



BEGINNING WRITER'S ANSWER BOOK

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
COMPLETELY UPDATED

EXCERPT

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HOW DO I WRITE AND SELL SHORT FICTION?

The competition for publishing short fiction—especially in popular magazines and journals—is fierce, and the days when a fiction writer could earn a living writing short stories are long gone. Only a select few magazines—such as the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *Esquire*—publish literary short fiction. To get an acceptance letter from one of these publications, you'll need to be writing at the level of John Updike and Alice Munro (and even then it's tough).

On the other hand, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of small-circulation literary journals and magazines (and online zines) that actively publish new writers and will give your work a fair chance. This chapter gives you an overview of what it takes to write successful and publishable short fiction.

CRAFT AND TECHNIQUE

I like to write short stories, but people say the things I write are not exactly stories. How can I find out what a short story is?

A traditional short story (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) features a character who meets with conflict either within himself, with another character, or with some other force outside of himself. The conflict and its resolution should change the character. It is this change, for better or worse, that makes a story.

Consider, for example, a story about two young boys on a Saturday afternoon fishing trip. If the author tells us about the nice time they had looking for the right spot along the bank to cast their lines, and the large number of fish they caught before they trotted happily home, would it be a story? Not unless one of the boys, who always thought of himself as a coward, had to muster up his courage to save the other boy after he fell into the rushing river. Here, a character is in conflict with what he sees as his own limitations, and he learns that he can go beyond them—the series of incidents has become a story.

Look closely at what you've written. Does your story contain character conflict, change, and growth, or are you just relating a series of events that involve one or more characters? That may be the difference between what you've written and what a story is.

What is the difference between crisis and climax in a traditional short story?

The crisis in a short story arises from conflict that leads to a turning point. After a series of obstacles, the major character experiences a dark moment in which he sees no way to solve the problem. Then, there is a moment of revelation as the character figures out everything. The climax normally follows the crisis and represents the most intense point in the story line. The story should end shortly thereafter.

What is a story theme? Is it any different from a story problem?

Writers disagree on the exact definitions, but here's one explanation: A theme is the message an author imparts to his readers through the plot and characters in his story. The writer starts with an idea, and as his story develops, it is influenced by his own philosophy or observation of the human condition. This is his theme. A story problem is the vehicle by which an author presents his theme. For instance, the problem facing Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* is getting home to Kansas. Through her trials and adventures in the Land of Oz, she realizes her folly in wanting to run away from home in the first place, and finally decides "there's no place like home," which is the overall theme of the story.

I'm having trouble coming up with fresh ideas for my fiction. What are some ways I can jog my imagination?

First of all, you should read widely—not just novels and short stories, but magazines and newspapers. Something in a factual article might spark an idea. If something makes you think “I wonder what kind of person would do something like that,” chances are you could use it as a starting point for your next story. Sometimes meeting an interesting person, recalling an event that happened to you at work, or remembering a daydream (or nightmare) can be a catalyst.

Another way to come up with new ideas is to listen to what people say—on the street, in a restaurant, etc.—and jot in your notebook any interesting pieces of dialogue. Remember: A good writer is also a good listener.

Your own life experiences can also provide the foundation for a short story or novel, but you must be careful to avoid becoming trapped by the facts. Remember that you're telling a story and that what was really said or what really happened will have to be modified (or ignored altogether) in the interest of creating readable dialogue and an entertaining plot.

Many writers have found that events in history and the classics of literature can be retold in modern surroundings—Othello as chairman of a corporation, or a Napoleon figure as president of the U.S., are only two of the many possible twists on old stories.

Above all, remember inspiration doesn't always strike like a flash of lightning. Ideas tend to ripen slowly, starting from a single impression or bit of information. The more opportunities you give your imagination, the greater the chance ideas will come to you.

I have a story in mind involving several character types, but I'm having trouble coming up with a strong plot. What can I do about this?

Most fiction is based on what the characters do. Interesting, believable characters create the atmosphere and conflict necessary for a successful short story or novel. Every story must have a basic conflict. By carefully examining your characters—their backgrounds, likes, dislikes, beliefs—you can get ideas about how to set up conflict. Ask yourself questions: What does the main character want? What obstacles might interfere with his goals? How do the characters relate to one another? Once you've set up

the basic conflict, you can begin to outline the action of the story. If you're still having problems developing your story's plot, you may want to read *20 Master Plots*, by Ronald B. Tobias, which discusses twenty plots that recur in all fiction.

How does a writer get his point across in a story without repeating it?

The change that occurs in the major character as a result of his experiences should make your point. In the course of the story, the major character must experience a moment of revelation or make a decision and, just as in real life, he changes as a result of these experiences. It is through these revelations and decisions that the writer sends his message, not through overtly stating it.

