

Short and Sweet

Writing it in Three Thousand words. (Or Less)

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Writing short fiction can be just as challenging, if not more challenging, than writing novels. Simply writing less words does not necessarily equate to writing a good short story, and when many writers attempt to write short fiction, they often miss the mark, or end up with either a fragment, a vignette, or a story that feels unfinished.

No matter what length your story, it needs to be complete in its own right. Even a thousand word flash fiction piece needs to have a beginning, a middle and an ending, and ideally a character that changes over the course of the story in some significant way.

Tackling the short story can be baffling and confounding, but it doesn't have to be. By simplifying the process, we will examine one method for approaching the art of the short. Hopefully, it will shed light on the format enough that the writer can discover other methods and learn to appreciate how keeping it short can be as challenging and as rewarding as writing a full-length novel.

THE CONCEPT:

Our first step is to generate a story concept. This is the key idea or jumping off point from which our story will grow. Make sure you approach this step with an experimental attitude and a sense of fun. The more you play with the concept, the more likely that you will discover a hidden gem or idea that seizes your interest fully.

- 1- We start with a story seed. This doesn't need to be a complete sentence, and we should remain loose and work more on sketching a rough idea. Remember that there are two key parts to this step: the story seed + why it's interesting enough to write about or why it matters. Examples. We could write about an astronaut on a dangerous mission...which is a nice seed, but if we want to make it really unusual or interesting, we could make him claustrophobic. A troll might be an interesting character, but it's not a story seed in and of itself. A troll who ends up babysitting however, could spawn some great plot and conflict. The seed is our first peek at what we might want to write about, brainstorm as many as you can think of, and try to make them as unique or interesting as possible. Instead of a story about a soldier, write about a soldier who has helped the enemy or a dragon who is allergic to gold, or a gunfight between blind or geriatric gunslingers. It is the second part of our story seed that makes it uniquely our own.

Write down your selected story seed.

- 2- Once we've selected a story seed that we are happy with, we need to consider theme. This is a full sentence summing up the whole point of the story. What are you telling us *about* the seed? How do you feel about it? Do you have a strong opinion or ideal that can be expressed through the concept, a larger question you can ask, or a theoretical or philosophical dilemma you want to pose? This is "The Point" and it goes a long way toward making our short story rise above just being a string of events with no real substance. Try to avoid cliché themes. "Even a troll can have a heart of gold" has been done. How about, "you can't outrun/fight your inner nature" instead? (meaning the troll babysitting story will go very, very wrong.)

Write down the theme you will use with your chosen seed.

PLOTTING:

The plot of a short story is simplified in some ways from that of the novel. There can be less sub-plots, for one. There is physically less space for in-depth back story, character development and description. Still, all of these things can be done with the judicious use of words and the careful and precise weaving of everything into the plot. Always, the short story writer needs to keep in mind that the tale must be complete, self contained and feel finished. It must have a beginning, middle and end, as well as exhibit a major character change.

- 1- There are many ways to plot a short. For our purpose, we will simplify to the barest bones and use only three plot points: the status quo, the change, and the result. In its smallest form, a story could include only one sentence for each of these, or even combine them into a single sentence. This gives us forms like twitter fiction, drabbles, micro stories, etc. Your story can still be character or plot driven depending on what changes, the universe or your protagonist. Keep in mind that the result of the change should echo or enforce your theme.

Decide on your three plot points. Status quo, change and result.

- 2- **Write Two short lists.** Sketch. Not full sentences. We practiced this when finding our seeds. On the First List write what HAS to go in. Only put things that the story won't make sense without that ALSO completely support your theme. List Two should be for what COULD go in if we end up with words to spare. List One only pertains to the three sentences in your plot points, List Two can have back story, character development, world building, etc. But remember, you can world build in a single sentence: example- After the androids came, they shut down all the MacDonalds. Entire world built.

Three sentence story example:

After the androids came, they shut down all the MacDonalds. Me and Joey sneaked down to the old Jimson Dairy and shot us a cow one night. We got as far as medium rare before we heard the bastards coming for us.

Try your seed and theme as a three sentence or less micro fiction.

