accessing their personal banking information, to get things for themselves.
2. Property crime: We have several detectives that investigate these crimes. These are usually crimes that involve stealing or destroying other people’s property. If someone breaks into your garage and steals your bicycle, that’s a property crime.
3. Crimes against persons: Almost all crime is against a person, because it harms someone in some way. But these detectives investigate more direct crimes, like when a person commits an act of violence against another. If someone hits another person, that’s something these detectives investigate.
4. Cold cases: These are investigations for which we don’t yet have the answer. Detectives who investigate these cases may find that there wasn’t a crime, but rather an accident. Or, they may find that it’s the opposite; something that was thought to be accidental may have actually been an intentional crime. The cases have been left “open” because the original detectives weren’t able to find a definite answer. These detectives often use new tools and techniques that weren’t available 10, 20, 30, or even 50 years ago to get closer to understanding the how and why something happened.

Each of our detectives may have special training that applies to what they investigate. For example, Detective Eiden knows more about how banks work and about following patterns to identify people committing the same crimes in different areas than a cold case detective. BUT, all of our detectives often work together because the crimes they investigate cross over into several categories. For example, if someone breaks into a garage to steal a bike, that's a property crime. But if your mom catches the person and they fight (and your mom wins!), that criminal has also committed a crime against a person. Those detectives might work that case together to get all the evidence needed to arrest the person and bring them before court.

ALL of our detectives are Lead Homicide Investigators; that means we all go through special training that is required by the State of Illinois to allow us to investigate crimes that result in death to one or more persons. *Homicide means death at the hands of another.* That means, the death didn't happen from natural causes, like old age, sickness, or other things not caused intentionally by other people. Most people usually think of homicides as a shooting. But they may involve poison, drugs, striking with an object, strangulation (choking), stabbing, or other means.

We also have detectives that have other specialized training and tools; they may know how to get into a cell phone or a computer to find evidence, how to use GPS to track someone, how to locate suspects, or they may work with other investigators when there are other criminal connections, such as drugs or weapons. Some of our detectives have specialized training to investigate crimes against children.

The most important thing to understand is that ALL of our detectives work together to solve crimes. No matter what a detective specializes in, we all help each other to make sure that the citizens (like you) that we serve get the best investigation possible. Another group of investigators we work closely with are the Crime Scene Investigators, or CSI. They are an especially important part of investigations.

What is a work day like for a detective?

Being a detective might sound like a pretty cool job. That's because it is. Detectives get to dig deeper into crimes and work toward seeing them through all the way to court. We drive cars that other people wouldn't recognize as police cars. That's because we often don't want people to know that we are checking out the area where a crime took place; we can observe people and things in their natural environment, without them acting different because they know the police are watching. We don't have to wear a uniform (but we still have to dress nicely; we don't come to work in basketball shorts). That's because a lot of times, we don't necessarily want people to know we are out conducting an investigation. If people recognized us as police, they might run, destroy evidence, try to harm us or others, or do other things to try to prevent us from solving a case. Sometimes people are just more comfortable talking to a police officer that is not dressed in a police uniform. But there are some things that other officers do that, most days, we don't. We don't get the excitement of the dispatcher sending us to a call, and not knowing what's really going on until we get there, and then handling that call with our partners. By the time we get a case, that excitement is over. One nice thing, however, is that all detectives start off as patrol officers – so we have already done a lot of that. That's important, because we have to remember that the crimes we investigate usually start off with a 911 call and a uniformed officer gathering a lot of information that will help our investigation. For that reason, what the officer in a uniform does when they first arrive is a very important part of solving a crime.

Another fact of detective life is that we don't have set hours. We might have a scheduled workday, but we can be called out at any time if something happens. Sometimes we will be eating dinner with our family on our day off work, and our work phone will ring, and it's our boss telling us we have to report to work immediately. If you are a patrol officer, this will almost never happen.

Our work day can sometimes be pretty unexciting. We might spend hours in front of a computer, doing all kinds of research. We might be listening to audio recordings. We might be watching security camera video. We might be making phone calls to stores, to victims, and to witnesses. And almost everything we do, whether it seems important or not, we have to document with a report. That means a LOT of time typing. Other times we do things that are a little more interesting, like interview people. But guess what? We have to write reports about those interviews too. Sometimes interviews are not as easy as just talking to someone, like you talk to your best friend. We might have to talk to people about things they don't want to revisit, like the loss of a loved one. We might be trying to piece together bits and pieces of an event from stories told by 20 different people before we can put together all the puzzle pieces and get a clear picture. Often times, people lie to us – even if they don't have to. *The most important tools that detectives have are their brain and ears.* They must be good thinkers, but most important they must be good listeners.

So, being a detective has a lot of ups and downs. It can change every day. Some days it can be very exciting. Some days, it can be exhausting. Some days are easier than others. And sometimes our lives get turned upside down because something happens and we get called in and have to start working on a case immediately. But every day, we dig deeper into crimes to find out who committed them, why, when, and how.

The job of a detective can be like a roller coaster, with a lot of twists and turns. A good detective is a person with an open mind, who is a team player, who doesn't quit and will make sacrifices because doing a good job is important to them. In that way, we are very much the same as successful people in all careers that work with people, whether you're a police officer, a teacher, a nurse, or anyone else whose job is to help others.

What did you learn?

1. What are some things a police detective would investigate?
2. What kind of officer do all detectives begin their career as?
3. When can a detective be called in to work?
4. What are the most important tools a detective has?