

HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY

Lesson Objective

In this lesson, you will learn how to write a short story. You'll also learn tips for keeping your writing clear and concise. After all, a short story is supposed to be short!

Did you know...

Many professional writers cut adjectives and adverbs out of their stories.

Warm-Up

A. Writing Warm-Up

A good story must have conflict. The more trouble your main character has, the more interested your reader will be. Get out a piece of paper and write a list of problems that can happen to a main character.

1. Exchange papers with a classmate.
2. Read your classmate's list. Put a * beside the three problems that you find the most interesting. Put an X beside any problem that you wrote on your own list.
3. Chat with your classmate about the most interesting problems on both of your lists.

B. Vocabulary Preview

Match these words to their correct definitions.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| _____ 1. modifier | a) written about the human condition, e.g., social or political issues |
| _____ 2. theme | b) the main message or subject matter |
| _____ 3. hook | c) causing a person to feel interested |
| _____ 4. literary | d) a small problem or negative trait |
| _____ 5. intriguing | e) a device that attracts the reader's attention |
| _____ 6. flaw | f) to slowly come undone |
| _____ 7. trait | g) short and simple |
| _____ 8. unravel | h) unnecessarily repetitive |
| _____ 9. concise | i) a specific characteristic or feature |
| _____ 10. redundant | j) a word that changes or adds to the meaning of another word |

What Is a Short Story?

A short story is a short, fictional piece of writing. It may be based on real people and inspired by real events, or it could be created entirely from the writer's imagination.

A short story has all of the following:

- a plot (beginning, middle, end)
- conflict
- a theme or purpose
- a main character
- one or a few minor characters (usually)
- a setting
- a climax
- a satisfying ending

A. Fictional Genres

Before you write your first few sentences, you may want to think about a genre. Some short stories are classified as "literary." In literary fiction, the author wants to express a point about humanity.

Here are some other fictional genres.

Can you and your teacher think of any others?

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------|
| • children's story | • humor | • _____ |
| • detective story | • horror | • _____ |
| • fable or myth | • mystery | • _____ |
| • fairytale | • science fiction | • _____ |
| • fantasy | • spy story | • _____ |
| • historical fiction | • thriller | |

B. Length

Unlike a novel, a short story is something that you usually read in *one sitting*. Some short stories are only a few hundred words. Longer short stories may be a few thousand words. In this lesson, you will write a short story that is about 500 words long.

Task 1

In a small group, discuss which fictional genres you find most interesting. Discuss why you like a certain genre. Classify some of your favorite stories, novels, movies, and TV shows into different genres.

Parts of a Short Story

A. The Opening (aka the Narrative Hook)

*“A short story is like a chess game:
The opening is a huge part of
whether you win or lose.”*

—Charles Jane Anders

A good story hooks the reader in the first few sentences. You want your reader to become curious about a character, place, or event right away.

- a unique character trait
- a mysterious setting
- an unexpected situation
- an interesting narrator
- a major problem

To the right are a few ideas for hooking a reader. Can you think of any other ideas? You may want to read some short stories to see what other authors do.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Examples

Read the following openings and discuss which are the most intriguing to you, and why.

1. *Simon had so many brothers that even his own mother forgot his name.*
2. *No one had lived in the cottage by the mushroom field for over 50 years.*
3. *Carey reached down to pet her new kitten, and was astonished to hear it bark.*
4. *The widower blamed his dead wife for everything, including his missing car keys.*
5. *I’ve been known to stretch the truth when it comes to my adventures as a zookeeper. But this time, I swear everything that I’m about to describe is true.*
6. *Three minutes before Allan was due to marry Barbara, he began to think about Louisa May Chariot, his first love.*

Task 2

In your notebook, write three to five openings (1 or 2 sentences for each) for different short stories. Use the examples above to write a good hook.

Show your sentences to a partner. Which opening does your partner find the most intriguing? If a story followed, which genre would each opening belong to?

Parts of a Short Story cont.

B. The Characters

Good stories almost always have memorable characters. What makes a character memorable? Below are some traits. Can you think of more?

- has a big problem to deal with
 - has an odd habit or mannerism
 - has an interesting viewpoint on life
 - is a villain with a soft side
 - is a hero with a flaw
- _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____

DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTERS

In a short story, you don't have a lot of space to develop your characters. Use a small cast of characters, such as one main character and one to three supporting or minor characters. Here are some tips:

- choose memorable names that aren't too close to other characters
- know each character's main goal
- know each character's main fear
- give each character a memorable physical trait
- give each character a memorable non-physical trait

MAKING YOUR CHARACTERS COME ALIVE

Many authors interview their own characters during the writing process. Here are some questions you can ask the main characters in your stories.