EXAMPLE OF PROCESS:

Extrapolate in reverse: seed: two hicks + on a planet invaded by androids. Theme: The average American cares more about his pleasures than his freedom. (ok that's a stretch, ideas?) We've grown too stupid to be heroes? 😊 Plot points: 1/status: androids have taken the planet and ruined all our fun. 2/change: our heroes decide to rebel, by making an illegal burger. 3/the point: our heroes are found out and apprehended or destroyed.

WRITING:

Unless we are sticking with micro fiction, the next step begins the actual short story writing. Try to be loose enough in this stage that the words will flow. It is far better to get the story out and then cut and edit afterwards, than to agonize over putting each word on the page exactly right and never getting to the end. That being said, the three plot points and theme we have chosen will be your road map. If you find that you are veering too far astray from them, attempt to focus the events back toward the story goal or revise the goal/theme along the way.

A short story is a lot like telling a joke. The ending has punch, a surprise or a turn of events that leaves us thinking. A good ending will make our theme resonate in the reader's mind long after the story is over. However, like a good joke, over explaining can ruin the punch line. If it's not on List One at this point, it probably isn't needed on the page. Should you come in under your word count limit, with room to spare, you can always add in what you missed during edits.

I'm offering two methods for hammering out the first draft of your short story. I recommend method one, but realize it will be difficult for a lot of writers.

- 1- First method: Write what's on List One only, and then if you are UNDER your goal count and something on List Two is UNBELIEVABLY WONDERFUL go ahead and add it in. Start with the one thing you like best, prioritize and add till you are happy and STILL UNDER COUNT.
- 2- Second method: Write the story with things from both lists and then cut from List Two until you are under goal. Here's why this is a bad idea: not everyone is good at cutting. Once it's in you get attached to it/can't see why it's not necessary. Also, you could use that extra space for more important things like symbolism. (see below) People who excel at axing their own words still might try this one. However, I find more new authors are very reluctant to chip away at something they've written.

Time to start writing your story in earnest.

THE TRIM:

Sometimes a writer is writing for themselves, and there is no word count limit or cut off. Even so, writing to a specific count is a valuable skill to have and something anyone serious about publishing should practice. Sometimes a market that would be a great fit for your story has strict word caps. If they say nothing above 4000 words, it won't matter one bit if your brilliant short is 4005. You have to make the cuts, and come in under that bar.

Learning what to cut and how to cut is good for improving your prose as well. Tight, sharp writing has impact. It drives home your theme instead of whispering it to the reader. Especially in a short story, learning to trim and tighten is an invaluable skill to master.

Now is the time to take that beautiful story you've just written, and put it through the wood chipper.

- 1- Check your symbols. Did you use an onion or apple for our troll babysitter to snack on? Make sure your images fit the story theme you've chosen. (rotten apple vs. many layered onion) Don't have symbols? Get some. Utilize them in any char description, scene setting, world building or? Symbolism is to the short story like back story, description and things that take up lots of words are for the novel. One strong symbol can do the job of thousands of words.
- 2- Make it artful. Trim extra words. There's no room for adverbs in shorts. Adjectives are optional. Cut for impact! Example: The android's wheels clicked repeatedly, making the hair on his arms stand on end. (13 words) CUT "The clicking android wheels lifted his arm hair. (8 words) It helps to sing the "Kill the Wabbit" song during this phase, or play anything that makes you feel slightly violent and/or homicidal.
- 3- Repeat as necessary. Sometimes if you've run over it takes several passes to trim all the fat. Every single word you can cut helps. If you've run under, put things in very sparingly, one at a time and then trim THEM for extraneous wordage.

Practice cutting the fat. Glean at least twenty words from your first page.

HAVE FUN IN ONLY A FEW PAGES

Don't let yourself get frustrated if your first few short stories don't nail the gold. Writing short stories is hard. There is no correlation between length and quality or difficulty, and a lot of fantastic novel writers never master the art of writing short.

That being said, many of them could also use to learn how to minimize, sharpen and bring home a theme. The short story is a brilliant medium for practicing all of those things. Even if you have no long term hopes of writing short fiction, it is a great way to work your writerly muscles, to learn focus and economy when word slinging, and I recommend at least using regular short writing as a form of literary exercise or yoga to keep your prose limber and strong.

If you enjoy it, and your short stories shine, they are also a great way to get your words and your name into the world in a lot of diverse places and in front of a lot of different eyes.

Write on....and trim, trim, trim!