

What is a Short Story?

A short story:

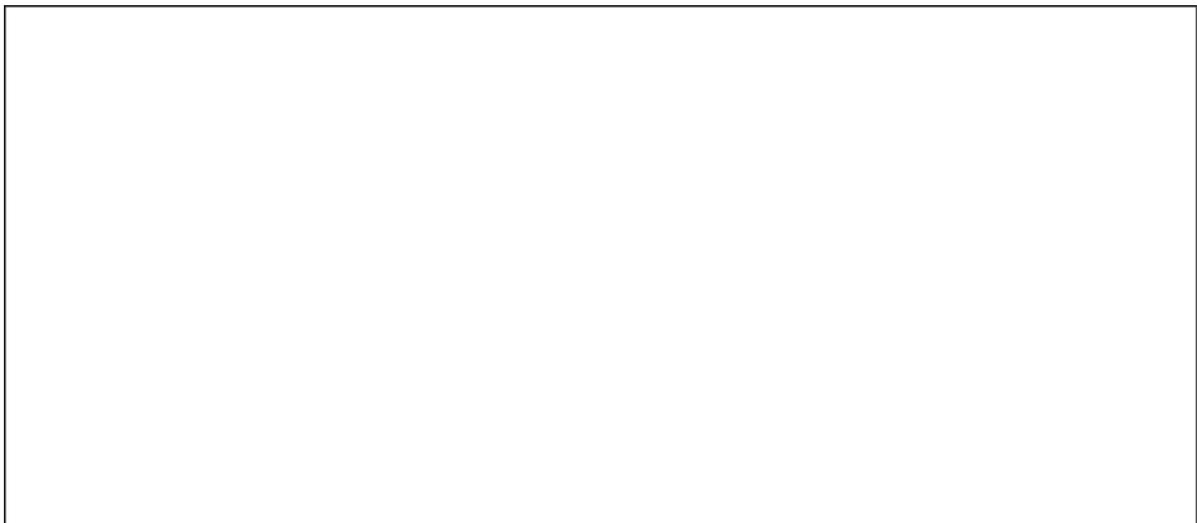
- Gets off to a fast start.
- Generally has a limited number of characters and scenes.
- Starts as close to the conclusion as possible.
- Frequently deals with only one problem.
- Uses only the detail necessary for understanding the situation.
- Usually covers just a short time period.

1. Get Started: Emergency Tips

If you are having trouble getting started, look out the window. The whole world is a story, and every moment is a miracle.

-Bruce Taylor, UWEC Professor of Creative Writing

- **Make lists.** Sketch out the characters, plot, emotional tone, and so forth -- without slowing down to organize your ideas into sentences and paragraphs. You might list things you associate with school, sensations you feel that make you happy, or people that you admire. A story starts to develop around your list, and if you change the words around (which will be a lot easier than moving complete sentences and paragraphs around), the idea of the story begins to change too.
- **Develop a list of events.** Think about distressing, unusual, or difficult periods in your own life. Pick some of these events and write a paragraph about each one.
- **Try clustering.** Choose a word that is your main subject, write it in the middle of the page and circle it. For a few minutes, free-associate by writing around your main word any word that comes to mind--action, image, part of speech, or abstraction. Circle the words you have written and draw lines and arrows between words that seem connected.



2. Write a Catchy First Paragraph

In today's fast-moving world, the first sentence of your short story should catch your reader's attention with the **unusual**, the **unexpected**, an **action**, or a **conflict**. Begin with tension and immediacy. Remember that short stories need to start close to their end.

 I heard my neighbor through the wall.

Dry and uninteresting.

 The neighbor behind us practiced scream therapy in his shower almost every day.

The second sentence catches the reader's attention. Who is this guy who goes in his shower every day and screams? Why does he do that? What, exactly, *is* "scream therapy"? Let's keep reading...

 The first time I heard him, I stood in the bathroom listening at our shared wall for ten minutes, debating the wisdom of calling the police. It was very different from living in the duplex over middle-aged Mr. and Mrs. Brown and their two young sons in Duluth.

The rest of the paragraph introduces *I* and an internal conflict as the protagonist debates a course of action and introduces an intriguing contrast of past and present setting.