What is the difference between a plant and a false plant in a story?

A plant is something (a person, place, object, or fact) that the writer "plants" early in a story so when it is used later, it won't seem unrealistic or like too much of a coincidence. For example, imagine you're reading a short story in which a cowboy's horse has just died; the character is sun-parched and dying of thirst himself as he traverses the desert of the American Southwest, but is saved when he suddenly comes to an old deserted homestead that has a spring close by. Wouldn't you be bewildered? Where did that house and spring come from? A good writer will find a way to plant them earlier in his story, thus getting rid of the contrived coincidence.

The false plant is something deliberately placed by the author that ultimately has no connection with the conclusion or resolution of the conflict in the story. Introducing innocent suspects with viable motives in a mystery is a common use of this device. False plants must always be adequately explained somewhere in the story. If the writer of that cowboy short story mentioned an old homestead with a spring close by and *didn't* put it to some use later in the story, he would have placed what is called a dangling plant. These can be annoying to the reader and should be avoided.

How can I effectively create a character in the limited space of a short story?

Try to determine what is so unique about him that warrants a story. Find a single fact that sets him apart and gives him a recognizable trait. Then

portray him in *one* sentence. Though difficult to write, one-line character descriptions can be extremely incisive.

Character traits should not be thrown at the reader, but rather should be woven gradually into the story. A writer should let dialogue, actions, and reactions be the defining features of a particular character.

I have often wondered whether a man can write effectively about a woman, and vice versa. What is the practice among successful writers?

There is significant proof in literature that a writer can successfully portray a member of the opposite sex. Look at what Flaubert did with *Madame Bovary*, what Margaret Mitchell did with *Rhett Butler*, and what Tennessee Williams did with *Blanche DuBois*, to name just a few. The ease with which a male writer can slip into the consciousness of a female character and vice versa depends ultimately on the individual writer and how much insight he has into the workings of human nature, regardless of gender.

In dissecting a short story, how does a writer go about isolating a scene? To me, the scenes seem somewhat continuous. I fail to see any sharp dividing line in a taut story.

Whenever the action moves to a different setting, that's automatically a new scene. If, for example, a story opens in a young couple's kitchen, then moves to an incident in the husband's office, these two different settings constitute two different scenes. But suppose the story is a short-short in which all the action takes place in the kitchen. In that case, look for a division in time. A story may begin with the husband and wife in the kitchen at breakfast time, then jump to five o'clock, when the wife is preparing dinner. This is a device used often. For example: "Jim stomped out during breakfast without finishing his coffee. As Ellen prepared dinner, she thought of the silly argument they had had early that day."

When writing a short story, are you supposed to italicize everything that is spoken or thought?

Use quotation marks for dialogue spoken by story characters. Styles vary for denoting a character's thoughts: Some use quotation marks, some put a character's thoughts in italics, some merely set them off with a comma



Frequently
asked question

and capitalize the first letter, and some make no special designation at all if it's clear that the thoughts are the narrating viewpoint character's.

flashback question

I don't understand most modern poetry. Is there some book which has taken these kinds of poems apart, analyzed them and discussed what the poet is saying?

Yes, *The Poet and the Poem* by Judson Jerome has chapters on this subject along with discussions of other matters of interest to poets attempting to become "professional" poets. What Jerome means by "professional" poet as opposed to an "amateur" or "trade" poet is described in his column in the November 1968 issue of *Writer's Digest*.

An editor told me I should strive to present a single viewpoint in my short story. Why should I? How do I decide whether third person or first person is better?

In a short story, strong reader identification with one of the characters is very important and is easily disrupted when the author employs a multiple viewpoint. Suspense and continuity are often lost in the transition from one viewpoint to another. For these reasons, short stories told from more than one viewpoint are rarely successful. The choice between first and third person should be made with the plot and characters in mind. Using first person can be subjective, and first-person point of view lends itself well to strong emotion and fast reader identification. Third person, on the other hand, is useful if your plot and characters demand an objective treatment.

One of the editors who rejected my story told me he liked the basic idea very much but the whole story was much too complicated. How can I simplify it?

If you have too much going on in your story, it may be because you've tried to incorporate too many characters or incidents into it. You have to decide who the story is about and focus your narrative on that character

and his problem. All other characters should be a part of the story you build around the major character. You may have to reduce arbitrarily the number of characters (to three or four at the most) and restructure your plot from there. The result should be greater simplicity and unity.

I submitted my story to an editor, and he returned it, saying it was too slow-paced. What is he talking about?

