

Short story writing key tips

General thoughts

- 1) Short doesn't always = simple. Complex concepts are good.
- 2) Intriguing hook/intro + Dramatic conflict + Scintillating/unexpected conclusion
- 3) Find ways to make an old/well-hashed story concept fresh and original with interesting settings, unusual characters, and subverted expectations.
- 4) A short story focuses on a single event that reveals something unknown about the character, or changes the character in some way.
- 5) Keep to within a short time-frame – this reduces Telling and gives a more immersive read.
- 6) Stand-alone shorts need to be self-contained (not requiring the reader to read a full series to understand). Reader magnet shorts can link in with a larger series (but should still work as stand-alones for content purposes – they should still make sense)
- 7) Short stories are normally character-driven, rather than external plot-driven.
- 8) Think about what emotion you want your reader to feel as they read the story.

STORY STRUCTURE

- 1) Follow conventional story structure (although you can't include every beat a novel has). A short story will often start at or even after the inciting incident. At the least, it must include conflict, rising action, climax. (very rarely denouement). The climax is usually a choice by the character or the revelation about the character.
- 2) Try not to use flashbacks if possible – there's no space for slowing the action or dissolving tension.
- 3) Continually raise tension, never dissolve it. Analyse each scene to make sure it's raising tension.
- 4) Every scene/action/moment in the story should be causal/closely tied to causing the final, climactic event and character change/reveal moment. I.e: every event causes the next event which leads inevitably to the climax+change/reveal.
- 5) The climactic choice/revelation will be stronger if the character changes, makes a choice that reveals something about the character, AND also chooses an action.

Beginning

- 1) Before you start, know what the crucial, key thing is that you want to reveal about your character in the story. Or what important thing changes them, and how. AND what the climactic moment is that changes or reveals the character. That's your endpoint to work towards.
- 2) Also know what thematic principle you're exploring. Are you trying to say something about social conditioning, or do you need to explore how people handle trauma. What's the core concept around which the story is wrapped?
- 3) Know what the opposing forces are to the character achieving the goal. Societal (environment/government/big-scale stuff), Interpersonal (conflict with other people), or Internal (conflict with themselves)
- 4) Decide on the tone – light or dark, humorous, or bleak. And stick with that tone throughout – set your reader expectation at the beginning and don't disappoint by changing partway through.

- 5) We should know, within the first 10%, who the POV character IS, what they WANT, the setting, and what the core conflict is.

Character and Dialogue

- 6) Stick to one person's POV only and use few characters. Choose the character who will be most-changed by the event as your POV character.
- 7) The character should WANT something. And we need to know WHY they want it.
- 8) You can do a lot of characterisation and development using dialogue. You can often use a killer opening dialogue to both show character and hook the reader.
- 9) Reveal enough about the character to make the climax/big reveal/choice moment impactful. But generally not as much as you would reveal in a novel about a character. Share key, interesting, crucial details that give insight into who the character is. Choose a few, specific points.
- 10) The character should act/decide, not be acted upon/be passive.
- 11) Try to find things about the character that surprises us. Subvert expectations. Make the choice at the end a surprising choice.

SETTING

- 12) Choose a really unusual setting. See how the characters interact with that setting and how that affects character relationships and the conflict. Use setting to help set mood and tone.
- 13) Pick out key details of the setting only – just enough to set the scene without going overboard. Leave the rest to the reader imagination. But be specific eg: 'Pine trees, not just trees' or 'stampeding zebras' not 'stampeding herdbeasts'. Specificity creates stronger images.
- 14) Show what the character thinks is important by describing what they see in the scene (different people will see/prioritise different things in any given setting, depending on what they are thinking about/worried about)

WORD CHOICES

- 15) The title should be more than a single-word one. Consider it the opening hook to entice your reader and make it interesting.
- 16) The opening line should be an intriguing hook sentence that draws your reader on. Start with the MOST interesting moment and setting you possibly can.
- 17) Make every word important and give the sentences rhythm and cadence – read them aloud and listen for the smooth rhythm.
- 18) Use metaphors, symbolism, similes, alliteration, allusion etc, and other poetic devices to deepen and strengthen the emotional impact.
- 19) Be ruthless in your editing – make every word count. Remove all filler and filter words. Make sure you most-specific nouns and verbs that evoke the strongest emotions.