- Who is your best friend?
- Who is your worst enemy?
- What is your worst childhood memory?
- Which superhero or fairytale character are you most like?
- What is your most unique physical trait?
- What is your best talent?
- What are you most afraid of?
- Where do you feel happiest?
- Who do you admire?

Task 3

Think about the most memorable characters from stories, movies, and TV shows. What physical and mental/emotional traits did they have? What were their goals and fears?

Task 4

Choose one character from an opening that you wrote on page 3. If none of your openings include a character, write another opening that does. Now, interview this person with the questions provided. In your notebook, write down any answers that come to your mind.

Parts of a Short Story cont.

C. The Plot (aka Conflict and Suspense)

The plot of your story unravels as your main character faces and resolves his/her problems. The more problems, the better!

A VERY BAD DAY

One way to create conflict in a short story is to write an outline for a very bad day. Read the outline that was inspired by the following opening from page 3:

Simon had so many brothers that even his own mother forgot his name.

1. First, Simon realized it was raining on his birthday.
2. Then, nobody wished him a happy birthday at the breakfast table.
3. After that, Simon's mom gave his oldest brother Jack a birthday gift.
4. Next, Jack realized the mistake, but didn't correct his mother.
5. Meanwhile, Simon's dad came home and gave Simon trouble for interrupting Jack's birthday song.
6. Just then, the sun came out and Simon got sent to his room.
7. Next, Simon's brothers all started playing with Jack's new kite.
8. After that, Simon decided to jump out the window and run to his grandparents' house (They weren't home because they had gone to the birthday party.)
9. Later, Simon's grandparents asked where the birthday boy was.
10. Eventually, Simon's family realized the mistake. (Jack was sent to his room.)
11. Finally, Simon spotted a kite in the air that said, *Happy Birthday, Simon. Please come home.*

Task 5

Use the model above to write about a very bad day for your own character. Use the character you interviewed in Task 4. Complete the sentences in your notebook using the prompts to the right.

A VERY BAD DAY FOR _____

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. First, ... | 5. Meanwhile, ... | 9. Later, ... |
| 2. Then, ... | 6. Just then, ... | 10. Eventually, ... |
| 3. After that, ... | 7. Next, ... | 11. Finally, ... |
| 4. Next, ... | 8. After that, ... | |

If you get stuck, ask yourself this question: *And then what happened?*

Parts of a Short Story cont.

D. A Happy (or at least Hopeful) Ending

Almost all stories have a happy ending for the main character. After reading about pain, loss, death, sadness, disappointment, and other hardships, the reader deserves some happiness or hope.

Most importantly, readers want *good* to win over *evil*. This doesn't mean that the main character gets everything he or she wants. (In fact, your main character might die.) It does mean that the conflict gets resolved in one way or another. The reader should feel satisfied.

Comprehension

What have you learned so far?

Answer and discuss these questions in pairs or as a class.

1. What type of fictional genres can you list?
2. What is a narrative hook?
3. What must happen to a main character in a short story?
4. What useful technique can writers use to make characters come alive?
5. How do short stories usually end, and why?

Task 6

Discuss your favorite stories and movies in a group. How did these stories end? What caused the reader or audience to feel satisfied? Do you think all stories should have happy endings?

Storyteller's Viewpoint

Some short stories are written from a **first-person** perspective:

- *I had a bad day.*

Some short stories are written from a **third-person** perspective:

- *Simon had a bad day.*

Very few short stories are written from a **second-person** viewpoint:

- *You had a bad day.*

Concise Writing

A. 5 Tips for Concise Writing

You can make your writing stronger by removing unnecessary words. Here are 5 tips:

#	Tip	Example
1	Remove informal adverbs. (kind of, sort of, actually, totally)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was actually surprised that he arrived on time.
2	Reword negative sentences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She wasn't ever on time on Mondays. She was always late on Mondays.
3	Delete redundant adjectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The youngest girl won a free gift.
4	Delete redundant intensifiers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The dogs were really exhausted.
5	Edit wordy sentences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In spite of the fact that there was a total of six kids in the minivan, they had a really great trip. Although there were six kids in the minivan, they had a great trip.

B. Practice

Read each sentence and identify the problem(s).
Rewrite the sentences in a clear and concise way in the space provided.

1. All in all, there were eight people in my family.

3. In the course of her life, she had three best friends.

5. Due to the fact that it was after 12 midnight when we arrived, the kids slept on the couch.

2. We went to the police station on two separate occasions.

4. It is absolutely impossible to get the in-laws to cooperate together.

6. In the event that the alarm goes off, remove the battery.

Sample Short Story

Read the sample short story and discuss it with your class. How do you feel when the story ends? What's the theme of this story? How has the main character changed?

