

Editing a Short Story

Stage 1: Check for Show, Not Tell

Read your work for this one point: mark where you are telling and where you are showing the reader. It isn't black and white - don't struggle over small distinctions.

Are there places where you have told, when it would have been better to have shown?

Rewrite them. If you are not clear about showing and telling, you may want to include a question in the workshop about the use of showing and telling in your story.

Stage 2: Check what is Summary and what is Scene?

Read your work for this one point: what is summary, and what is scene? Again, these are not clear paragraph-by-paragraph distinctions.

Stage 3: Check on Detail

Read your work for this one point. What details do you use, about character, place, gestures etc? Are they clear and specific? 'Muesli and yoghurt' is a lot different from 'breakfast'. 'Fried eggs with tomato sauce' is different again

Stage 4: Check Beginnings and Endings

Often when we write a story, we don't begin it in the best place. It's always worth going back and looking at the beginning of a story, and asking ourselves if this is the best place to start. Often the best place to start is further into the story.

Endings are harder. Workshops can be very valuable in considering endings. An ending certainly doesn't need to tie the story off neatly, but it needs to be satisfying. Often the ending offers the small insight or discovery of the story.

Read the beginning of your story and ask yourself, is this the best place to begin? Can the order of the first few paragraphs be changed to provide a better beginning?

Read the ending. Is it satisfying to you? (Thinking about the beginning of the story, or what the story is really about, can help with the ending.)

Rewrite the beginning and ending of your story, if necessary.

Stage 5: Check for a sense of Place

'Nothing happens nowhere'. Not every story has a sense of physical place, but sometimes we simply overlook it. A sense of place can be created with very few well-chosen details, or in much more detail. This sense of place helps to create the world of the story.

In a short story, every part of the story works towards the story itself. This is equally true of place.

Stage 6: Check on Theme

We've already seen how the theme of a story often emerges after the story has been written. Often it's in the revising that one comes to see what the story is really about.

Ask yourself the question, what is your story really about? Stanley Elkin, an American writer and creative writing teacher, suggests that you should write what the story means in one sentence; others would disagree with that approach. Use what works for you.

Whichever way you do it, use that clearer understanding of what the story is really about to revise the story; sometimes this can be a matter of large cutting and rewriting, but sometimes it can involve very small changes that subtly sharpen the focus of the story.

Revise your story as necessary

Stage 7: Check on Dialogue

Writers tend naturally to use dialogue or not. If you tend not to use dialogue, a challenge might be to try deliberately writing dialogue, to add it to your range of possibilities.

Generally we think of dialogue as direct speech. Understanding the distinction between summary dialogue, indirect dialogue and direct dialogue can be very useful. Consider also what punctuation you will use, and that your use has been consistent throughout.

Read your work, and note how you use dialogue. If you don't use it, consider whether some parts of the story might be better in dialogue. Or if you do, is the dialogue significant? Does it sound natural? Reading dialogue aloud is a very useful exercise. Are there places where dialogue would be better summarised?

Revise your story as necessary

Stage 8: Check on Character

After you've written a first draft of a story, it can be very fruitful to go back and think again about the characters.

Choose the main character from a story of yours. Think carefully about that character, and make a note of any additional details or any details that change.

Now go back to the story and read it again, with those possible additions or changes in mind.

From the other side – a reader response

If you are responding to a story, and want to make your criticism constructive and helpful to the writer, here are some questions you might like to ask yourself that will help you to shape your comments most usefully:

What kind of story is it?

What is the story about, that is, what is it really about?

What movement or change occurs in the story?

What happens to the point of view/person in this story?

Does the reader have a sense of the main character or narrator's voice?

Is the dialogue credible?

Is the ending satisfactory?

What does this story make me feel?

What works well in this story?