"It is important to understand the basic elements of fiction writing before you consider how to put everything together. This process is comparable to producing something delectable in the kitchen--any ingredient that you put into your bowl of dough impacts your finished loaf of bread. To create a perfect loaf, you must balance ingredients baked for the correct amount of time and enhanced with the right polishing glaze." -*Laurel Yourke*

3. Developing Characters

Your job, as a writer of short fiction--whatever your beliefs--is to put complex personalities on stage and let them strut and fret their brief hour. Perhaps the sound and fury they make will signify something that has more than passing value--that will, in Chekhov's words, "make [man] see what he is like." -*Rick Demarnus*

In order to develop a living, breathing, multi-faceted character, it is important to **know way more about the character than you will ever use in the story**. Here is a partial list of character details to help you get started.

- Name
- Age
- Job
- Ethnicity
- Appearance
- Residence
- Pets
- Religion
- Hobbies
- Single or married?
- Children?
- Temperament
- Favorite color
- Friends
- Favorite foods
- Drinking patterns
- Phobias
- Faults
- Something hated?
- Secrets?
- Strong memories?
- Any illnesses?
- Nervous gestures?
- Sleep patterns

Imagining all these details will help you get to know your character, but your reader probably won't need to know much more than the **most important things in four areas**:

- **Appearance.** Gives your reader a visual understanding of the character.
- **Action.** Show the reader what kind of person your character is, by describing actions rather than simply listing adjectives.
- **Speech.** Develop the character as a person -- don't merely have your character announce important plot details.
- **Thought.** Bring the reader into your character's mind, to show them your character's unexpressed memories, fears, and hopes.

For example, let's say I want to develop a college student persona for a short story that I am writing. What do I know about her?

Her name is Jen, short for **Jennifer Mary Johnson**. She is **21 years old**. She is a fair-skinned **Norwegian** with **blue eyes**, long, curly **red hair**, and is **5 feet 6 inches tall**. Contrary to typical redheads, she is actually **easygoing and rather shy**. She loves **cats** and has two of them named Bailey and Allie. She is a **technical writing major** with a minor in biology. Jen **plays the piano** and is an **amateur photographer**. She lives in the **dorms** at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She **eats pizza** every day for lunch and loves Red Rose **tea**. She **cracks her knuckles** when she is nervous. Her mother just committed suicide.

4. Choose a Point of View

Point of view is the narration of the story from the perspective of **first, second, or third person**. As a writer, you need to determine who is going to tell the story and how much information is available for the narrator to reveal in the short story. The narrator can be directly involved in the action **subjectively**, or the narrator might only report the action **objectively**.

- **First Person.** The story is told from the view of "**I**." The narrator is either the **protagonist** (main character) and directly affected by unfolding events, or the narrator is a **secondary character** telling the story revolving around the

protagonist. This is a good choice for beginning writers because it is the easiest to write.

- ☑ I saw a tear roll down his cheek. I had never seen my father cry before. I looked away while he brushed the offending cheek with his hand.
- **Second Person.** The story is told directly to "**you**", with the reader as a participant in the action.
 - ☑ You laughed loudly at the antics of the clown. You clapped your hands with joy.
(See also Jerz on [interactive fiction](#).)
- **Third Person.** The story tells what "**he**", "**she**," or "**it**" does. The third-person narrator's perspective can be *limited* (telling the story from one character's viewpoint) or *omniscient* (where the narrator knows everything about all of the characters).
 - ☑ He ran to the big yellow loader sitting on the other side of the gravel pit shack.
- Your narrator might take sides in the conflict you present, might be as transparent as possible, or might advocate a position that you want your reader to challenge (this is the "unreliable narrator" strategy).
- **First Person.** "Unites narrator and reader through a series of secrets" when they enter one character's perceptions. However, it can "lead to [telling](#)" and limits readers connections to other characters in the short story.
- **Second Person.** "Puts readers within the actual scene so that readers confront possibilities directly." However, it is important to place your characters "in a tangible environment" so you don't "omit the details readers need for clarity."
- **Third Person Omniscient.** Allows you to explore all of the characters' thoughts and motivations. Transitions are extremely important as you move from character to character.
- **Third Person Limited.** "Offers the intimacy of one character's perceptions." However, the writer must "deal with character absence from particular scenes."

