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Writing the Short Story



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Creative Writing Made Easy

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Introduction

A short story is a piece of fiction under 20,000 words. More typically, a short story will be 1,000 – 5,000 words. (Pieces under 1,000 words are “short short stories” or “flash fiction”, over 20,000 and they’re novellas.)

Short stories are published in magazines, newspapers and book anthologies. Short stories need:

- A small cast of characters, with one main character
- A compact time frame, with the story taking place over the course of a few days or weeks
- A single plot without subplots, though longer short stories may have a subplot

Most of writing competitions are for complete short stories, rather than novels or novel excerpts. If you do enter competitions, don’t be put off writing if you don’t win – judges have different likes and dislikes.

How to Write a Great Short Story

Like any story, your short story needs to have a beginning, middle and end:

- **The beginning** is where we’re introduced to the characters, especially the main character and his/her problem
- **The middle** is where the action and plot are developed. The main character will face difficulties such as opposition from other people or a challenging environment.
- **The end** is where the main character triumphs over his/her biggest challenge (or fails, in the case of a tragedy). The resolution should be satisfying and conclusive for the reader.

Even in literary and experimental short stories, it’s important that something should happen. Much of the action might take place inside the characters’ heads, but there should be a real change as a result.

By the end of your short story, your main character should have experienced an internal change. This means that they’ve grown and developed as a person – perhaps overcoming a fear or recognizing an unacknowledged truth about himself or herself.

Additional Tips for Writing a Short Story

Structure of Your Short Story

Novice writers are often given this advice on how to structure their short stories:

- Put a man up a tree
- Throw stones at him
- Get him down

When you come to think of it, it's good advice for any writer. So follow the steps in the plan below to start writing great short stories.

Short Story Plan

Start with a situation - a problem to be resolved for your protagonist (the man up the tree).

Then present the problems that can occur (throw some stones):

- Misunderstandings / mistaken identity / lost opportunities etc.

The final step is to show how you can solve the problem - get the man down from his leafy perch - safely.

- Love triumphs / good conquers evil / honesty is the best policy / united we stand

When you've finished writing, always, always proofread your work to check your spelling, punctuation and grammar. Don't spoil all your hard work by presenting an unprofessional image to your readers.

Short Story Theme

Every piece of writing must have a message or thread of meaning running through it, and this theme is the skeleton or framework on which you hang your plot, characters, setting etc.

As you write, make sure that every word is related to this theme. It's tempting to use your short story to show off your talents at characterization, descriptive writing, dialogue or whatever ... But every excess word is a word that dilutes the impact of your story.

The best stories are the ones that follow a narrow subject line. Decide what the point of your story is and even though it's tempting to digress, you must stick to the point otherwise you end up with either a novel beginning or a mish-mash of ideas that add up to nothing.

Time Span for Your Short Story

An effective short story covers a very short time span. It may be one single event that is momentous in the life of your main character or the story may take place in a single day or even an hour. Try to use the events you depict to illustrate your theme.

Setting for Your Short Story

Because you have such a limited number of words to convey your message, you must choose your settings carefully ... there's no room for free-loaders in a short story!

That doesn't mean you have to be trite or predictable when deciding on settings. For example, some of the most frightening settings for thrillers are not cemeteries or lonely alleys, but normal places where readers can imagine themselves.

Appeal to your readers' five senses to make your settings more real.

Characters in Your Short Story

Around three main characters is all a short story can effectively deal with because too many will distract you from your theme.

Don't give in to the urge to provide detailed background on your characters ... decide on the characteristics that are important for your theme and stick

to those. If you fall in love with your character, use him/her as the basis for a novel later.

Short Story Dialogue

Never underestimate the power of dialogue in conveying character, but it must contribute to the main focus of the story - don't just use it to pad out your characters. Every word you put into the mouth of your characters must contribute to revealing your theme ... if it doesn't, be ruthless and cut it.

Plot for Your Short Story

Begin with an arresting first paragraph or lead, enough to grab the readers and make them curious to know what happens next.

Make sure your plot works - there must be a beginning, a middle and an end. But don't spend too much time on the build-up, so that the climax or denouement (as in the twist ending) is relegated to one sentence, leaving the reader bothered and bemused but sadly, not bewitched.

And don't signal the twist ending too soon - try to keep the reader guessing until the last moment.

If you're telling a fast-moving story, say crime, then keep your paragraphs and sentences short. It's a trick that sets the pace and adds to the atmosphere you're conveying to the reader.

Publish Your Short Story

Once you've written your story, you'll want to get it out to your eager public, so you'll need to know how to publish your story.