If your story is too slow-paced, you are giving too little attention to action and dialogue that moves the story toward the problem and its resolution. Editors often complain that stories written by beginners don't even start until page five of the manuscript. If the reader must watch the main character wake up, light a cigarette, make coffee, and start breakfast before he learns what the problem in the story is, the story is too slow-paced. Since word space is so limited in short stories, the opening scene (as well as every other scene) should be short on exposition and quick to provide action and dialogue that engages the reader and is pertinent to the story's end.

The transitions in my stories never seem to work. How can I handle them without being abrupt or taking too much time?

Scene transitions involve changes in time, place, and emotion; the key to smooth transition is to link the old with the new. In the last paragraph of a scene, preferably the last sentence, indicate the present place and time period, and if possible, imply the new ones. Then the first sentence in the new scene can establish the time lapse and change of place. Note these points in the following example: "She hoped the Crandalls wouldn't like her antiques. *But that must wait until tomorrow*, she reminded herself, and tried to get some sleep. The next morning, worry about the Crandalls completely left her mind when...."

How do I detect rambling in my story? A teacher told me I was rambling at some places where I thought description was necessary.

Examine the passages your teacher marked and evaluate them for their relevance to the story. Be able to define the purpose of each episode and descriptive passage. If you can't determine a function for each part, either discard it or rewrite it. If you determine that the information really is nec-

essary, your teacher's assessment that it rambles is a sign that it should be incorporated into the story more subtly. For instance, can your spelled-out characterization be compressed into the character's actions or his dialogue? Every passage must perform three or four functions at the same time—advance the plot, add to the characterizations, introduce background information, and so on. Being able to write this concisely takes practice, but in the long run, your stories will be better.

When an editor says my story has loose ends, what does he mean?

It means the story has unresolved complications, lingering questions, or problematic inconsistencies. You may need to add or omit incidents, or merely add a phrase that refers to an earlier part of the story. Your story needs to be unified in time and action, and the course of events must be logical. For instance, don't introduce some line of plot action for which the reader expects some meaning in the story and then arbitrarily drop it. It only confuses and annoys the reader.

Looking at the short story I've written, I can see that the conclusion is weak and unconvincing. How can I fix it?

Endings can be the most difficult element of short story writing, since an ineffectual one (or the wrong one) will make the story dissatisfying and unpublishable. Is your ending too obvious? Is the outcome exactly what a reader would expect from your characters and plot? Your problem may be that you failed to plan for your ending before you started writing the story or, conversely, that you overplanned and stifled the real story. If you were hoping something would come to you as the story progressed, and nothing did, your ending undoubtedly seems irrelevant or illogical.

At this point, you have a few options. Your solution could involve going back to the beginning of the story and doing some replotting. Make your major character's decision a difficult one rather than an obvious one. Or use the conflict structure to misdirect your reader, leading him to expect a different ending than what you finally give him. Changes like these must be incorporated into the whole story, for if you merely tack on an ending, it will remain inappropriate and weak because it is not justified by the rest of the story. Ask yourself what you're trying to communicate to the reader through your story. Revisiting your

themes might shed some light on the proper conclusion. If you still can't create a convincing and emotionally powerful ending, then it's possible you may need to set the story aside and begin work on something else. Sometimes distance from the material and fresh eyes are all you need to realize what's missing or to gain new insight into where your story should go.

I'm taking a course in short story writing and my teacher keeps noting "overstatement" in my stories. But he's never given me a solid definition of the problem.

Your teacher may be referring to what others call overwriting or purple prose. Redundancies, an excess of adjectives and adverbs in descriptive passages, or an overplay of emotion can all be considered overstatement. Passages that seem contrived or that just don't fit the tenor of the story may be overwritten. While overstatement is most easily spotted by someone other than the writer, you should develop the skill of recognizing and correcting this flaw, which would obviously hinder publication.

DECIPHERING STORY TYPES

Fiction requirements of many magazines specify "no contrived stories." What do they mean by these terms?

By *contrived*, editors usually mean plots in which the action is constructed in an artificial, implausible way. For example, if a character purposely sets fire to a barn to kill the man inside, that's a credible, well-motivated act. But if a fire happens to break out in the barn for no reason other than the obvious one of helping the author dispose of the man inside, that's contrived.

Many guidelines state "no vignettes or slice-of-life pieces." What does that mean?

A slice-of-life story or vignette is usually one that depends less on plot for its interest than on mood and atmosphere and the detail with which the setting (and its effects on the characters) is described. It is a seemingly unselective presentation of life as it is—a brief, illuminating look at a realistic rather than a constructed situation, revealed to the reader without comment or interpretation by the author.

How long is a short-short story compared to a short story?

The average short-short story is from 500 to 1,500 words long, and the short story runs from 2,000 to 7,000 words. Individual publishers may have varying requirements, which would be listed in *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market*.