5. Write Meaningful Dialogue

Make your readers hear the pauses between the sentences. Let them see characters lean forward, fidget with their cuticles, avert their eyes, uncross their legs. -*Jerome Stern*

Dialogue is what your characters **say** to each other (or to themselves).

Each speaker gets his/her own paragraph, and the paragraph includes whatever you wish to say about what the character is doing when speaking.

- ✗ "Where are you going?" John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. "To the racetrack." Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head. "Not again," John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."
The above paragraph is confusing, because it is not clear when one speech stops and the other starts.



"Where are you going?" John asked nervously.

"To the racetrack," Mary said, trying to figure out whether John was too upset to let her get away with it this time.

"Not again," said John, wondering how they would make that month's rent. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

The second example is mechanically correct, since it uses a separate paragraph to present each speaker's turn advancing the conversation. But the narrative material between the direct quotes announces for the reader's benefit exactly what each quoted passage means. The result is a dry passage that does not engage the reader. Why bother to think about what is going on when the author is so busy telling you exactly what each line means?

Let's return to the first example, and show how paragraphs can affect the meaning of the passage.



"Where are you going?" John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor.

"To the racetrack." Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head.

"Not again," John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

In the above revision, John nervously asks Mary where she is going, and Mary seems equally nervous about going.

But if you play a little with the paragraphing..



"Where are you going?"

John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. "To the racetrack."

Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head. "Not again."

John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

All I changed was the paragraphing (and I changed a comma to a period.)

Now Mary seems more aggressive -- she seems to be moving to block John, who seems nervous and self-absorbed. And John seems to be bringing up the credit card problem as an excuse *for* his trip to the racing track. He and Mary seem to be desperate to for money now. I'd rather read the rest of the second story than the rest of the first one.

6. Use Setting and Context

Setting moves readers most when it contributes to an organic whole. So close your eyes and picture your characters within desert, jungle, or suburb--whichever setting shaped them. Imagining this helps balance location and characterization. Right from the start, view your characters inhabiting a distinct place. -- *Laurel Yourke*

Setting includes the **time, location, context, and atmosphere** where the plot takes place.

- Remember to **combine setting with characterization and plot**.
- **Include enough detail** to let your readers picture the scene but only details that actually add something to the story. (For example, do not describe Mary locking the front door, walking across the yard, opening the garage door, putting air in her bicycle tires, getting on her bicycle--none of these details matter except that she rode out of the driveway without looking down the street.)
- Use **two or more senses** in your descriptions of setting.

- Rather than feed your readers information about the weather, population statistics, or how far it is to the grocery store, **substitute descriptive details** so your reader can experience the location the way your characters do.

✔ Our sojourn in the desert was an educational contrast with its parched heat, dust storms, and cloudless blue sky filled with the blinding hot sun. The rare thunderstorm was a cause for celebration as the dry cement tunnels of the aqueducts filled rapidly with rushing water. Great rivers of sand flowed around and through the metropolitan inroads of man's progress in the greater Phoenix area, forcefully moved aside for concrete and steel structures. Palm trees hovered over our heads and saguaro cactuses saluted us with their thorny arms.

7. Set Up the Plot

Plot is what happens, the storyline, the action. Jerome Stern says it is how you set up the situation, where the turning points of the story are, and what the characters do at the end of the story.

A plot is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance. -*Jane Burroway*

Understanding these story elements for developing actions and their end results will help you plot your next short story.

- **Explosion or "Hook."** A thrilling, gripping, stirring event or problem that grabs the reader's attention right away.
- **Conflict.** A character versus the *internal* self or an *external* something or someone.
- **Exposition.** Background information required for seeing the characters in context.
- **Complication.** One or more problems that keep a character from their intended goal.
- **Transition.** Image, symbol, dialogue, that joins paragraphs and scenes together.
- **Flashback.** Remembering something that happened before the short story takes place.
- **Climax.** When the rising action of the story reaches the peak.
- **Falling Action.** Releasing the action of the story after the climax.

