

Top 10 Tips for Writing a Short Story

1. Think About What Kind of Story You Want to Write

Knowing what type of story you want to write helps you formulate your ideas and can help you choose how to structure your story, which tense to write in, and what descriptions and dialogue you might use.

For example, if you've decided to write a ghostly tale, you can set the tone by emphasising the menacing location and ominous weather, and there might be hardly any dialogue at all. If you're writing a comedic story, funny dialogue between two friends would be a lot more important than the scenery.

2. If You're Struggling for Ideas...

Start with an interesting first line.

Lucas woke to a racket. He jumped out of bed, threw open the curtains, and stared in disbelief...

Would you believe me if I told you I'd be born with a tail? ...

Hurriedly, the McDougal's boarded the spacecraft, but where was Sienna? ...

Think of a sentence that would make you wonder what comes next. Write a few lines following on from it and see where it takes you. It might give you an idea you wouldn't otherwise have thought of. You can do this for a few times if you like, and choose the one gives you the most dramatic, or exciting, idea.

3. Start with Action

Starting short stories *in media res* (in the midst of things) is a great way to hook the reader in. In a short story, you want to get to the good bit as soon as possible, so start as close to the end as you can. If there's a big battle about to go down, start the story just before the first charge. You can always explain the history between the two sides during the fight, but starting with some exciting action will grab your reader's attention.

4. Don't Have Too Many Characters

Focus on one or two main characters. It could be the protagonist and the antagonist. It could be two best friends that are about to take different paths at a pivotal point in their lives, or a story about a boy and his dad. The main thing to remember is, when you're

working with the limited word count of a short story, we don't need to know about every single kid in school, or the life story of your hero's little sister. Keep it focused on the main character.

5. Limit Backstories

Another thing to do to keep the story focussed is to limit the main character's back story too. If it's not relevant to what the story is about, you don't need to go into detail about everything that's ever happened to your main character. You might need to make a few remarks – perhaps your hero was an orphan and that's why he's so independent and brave, or maybe the baker who finally invents the best pudding ever was never allowed to eat dessert as a child – but think about why you're telling the reader this information and if it's really important to the storyline.

6. Character and Conflict

Conflict makes for interesting stories by adding tension. What conflict does your character face? What's getting in the way of them achieving their goals, or getting what they desire?

- It could be another **person**, such as a villain, or an overbearing parent.
- It could be **society**, and the pressure of having to conform
- It could be **inner conflict**, such as self-doubt.
- It could be the **environment**, such as a natural disaster or a broken bridge.
- It could be the **supernatural**, or paranormal.
- It could be **technology**, especially advanced or futuristic tech, or Artificial Intelligence.

Being clear about what your character wants and why they want it, as well as being clear about the conflict they face in getting it, is key to an engaging story. It also gives the reader a reason to root for your character.

7. Writing and Structuring your Story

Once you've got a good idea of what your story will be about, you can follow one of two methods for getting it written.

- Plot it out first. Think about the journey your character is going to take. What position are they in in the beginning, and how will that differ by the end? What's the big pivotal moment that changes their life, or how they see the world? Does this happen right at the end, or halfway through? Plotting out the whole story will give you a guide to follow while you're writing your first draft.

Or:

- Write the story in one go, as quickly as you can, from beginning to end. This is like following on from the opening line and seeing where your story will take you. It's a good way to keep coming up with new ideas, and your story might change shape as you write it. Once you've finished your first draft, you'll need to look at it again and decide whether you've started the story at the best moment, or if you could perhaps keep some key information back until the end for a big reveal!

8. Re-visit the Opening Line

Now you've written at least one draft of your story, does the opening line still fit? It's important to really grab the reader's attention, so go back to the beginning and ask if the opening line sets the tone of your story and hooks the reader in.

9. A Satisfying Ending

Not all short stories have to reach a resolution, but it is certainly the most satisfying end to a story. However, to be truly satisfying, it must be justified.

If your protagonist gets everything they hoped for – say they win a talent show – have they earned it through hard work, and overcoming their stage fright (an example of **inner conflict**), or did they cheat their way to the top? If it turns out they poisoned the other contestants, or bribed the judges to win, the reader might feel cheated in rooting for them.

10. Edit Edit Edit

Be prepared to go back, re-read, and edit your story.

Then do it again!

Short stories are, by their nature, short. Take out any long descriptions that don't really add anything to your story. Think about the dialogue you've used between your characters – does it advance the plot? If not, cut it out. If you're writing to a set word-count, you might be worried about cutting out too much. But just as with editing things *out*, you can also edit things *in*. Maybe on the second reading, some of your characters' actions don't make sense because you've not included *enough* backstory. Maybe you decided the scary, fire-breathing dragon was actually a harmless baby who had been caged up his whole life, and just needed to be set free.

Also, don't forget to double-check your punctuation and grammar while you're at it.

Happy writing!