

January 28, 2021 with John Nicolay

1. Review of the genre
2. Writing dialogue that sets the tone, captures the scene, moves with the characters
3. Know the audience. Speak to them.
4. The story arc
5. The challenge

3 Characteristics of Flash Fiction

Brevity. Flash fiction compresses an entire story into the space of a few paragraphs. There is no defined word count for flash fiction, but some commonly used word limits in flash fiction range from just six words on the short end to around 1,000 words on the longer end.

A complete plot. A flash fiction story is indeed a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. This sets it apart from a prose poem or vignette, which can explore an emotion, memory, or thought without a plot.

Surprise. Great flash fiction often incorporates surprise, usually in the form of a twist ending or an unexpected last line. This is not a gimmick: the aim is to prompt the reader to think deeply about the true meaning of the story.

Expert tips for writing the best flash fiction by Jack Smith

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What is flash fiction?

Flash fiction goes by many names: microfiction, sudden fiction, short-short, postcard fiction, etc. Its word count runs anywhere from 140 characters to over a thousand words capping out at 1500. Many famous writers have written flash, including Langston Hughes, Raymond Carver, David Foster Wallace, Jamaica Kincaid, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Amy Hempel, and Margaret Atwood, to name only a few.

Since the 1986 appearance of the landmark *Sudden Fiction*, an anthology edited by Robert Shepard and James Thomas, flash fiction has become a special genre for many fiction writers, with quite a few magazines and journals and small presses open to the form. While commercial presses aren't receptive to single-authored flash fiction collections, W.W. Norton published *Flash Fiction* in 1992; *Flash Fiction Forward* in 2006; and *Flash Fiction International: Very Short Stories from Around the World* in 2015.

Other than being short, what's at the heart of flash fiction?

For Randall Brown—author of the award-winning flash collection *Mad to Live* and editor of *Matter Press*, which specializes in flash—it comes down to what the form says about the world and human experience in it.

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“The world—shattered and lying in shards—has grown tired of its pieces being glued together to create the illusion of something complete. Instead, the world hopes someone will pick up a single fragment and create out of it something whole, something that fills that compressed space with the entirety of all that there is,” he says.

Michael Martone, whose flash fiction has been widely anthologized, sees flash “as a corrosive genre.” He states: “I think its cultural appearance corresponds, along with other events and historical occasions, with the move of literary writers and poets into the university, the university that is an ancient scientific sorting critical machine. This world wants rigor. This form, ‘flash,’ wants to play. It can’t be categorized. It can’t be taught. It knows not to know.”

Flash fiction versus prose poems

Still, there must be certain identifiable properties of flash. How is it different from, say, a prose poem?

“I used to say that the difference between a prose poem and a flash story is that in a flash story something happens. Now I have pared back ‘something happens’ to ‘movement,’” says Pamela Painter, award-winning author of the flash collection *Wouldn’t You Like to Know*.

Whatever flash fiction is, or how it differs from other forms, it has a large following.

“There is a really mighty, supportive flash community these days. It’s great to see people holding each other up and supporting each other’s work through publication and review and word of mouth. It seems like there are more full-length flash collections and anthologies being published in the small press world, which is exciting,” says Sherrie Flick, author of *Whiskey, Etc.* and the award-winning *I Call This Flirting*.

Writing flash fiction

Why write flash fiction and not the traditional short story? The short story itself is a compressed form, so why seek even greater compression?

For some it may be in the demands of such extreme brevity, the challenge of handling an entire piece of writing in such a short space.

“It’s a great artistic expression,” states Kim Chinquee, author of *Oh Baby: Flash Fictions and Prose Poetry*. Painter sees flash as both a challenge and a gift: “Compression is a challenge when the story goes spooling out of control—‘Spooling off to where?’ the writer might timidly ask. But then s/he gains some backbone and welcomes the gift, self-bestowed largesse though it may be, to write short—to end the story in a flash. The challenge and the gift both nourish flash writers—I wish they occurred simultaneously more often.”

Flash fiction can be an opportunity for experimentation, as it has been for Stuart Dybek, winner of many awards and author of two short-short collections (*Ecstatic Cahoots* and *The Coast of Chicago*). Dybek notes that he never set out to write flash.” Back in college, he tried out the short-short form “in relation to the prose poem.” Because of its compression, he found it “a good

form to work out prose rhythm, to experiment with fragmentation, to inhabit the no-man's-land between fiction and poetry.”

A short-short story has to handle all the fictional elements seamlessly within an extremely tight space.