- **Resolution.** When the internal or external conflict is resolve.

Brainstorming. If you are having trouble deciding on a plot, try brainstorming. Suppose you have a protagonist whose husband comes home one day and says he doesn't love her any more and he is leaving. What are actions that can result from this situation?

1. She becomes a workaholic.
2. Their children are unhappy.
3. Their children want to live with their dad.
4. She moves to another city.
5. She gets a new job.
6. They sell the house.
7. She meets a psychiatrist and falls in love.
8. He comes back and she accepts him.
9. He comes back and she doesn't accept him.
10. She commits suicide.
11. He commits suicide.
12. She moves in with her parents.

8. Create Conflict and Tension

Conflict is the fundamental element of fiction, fundamental because in literature only trouble is interesting. It takes trouble to turn the great themes of life into a story: birth, love, sex, work, and death. *-Janet Burroway*

Conflict produces **tension** that makes the story begin. Tension is created by **opposition** between the character or characters and **internal** or **external** forces or conditions. By **balancing the opposing forces** of the conflict, you keep readers glued to the pages wondering how the story will end.

Possible Conflicts Include:

- The protagonist against another individual
- The protagonist against nature (or technology)
- The protagonist against society
- The protagonist against God
- The protagonist against himself or herself.

Yourke's Conflict Checklist

- **Mystery.** Explain just enough to tease readers. Never give everything away.
- **Empowerment.** Give both sides options.
- **Progression.** Keep intensifying the number and type of obstacles the protagonist faces.

- **Causality.** Hold fictional characters more accountable than real people. Characters who make mistakes frequently pay, and, at least in fiction, commendable folks often reap rewards.
- **Surprise.** Provide sufficient complexity to prevent readers predicting events too far in advance.
- **Empathy.** Encourage reader identification with characters and scenarios that pleasantly or (unpleasantly) resonate with their own sweet dreams (or night sweats).
- **Insight.** Reveal something about human nature.
- **Universality.** Present a struggle that most readers find meaningful, even if the details of that struggle reflect a unique place and time.
- **High Stakes.** Convince readers that the outcome matters because someone they care about could lose something precious. Trivial clashes often produce trivial fiction.

9. Build to a Crisis or Climax

This is the **turning point of the story**--the most exciting or dramatic moment. The crisis may be a recognition, a decision, or a resolution. The character understands what hasn't been seen before, or realizes what must be done, or finally decides to do it. It's when the worm turns. Timing is crucial. If the crisis occurs too early, readers will expect still another turning point. If it occurs too late, readers will get impatient--the character will seem rather thick. -*Jerome Stern* *Jane Burroway* says that the crisis "must always be presented as a scene. It is "the moment" the reader has been waiting for. In Cinderella's case, "the payoff is when the slipper fits."

While a good story needs a crisis, a random event such as a car crash or a sudden illness is simply an emergency --unless it somehow involves a **conflict** that makes the reader care about the characters.

10. Find a Resolution

The **solution to the conflict**. In short fiction, it is difficult to provide a complete resolution and you often need to just show that characters are beginning to change in some way or starting to see things differently.

- **Open.** Readers determine the meaning.
- ☑ Brendan's eyes looked away from the priest and up to the mountains.
- **Resolved.** Clear-cut outcome.
- ☑ While John watched in despair, Helen loaded up the car with her belongings and drove away.
- **Parallel to Beginning.** Similar to beginning situation or image.

☑ They were driving their 1964 Chevrolet Impala down the highway while the wind blew through their hair.

☑ Her father drove up in a new 1964 Chevrolet Impala, a replacement for the one that burned up.

- **Monologue.** Character comments.

☑ I wish Tom could have known Sister Dalbec's prickly guidance before the dust devils of Sin City battered his soul.

- **Dialogue.** Characters converse.
- **Literal Image.** Setting or aspect of setting resolves the plot.

☑ The aqueducts were empty now and the sun was shining once more.

- **Symbolic Image.** Details represent a meaning beyond the literal one.

☑ Looking up at the sky, I saw a cloud cross the shimmering blue sky above us as we stood in the morning heat of Sin City.