

Writing a Short Story

The Short Story Definitions

- A short story concentrates on a single facet of human nature.
- A short story illustrates a moment of change or understanding.
- The essence of a short story is conflict.
- There must be a direct link between that conflict and the moment of change.

Plot

- Plot springs from character.
- Ideas are all around you - let them develop and extend.
- Use triggers - real-life situations, the letters page, fairy tales, pictures, nouns, etc.
- Keep an 'ideas book' - your writer's journal, or work-in-progress.
- Keep plots simple.

Structure

- Start your story as near the end as possible.
- Grab your reader's attention from the beginning.
- Don't let your story sag in the middle - keep the pace going with suspense.
- Express the character's change/ response subtly throughout, so that it doesn't come abruptly at the end.
- Use plants - indicators that your reader can pick up on.
- Keep the story concise by using bridges and flashback where necessary.
- In double-conflict stories, the second conflict must always stem from and be greater than the first.
- End your story as soon as possible after the moment of change.

Viewpoint

- Decide who is the main character (i.e. the person undergoing a change) and tell the story through the eyes of that character.
- Keep to one viewpoint only throughout your story.
- Don't be afraid to break these rules - but only with good reason.

Characterisation

- The character(s) give you the story.
- Know your character - if you can't picture them, neither will your reader.
- Don't give names to bit-part characters.
- Keep numbers to a minimum - don't introduce irrelevant characters.
- Don't overdo physical description - pick out one or two features, and make them memorable.
- Use clothes as a statement of character.
- Use movement, mannerisms and tricks of speech to establish character.
- Spread characteristics throughout the story.

Dialogue

- Use dialogue whenever possible, but keep it crisp. Leave out unnecessary chit-chat.
- Use dialogue as characterisation, by letting each character speak differently.
- Use abbreviations, colloquialisms and poor grammar - if it is right for your character.
- Break speech to give added emphasis.
- Weave dialogue in with action to help the flow.
- Keep any dialect 'low profile'.
- 'Listen' to your character's voice in your head before transferring it to the page.

Names & Titles

In naming your characters consider:

- what kind of person the name suggests to you;
- the character's age;
- the period in which the story is set;
- the character's background and parentage;
- fashionable 'bulges' (like Jack and Chloe for the 1990s);
- region or nationality.

Don't forget to check out unusual names or titles which could belong to real people.

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