The experimental potential of flash has also attracted Flick, who enjoys “messing with craft elements, tuning in and tuning out of ways that traditional short stories are written.” But her interest in flash fiction goes beyond using it for occasional experimentation. The form itself has attracted her, with most of her stories running 500 to 1500 words, though she didn't set out intentionally to write in the genre. “Writing short came naturally and early in my career,” Flick says, “so it wasn't so much a decision as a revelation that this was the type of work I should be writing.”

Examples of good and bad flash fiction

A short-short story has to handle all the fictional elements seamlessly within an extremely tight space. Given these extreme parameters, what makes a piece of flash fiction truly great? Chinquee provides a sweeping list of key attributes: “Language. Imagery. Surprise. Things that are left out. Elements such as tone and point-of-view can fill in for the plot. Rhythm. And a smashing title and ending.” For Painter, too, good flash has certain essential ingredients: “Density, texture, tension, forward movement, the necessary end.” Related to texture, Flick stresses quality of language: “Excellent sentences. A kind of internal rhythm to the language.” For Brown, “A myth of flash fiction is that every word counts (they don't), but that being said, the compressed space does put more focus on the language choices writers make.”

What about mistakes, pitfalls, or problems in writing flash fiction?

“I don't think a piece of flash should rest on a gimmick or a joke or a super-long extended metaphor.”

Language problems, for one. With Flick's emphasis on compelling language, she warns against “lazy sentence structure.” For Brown, the language pitfall includes “choosing the too-familiar word.” For Painter, “dull language.” And for Chinquee, a “lack of sensory detail.”

Another problem area for Painter is a “static story.” Flick, too, is concerned about this problem: “I don't think a piece of flash should rest on a gimmick or a joke or a super-long extended metaphor. I think there should be a story inherent in the piece, and this separates it from a prose poem.” But she warns against trying “to bring too large of a scope to a tiny story.”

Other pitfalls in story content and development, according to Brown, include choosing the too-familiar “setting, situation, and/or resolution; playing it too safe and relying too much on the same tired form and the same tired content; and going for the twist at the end rather than the deeper significance.” As to endings, Chinquee warns against ending your story too soon. But above all, she cautions against “ending the piece by saying it's a dream.”

But there's another way to look at this matter of overcoming mistakes in writing flash fiction. There's the position that the writer shouldn't be thinking in terms of “good” and “bad” at all. The

goal of flash fiction isn't about achieving either dynamic. Consider what two leading figures in this field say:

For Dybek, the question of “good,” or “bad,” flash fiction must be seen within the context of fairly recent “anthologies, workshops, contests, etc.” that have provided a set of criteria for the present generation of flash-fiction writers—criteria that wasn't in place when he wrote this form. “The genre—if it is a genre—was never about shoulds. It was about taking a chance, giving yourself permission to call something that might be a fragment a right to exist, the way a painter might decide to leave a painting at some point not quite finished, because it interests him more that way,” he says.

Martone thinks along similar lines: “The truth is I really don't think about ‘goodness’ or ‘badness.’ That is the critic's job. The key element for me is not that a piece gets better, but that it gets different. I enter a text with curiosity for what this thing is: Is it a ‘giraffe?’ Is it a ‘lion?’ I don't make a distinction that the lion is better than the giraffe. You might as well ask what are the elements of a ‘good’ mammal? ‘Yes, that groundhog there is looking a bit sketchy,’” he jokes. “No, all pieces are interesting, different, fruitful.”

Submitting to flash fiction magazines

Hundreds of publications are open to flash fiction. What draws so many magazine editors to this form?

For online magazines like Atticus Review, “the online format is better suited to shorter fiction,” says fiction editor Michelle Ross. It makes sense: Bite-size chunks of text in this medium are very reader friendly.

But it's not just about convenience. “I confess to having a special fondness for flash fiction,” Ross says. And so does Sue Walker, editor of Negative Capability Journal. Hers is an enthusiastic welcome: “Flash fiction is the way you fall in love. Someone is sitting at a bar, in a coffee shop, at the corner table in the library. You look up. Eyes meet—and viola. That flash, that momentary gleam in the eye is exciting. It is the promise of what is coming.”

Though flash has its devotees like Ross and Walker, others simply treat flash the way they would any other fictional work.

“The reason to publish flash fiction is the same reason to publish fiction of any length—it takes hold of you and won't let go. I don't treat flash fiction as a special genre of fiction that is exempt from the same qualities that I look for in other short fiction,” says Phong Nguyen, co-editor of Pleiades.

Publishable flash fiction

Nguyen's remark takes us to the question of quality, of excellence. What makes good flash fiction from an editorial standpoint? The criteria come down to compression, language, character, story, and context.

For Ross, publishable flash requires adept handling of the form's restraint. "Good flash fiction is sharp, tight, and precise. It's immediate, cuts to the chase. One unneeded word or wrong word, and the reader's trust in the writer falters. There's great beauty in flash's compression. This compression lends itself to great depth, too. The best flash fiction deals with big ideas, big emotions," she says.

