



A Guide to... writing your first short story

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Some writers say that when they write, they have no idea what will happen next: they just put the character in a tight situation and wait and see what they do. There's nothing wrong with that, but when you're starting writing short stories, you may appreciate a few pointers.

EVERYTHING IS THERE FOR A REASON

Remember that a short story is precisely that: short. You don't have a lot of time and space to tell your story, so everything that goes into this story has to count. There is nothing accidental in a short story. Everything works to push your story forward, and everything is there for a reason: dialogue, description, character, location. They should all work together to give a very focused and punchy story for the reader.

IS THIS RELEVANT?

You need to always remember what story you are telling. Sometimes the urge to elaborate on an irrelevant tangent is too much to resist! From starting a story about a man having an argument with his brother, a writer might suddenly start telling the story of the brother setting up his own business. This is fine if it's essential for us to know this as part of the story, but that's the question to keep asking yourself: Is this relevant? Do we need to know the ins and outs of the brother's grocery business? Remember what story you are telling.

SHORT STORY, SHORT TIME

It's not an absolute rule, but as a new short story writer you might try setting your story in an hour or a day, or a week at the outside.

A favourite short story is about a woman who climbs the stairs in her building, with much difficulty. At the top of the stairs as she talks to her friend she has a realisation she is pregnant. On her way back down she thinks that her life will never be the same. That's the story. If it was a real event it would probably take about half an hour. The great thing is how vividly that whole scene is depicted; a vivid, brief moment in someone's life.

A 'MOMENT OF TRUTH'

A feature of a short story is often a realisation on the part of the main character: a 'moment of truth'. In the story about the woman climbing the stairs, she has a realisation she is pregnant, and sees that her life will never be the same again – she will lose her independence. It doesn't have to be a big realisation or a big moment, just a moment of clarity for the character that the whole story leads up to.

GET STRAIGHT INTO IT

In a short story you don't have time for setting the scene over a number of pages and giving someone's life history. Often, short stories might open straight into a conversation, or into the thick of things. If it's a story about a bank robbery, open the story just as the safe is blown open. Or, you might want to open your story with an intriguing first couple of lines that draw the reader in very quickly. Though it's not a short story, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* has a great beginning that really draws you in: 'Marley was dead, to begin with.'

IT'S ALL IN THE DETAIL

Detail is very important in a short story, but it has to be short, sparing and vivid. You don't have time to describe a person from head to toe, and you don't need to: you can choose a couple of key features about them, or a funny habit they have that says something important. A story I like describes a character's bare, dirty feet with yellowy hard skin, the way he collects grasshoppers in a jar and his smile that is like slowly unfolding paper. These details say certain things about him: he is perhaps a little childlike, untidy and shy, perhaps eccentric.

I WOKE UP AND IT WAS ALL A DREAM...

Whatever your ending, whether you decide to do a 'happy ever after' ending, a twist in the tale, or leave your reader wanting more, it should make sense.

SOME OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The writer has many choices to create feeling in a story. Some of these elements are:

Point of view

Who is speaking? e.g. 'I laugh' 'She laughs' 'Claire laughs' 'They laugh'.

As the writer do you describe everyone's point of view or just one, or two? Each choice will give a particular effect. If you're just giving one point of view, the reader will be naturally inclined to sympathise with that character. If you work through a variety of points of view you give a more balanced, but less intimate, effect.

Dialogue

Is there conversation in your story? Is it 'live' and happening in the moment?

'I'm not happy with this!' shouted Claire and slammed her hand on the fridge door.

Or reported back as having already happened?

Claire said she wasn't happy and she was going to leave.

Are we appearing to hear the character's thoughts, their internal dialogue?

I wondered if I should leave. I wasn't happy.

Setting

How does your story setting reflect the characters and events in the story? This can be anything from the geographical location to the weather to the furniture in a room. In the story about the woman climbing the stairs in her building, the stairs themselves are a journey from which she gains enlightenment when she reaches the top. The hallway and staircase is described as quite dingy and oppressive – perhaps mirroring her mixed feelings about having a baby.

STORY STRUCTURE

The story structure for beginner writers is a bit of a double-edged sword. Some people say they like it because it gives them a map to work to when writing a story, and others dislike the idea of planning out a story in such a formal kind of way because it takes the fun away! It's useful to know, and you can bear it in mind when writing or not: it's up to you.

The following is a basic story structure which shows you how to take a character through to a moment of truth, and then to the end of the story where things are resolved. This is based on the idea that a story is a character's journey of change: conflict makes them realise something, thereby enabling them to become changed in some way.

An example might be this: A young man is a selfish and happy-go-lucky kind of character. This is perhaps established by the story showing us a couple of events when he has fun at the expense of other young people in a local orphanage. This is your beginning.

In these situations he comes into contact with small examples of the main conflict that will challenge him in the story – the main conflict being selfishness versus thoughtfulness and compassion. This section is a bit of necessary action leading to the main action.

These small events also should enable the larger conflict to happen – perhaps the character finding he has a brother at the orphanage he didn't know about, and having to master his selfishness and become more understanding of others. His realisation is that he loves his brother and that he can become a better person. This is the moment of truth.

The story ends with he and his brother setting up in an apartment together. There will probably need to be a bit of necessary action to get to this point – maybe the main character persuading the orphanage authorities he can look after his brother.

A BASIC SHORT STORY STRUCTURE