Besides the obvious one of length, are there differences between short stories and short-short stories?

Plot in a short story is limited to a small chain of events. In a short-short, it is confined to a single power-packed incident that gives the story its thematic value. There is no room for extensive character development, and the writer doesn't try to do more than focus intensely on one truth of life that may or may not be new to the reader. Good subjects for short-shorts include changes in parent-child or husband-wife relationships, a child's awakening to some facet of life, or an individual's reevaluation of his role in society.

It's hard to draw the line between short stories and novels, since there are also novellas. Just what are the differences in length, subject matter, and form in all of these types of fiction?

Although there are no set rules of length, the short story usually runs 2,000 to 7,000 words. Long stories, which are more difficult to sell, generally run 8,000 to 15,000 words. Novellas will range anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 words. Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* are examples of this genre. Novels are the longest type of fiction. The novel's structure is similar to that of a short story in that it presents a series of conflicts and temporary obstacles leading to a climax in which the major conflict is resolved or accepted as unsolvable. The difference lies in the fact that the novelist has more time and word space to develop his plot, subplots, and characters, and can more easily change the viewpoint of the narrator.

when truth meets fiction

Why aren't true-life experiences the best model for planning a story?
How could I possibly improve on the way it really happened?

True-life experiences often make a good skeleton for a short story, but they usually need to be dramatized before they will interest others. If the basic action of your story needs a lot of exposition, which it invariably does, you may need to invent action and dialogue to get it across more effectively. Readers will be bored by a straight narrative explanation. If your characters are based upon people you are acquainted with, chances are you don't know them as well as a writer of fiction must know his characters. In order to provide them with sufficient motivation, you may have to provide traits that make them unique and worthy of the reader's sympathies. Plot may need changes in time span and in order of events so that it effectively moves the story along.

MARKETING YOUR STORIES

Should I send a query for my short stories?

Because of the nature of short fiction, editors rarely expect to be queried about it. Most editors prefer to receive the complete manuscript.

There are very few magazines that contain stories. Magazines print mostly articles. Who buys stories today?

While a few major magazines still have active fiction markets, the majority of markets for short stories aren't on the newsstand. You should look to literary magazines and journals, which are listed in *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market*.

How do literary magazines differ from general publications?

Literary magazines or journals are publications with limited circulation—generally of five thousand or less—that offer writers a vehicle of expression

not found in commercial magazines. They aim for an audience of writers, editors, and students and teachers of literature. Their contributors are usually writers striving for literary excellence. T.S. Eliot, Flannery O'Connor, and John Gardner all received their early attention by having their work published in literary magazines.

Literary magazines are often sponsored by universities or nonprofit organizations and do not rely on general public support; hence, their editors don't have to compromise the ideals of their publications toward a popular or commercial taste. A literary magazine can be centered on a specific theme or can be eclectic—open to work on any idea. Pay is usually low or nonexistent; contributing authors are often paid with copies or subscriptions to the magazine.

Do book publishers put out collections of short novels and stories that haven't previously been published?

Yes, but rarely. In the case of an unknown writer, the publisher is usually reluctant to start off with a short-story collection; novels are greatly favored. Many university presses and small presses do hold competitions for short-story collections; first prize is almost always publication of the collection.

My local bookstore has a very limited supply of magazines, and I can't afford to send away and pay for a lot of sample copies. How can I find out what kinds of stories magazine editors consider good so I can read and learn from them?

There are several anthologies published annually that will give you a good overview. *The O. Henry Prize Stories* (with earlier editions published under the title *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*) and *The Best American Short Stories* reprint stories that have appeared in magazines like the *New Yorker*, *Redbook*, and leading literary magazines. *The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses* reprints stories from some of the smaller magazines that you wouldn't find in most libraries. Each anthology prints a list of the magazines from which they selected stories. You can also check magazines' Web sites, which often offer sample editions or representative stories in their electronic archives.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

BOOKS

Novel & Short Story Writer's Market lists more than a thousand places to publish your stories, and includes interviews and articles on the craft and business of fiction writing.

The Art of the Short Story: 52 Great Authors, Their Best Short Fiction, and Their Insights on Writing, edited by Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn, is a massive anthology and an excellent resource for learning the craft.

Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular, by former *Esquire* fiction editor L. Rust Hills, is one of the best instructional guides to the craft; the author cuts right to the chase and tells you exactly what to do and what *not* to do.

WEB SITES

Flogging the Quill (<http://floggingthequill.typepad.com>) is guaranteed to improve the art and craft of your storytelling.

The Writer's Resource Center (www.poewar.com) offers hundreds of articles on the craft of fiction, as well as poetry and freelancing.

Writesville (www.writesville.com) is run by an aspiring fiction writer who shares what he's learned so far.