Writing Tip

Use variety in your sentence length to help your writing flow.

ANNIE'S KEY

The widower blamed his wife for everything, including his missing car key.

"She probably took it to the grave with her," Barney said to his daughter Meg, who was always the first person Barney called when he had bad news.

It had been three months since Annie's death, and not a single thing had gone right for Barney. On the day of the funeral, it had been so stormy that Annie's ashes had blown back as Barney tried to toss them into the sea. *This was her idea*, Barney had said as the other family members brushed themselves off. *She probably told the wind to blow.*

In the weeks after Annie's death, things got worse for Barney. His dog went missing. *You left the side door open again, didn't you Annie?* His drain clogged. *Did you dump your stew in the sink again?* When the power went out for three days, he blamed her too. *Why did you buy so much food? Look at all this waste, Annie!*

The day Barney lost his key, he huffed and puffed and tore about his house. This wasn't just any old key. It was one of those smart keys that unlocked the car door as soon as you got close to it. Annie had loved how Barney could turn on the car by pressing the start button beside the steering wheel even if the key was in her purse.

After days of searching, Barney went to the car dealer to buy a replacement. The man at the parts

department gave the widower some more bad news. "I hate to tell you this, but these smart keys aren't cheap," he told Barney. "They're about \$400 a piece."

"\$400!" Barney shouted. "That's plain stupid!"

Barney left in a huff and went home to call Meg.

"Go to the bank and get a loan, Dad," she suggested. "That's what Mom would do."

Barney knew his daughter was right, but he did not want to spend \$400 on a stupid key. He hung up the phone without saying goodbye.

"I need a loan," Barney told the bank manager another week later. "I lost my car key and it's going to cost \$400 for a replacement. Oh, and by the way, I also lost my wife."

Barney and his wife had been customers at this bank for over 20 years. The bank manager was sad to hear about Annie. He stared out at the parking lot for a moment before he replied.

"Your wife was always so thoughtful," the manager said. "She's the only customer I've ever known who wrote thank-you notes to the bank. She thanked us for helping her buy your first house. She thanked us for helping you pay for your daughter's tuition. She even thanked us for helping her buy you that fancy car. She couldn't wait to surprise you with it."

Sample Short Story cont.

"So are you going to give me the loan, or what?" Barney asked.

The bank manager nodded and reached for the forms. "By the way, how did you get to the bank today, Barney?" he asked.

"I drove," Barney said. "How else?"

"So, you have a spare key?"

"If I had a spare key, why would I be asking you for a loan? Annie said we only needed one key. Annie didn't drive, you know. I drove Annie everywhere. "

The bank manager couldn't help but giggle. Annie had recently confessed that she loved her husband dearly even though he drove her up the wall.

"Say, Barney. If you drove here, that fancy key must be nearby. Could it be in your pocket?"

"What do you think I am, stupid?" Barney asked.

He pulled his pockets out to show the bank manager that they were empty.

"May I take a look in your car?" the bank manager asked. He stood up without waiting for an answer.

"Don't waste your time," Barney said. "You're a busy man."

But of course it was not a waste of time. It only took a moment for the manager to locate the missing key in the space between the driver and passenger seat.

"That's usually where Annie puts her purse." Barney said. *And her elbow*, he thought.

Barney snatched the key out of the bank manager's hands and shook his head. Then he huffed and puffed and drove away. When he got home, he called Meg to tell her the news. He couldn't help but giggle.

That night Barney sat at his wife's desk and wrote his first thank-you note.

Write Your Own Short Story

Create and write your own short story. You can use the brainstorming you did on page 5. Your story should be between 300–1,000 words. After you write your story, remove any unnecessary words or phrases. Then review the checklist on the following page and share your story with a classmate and your teacher.

A Checklist

AFTER WRITING YOUR FIRST DRAFT

- ☐ Does my story have an interesting opening?
- ☐ Do I have a small cast of characters?
- ☐ Does my story have a genre?
- ☐ Does my main character have a goal?
- ☐ Does my main character face many problems?
- ☐ Can I remove any extra words and details?
- ☐ Will my reader be satisfied with my ending?
- ☐ Did I proofread my story for spelling and grammar mistakes?

My First Reader

Exchange your story with a classmate. Ask your classmate to read your story at home. Then have a short chat about it. What did he or she like about your story? What suggestions did he or she have? Summarize your classmate's thoughts about your story.

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