Flash fiction should begin with language that surprises and digs deep, generating narratives that strive toward something other than a last punch or twist.

For Laura Broom, fiction editor of *The Carolina Quarterly*, it's that "immediate impression," that flash is so well known for. There should be no delay, says Broom, "no time or words wasted in diving into the fictional world. Ideally, this brevity should work in tandem with evocative, deliberate language."

For Tara Laskowski, editor of the flash fiction online magazine *Smoke Long Quarterly*, the elements of good flash are covered by the magazine's guidelines. It should begin with language that surprises and digs deep, generating narratives that strive toward something other than a last punch or twist. It should contain pieces that add up to something, often (but not necessarily always) meaning or emotional resonance. And it should be an honest work that feels as if it has far more purpose than a writer simply wanting to write a story.

Good flash, according to Laskowski, situates richly developed characters in a well-delineated setting: "It makes the reader feel like the characters are fully formed people with histories and pasts, in a fully formed world that exists beyond the moment we are experiencing." Walker emphasizes not only strong characterization, but the story as well: "Think inventiveness," she says. "Think surprise. And don't forget the importance of a title that says: Stop. Come in."

"A good flash fiction leads the reader into a world already in full swing—if the story isn't already underway by the first punctuation mark, forget it."

Suggestion of a larger context is important for Nguyen. "This sets it apart from prose poetry in a way—that it renders more than a moment but a world," he says. A strong voice helps accomplish this: "I have a special fondness for strong voice stories but if you can suggest a character through a compelling narrative voice, that goes a long way towards establishing wider context."

Anthony Varallo, fiction editor of *Crazy Horse*, values getting into the heart of the story quickly. "A good flash fiction leads the reader into a world already in full swing—if the story isn't already underway by the first punctuation mark, forget it—and builds to a moment of change or transformation."

In keeping with these standards for strong story development, Varallo lists three key elements of good flash fiction: the first line, the last line, and the title. He points out that these elements must work in tandem "in ways they don't have to in a traditional 5000- to 7000-word story, where you have more room to let the story's impact arise slowly, gradually."

Tara L. Masih is the founding editor of the new annual series *The Best Small Fictions*, which honors the best flash fiction under 1,000 words from journals and presses around the world. She

notes that what is deemed as “good flash,” changes based on historical and cultural context. “If you asked someone of the O. Henry period what a good flash was, they would have insisted on twist endings. Literary writers have gotten away from the twist in the United States, but it is still valued in other countries, such as China. I see many stories come from around the world that don’t fit what we believe is a ‘good flash’ in the States, and our team of mostly U.S. editors must overcome our own prejudices and open up to different formats and approaches to telling a small story.”

Masih says editorial staff must be open to cultural differences. “We try to judge each story on its own merit and use more of an emotional and stylistic rubric: Does the story have power and resonance in a small space? Does each word count? Does the writer offer us something new in terms of language, structure, voice, point of view, punctuation use, worldview? Is it concise (not just short)?” she says.

Unpublishable flash fiction examples

So where can flash fiction go wrong? What kinds of problems do magazine editors note in the slush pile?

“One of the most common mistakes I see in flash submissions,” says Ross, “is that the writing just isn’t tight. The sentences are flabby. The writer wastes words on details that are not important to the piece.” Varallo also rejects manuscripts that “spend the first few lines clearing their throat.” Walker presents another problem related to flabbiness: “A story fails,” she says, “when it falls into explanation, into redundancy.”

Treatment issues can be a problem. For Walker, “A story fails when it preaches or becomes sentimental. This editor leans over and, with a flourish, drops it into the round waiting can.”

Another problem is a failed attempt at ambiguity. According to Nguyen, “It’s very easy to mistake obfuscation for ambiguity when writing a flash fiction story. To suggest a wider context, some writers can fall back instead on vagueness and obscurity.” He turns to Anton Chekhov for clarification: “I think Chekhov’s old saw about the writer being ‘not to solve the problem but to state the problem correctly’ applies here, but some writers forget the second half of that burden, which is to be as sharp and lucid with your prose as possible.”

“As a reader, I want an ending that takes me somewhere—that moves beyond where the story began.”

Lack of development can be another pitfall. “A lot of the stories we get don’t feel like flash,” says Laskowski. “They feel like scenes from a longer work. Or they are short stories cut down to 999 words to meet our guidelines. Or they are just character sketches, with no narrative arc or story.”

Endings can present another problem, says Brown. “As a reader, I want an ending that takes me somewhere—that moves beyond where the story began. A description of a moment without significance is unmemorable, however lovely the language may be.”

