The scene of a crime

Do you enjoy reading murder mysteries or watching whodunnits? ANNA HOCHSIEDER presents language to talk about investigating a crime scene.

A rookie detective reports
The call came through at 2 a.m. When we arrived, the uniforms (N. Am.) had already cordoned off the crime scene. Even in the night, a small crowd of onlookers had gathered, trying to get a glimpse of the body lying in the car park.

"A young male, around 20. The coroner’s on his way," said one of the scene-of-crime officers by way of greeting. Pulling on a pair of gloves, Inspector Forbes crouched down next to the body. "Well, no need for a post-mortem to determine the cause of death, I’d say," she remarked, pointing to the knife lying next to the victim. "He’s obviously been stabbed.

"We’ve had lots of gang-related incidents in the area lately, ma’am," the SOCO said. "It’s a rough neighbourhood."

Another officer was bagging and tagging various pieces of evidence. "Any clue to his identity?" the inspector asked. "None so far, ma’am. But I’ve managed to tape-lift some hair samples that are obviously not the victim’s. Oh, and we may have an eyewitness," he added. "The neighbour who called 999 says she saw a car speed away, and she wrote down the licence number."

"Not bad," said Inspector Forbes. "I wouldn’t mind an open-and-shut case for a change."
Exercise 1

Who’s who at the crime scene? Match the people on the left (A–F) to the definitions on the right (1–6).

| A. A rookie detective is... | 1. a person who has been attacked, injured or killed. |
| B. A uniform is... | 2. someone who examines the physical evidence at a crime scene. |
| C. An inspector is... | 3. a detective who is new to the job and has little experience. |
| D. A SOCO (scene-of-crime officer) is... | 4. a police officer who wears a uniform. |
| E. A coroner is... | 5. a senior police officer. |
| F. A victim is... | 6. an official whose job is to discover the cause of someone’s death. |

Exercise 2

What’s missing? Complete the following sentences with words from the opposite page.

A. The videotape provides a valuable ____________ to the time of the murder.

B. The police have not yet ____________ the ____________ of the victim.

C. A(n) ____________ said he saw a group of ____________ waiting in a car.

D. We won’t know the exact cause of death until we’ve ____________ a(n) ____________.

E. At present, all the ____________ ____________ points to Smith as the killer.

F. Is that a(n) ____________ on the victim’s shirt, or is it just tomato sauce?

Exercise 3

Complete the paragraph below, using the words from the list.

There were some bloody (A) ____________ leading from the victim to the car park. The forensic photographer placed (B) ____________ next to them before photographing them. I pulled on a pair of (C) ____________. Using a (D) ____________, I collected a (E) ____________ of the blood, then bagged and tagged it. “The (F) ____________ must have been something heavy, like a baseball bat,” I said to the inspector. “Well, we’ll see what the (G) ____________ says,” the inspector replied. One of the (H) ____________ appeared. “The (I) ____________ has just arrived to take away the (J) ____________, sir,” he told the inspector. “Fine. We’re all done here,” the inspector replied.

Ma’am

In American English, the word ma’am [mæm] is sometimes used as a polite form of address for female customers in shops or restaurants. In Britain, it is more common to use “madam”. In the present scene, ma’am is a respectful way of addressing a woman who is higher up in the hierarchy, especially in the police force or the military. You can also use ma’am to address the queen.