Submitting to small presses that publish flash fiction

It's one thing for a magazine to take a few pieces in an issue and another for a book publisher to invest in a volume of flash fiction, whether an anthology or a work by a single author. But there are a fair number of small presses that regularly publish book-length microfiction collections.

Rose Metal Press is one of the leading publishers of flash fiction. The press publishes two full-length books a year and also holds an annual chapbook contest for flash fiction and flash nonfiction, with the winning entry being one of the two genres.

"At RMP, flash is one of our flagship genres, an exciting form that inspired our focus on hybridity and mission to promote innovative writing in the first place," co-founders and editors Abigail Beckel and Kathleen Rooney tell me in a jointly written email. Rose Metal Press's book-length works include the novella-in-flash form, composed of stand-alone pieces that work toward a larger whole—a win-win for both the individual piece and the volume as a whole: "The flash pieces allow for the immediacy and punch associated with flash writing, but they have recurring characters and plot points that connect them to a longer narrative arc," Beckel and Rooney say.

Red Hen Press is another venue for flash fiction. According to editor Kate Gale, the press is "interested in the future of hybrid fiction, especially flash fiction. We've been publishing one book of flash fiction a year, and we hope to continue to do so." Given readers' fleeting attention spans, "flash fiction seems ideal," says Gale.

BOA Editions is also open to flash fiction, though publisher Peter Conners says he doesn't actively seek it: "We publish two fiction collections per year, and if there is a flash fiction collection submitted that stands out among the other submissions, I'm more than happy to publish it."

Creating a flash fiction collection

Unlike magazines and journals that publish individual pieces, a book publisher must decide not only on the integrity of each story but also how it fits in the overall work. So what kinds of unique problems do book publishers see in their submissions?

"Most of the neat tricks that brought flash fiction to our attention in the first place are now old hat. So it's not enough to simply give very good interpretations of flash fiction as you know it," Conners says. "You need to infuse it with something new, something surprising, something that is uniquely your own." He's noted too many manuscripts that show "mastery of the form," but lack anything "singular to that author."

Even if the individual stories pass muster, what about their place in the volume? What must transpire in a book-length work of flash fiction to be publishable?

"The best flash collections can be read more like short story collections—with meaning, symbolism, tension, etc., accruing as one reads deeper."

"With flash collections, you want them to speak to each other across the collection without having them all say the same thing or compete for space," says Conners. "It's very tricky, and it's why there are few flash fiction collections that can sustain compelling interest across a single

reading session. That doesn't mean they're not good—they just need to be read one piece at a time, with breaks in between.”

He adds that a successful volume is a matter of masterful layering. “The best flash collections can be read more like short story collections—with meaning, symbolism, tension, etc., accruing as one reads deeper. Ultimately, you want the reader to end the collection and then start it all over again, feeling compelled to read the early pieces with the gravity and understanding they've accumulated along the way.”

Masih, who mines many single-authored flash collections for Best Small Fictions each year, agrees. “I often feel collections would be more powerful if some filler stories were dropped. Just as each word needs to be important in flash, each story should be important in a collection, so the whole achieves a narrative or emotional arc in order to be memorable. It's easy to recall a novel as you spend hundreds of pages with one story. [It's] harder to recall a flash collection with hundreds of small stories. Better there be fewer, with more quality and resonance.”

Beckel and Rooney note the power of order: “It's common advice, but worth following: a flash collection should open with a super-strong story, one that sets the tone of the whole manuscript and that hooks the reader so they want to keep going and read the entire thing. A weak first story can harm the chances of an otherwise accomplished manuscript.”

As to the matter of overall cohesion, the editors state, “Even if a collection is not linked in terms of plot and characters, per se, we look for stories that are made cohesive by some other aspect: voice, atmosphere, and so on—traits that make it feel as though the stories take place in the same universe and go together because of some over-arching sensibility.”

Books of flash that lack this overall unity risk rejection, say Beckel and Rooney: “If the individual pieces don't have at least some resonance with one another across the whole set, it's hard to want to publish them as a collection.”

Summing up

It's easy to see the appeal of flash for both writers and editors. The form calls for adept handling of language, depth of development, and movement, resulting in richness yet restraint. So much is accomplished in such a short space. Remember, though, to keep in mind Martone's and Dybek's position as well: flash may not be about “should” or “good” and “bad.” Perhaps it serves the writer in finding something new and leaves the question of merit to others.

The Challenge

Select one of these images and write a short piece. We will gather the stories to publish in the next edition of the Blue Ridge Writers journal (April). This technique comes through the writing prompt contest sponsored by Reedsy.com. These descriptors above images are not titles:

Boy running from house toward old Dusseldorf



Three horses cross the bridge



Girl with feral hogs



Slum boys

