

Tips for Writing Short Stories by Robert Hilles

First it is important to familiarize yourself with what short stories have been written. To do that I recommend you read stories by the following authors in this order: Anton Chekhov, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Munro, Alistair MacLeod, Tobias Wolff, Raymond Carver, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Colm Toibin, Richard Ford, Haruki Murakami, Philip K. Dick, James Joyce, Louise Erdrich, Claire Keegan, Jamaica Kincaid, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ernest Hemingway, George Saunders, Kurt Vonnegut, and if you are into horror, then Stephen King.

Short stories typically are less than 30 pages and less than 20000 words. Anything longer than that in terms of word count is either a novella or novel (stories of less than 2000 words are typically called Flash Fiction). A short story has fewer characters than a novel, so typically 1 to 3 characters (but sometimes contains more than that). Like all forms of fiction, short stories focus on character and plot, but may also contain dialogue. A short story typically has a single point of view and one or more scenes.

How to Open a Story

For short stories it is important to start either with a hook or in the middle of the action. Do not use flashback especially early in a story. As Kurt Vonnegut has said — start as close to the end as possible.

Other kinds of openings include:

Description: a description of a character or setting – not usually recommended unless it's limited and very engaging. Never start with the weather.

When the status quo changes: this type of opening begins with the main character on a journey and then some problem occurs.

With a mystery: set the stage for a mystery

A ticking clock: the opening sets up a time frame that always remains in the reader's mind. Example: Maggie finds out she is pregnant. That means she has a month or two to decide what to do about her situation. Or Bill needs to get to his brother's wedding in 24 hours, but there is a snowstorm and all planes are grounded.

With an inciting incident: This is more for novels, but a short story can begin this way, too. An incident (it can be internal or external) starts the action of the story. An example is that Chloe learns she has won the lottery, but must get to Vancouver to collect the winnings.

How NOT to Open a Story

Flash forward or Flashback: this device is used a lot in TV, but doesn't work as well in short stories as readers lack context. Remember that most readers like to start in the middle of the action and move forward. They find flashback and narration boring.

With a detailed description of the weather or landscape: as noted above I do not recommend you open a story either by describing the weather or the landscape.

Your main character waking up in bed: this only works if your story is about waking to an extraordinary day.

Special Note: Anton Chekhov commented about the structure of a play that applies to short stories as well — if a gun appears in Act I, it needs to go off by Act III. What this means is that anything significant introduced at the beginning of a story needs to have relevance and/or meaning for the story and needs to come into play again later in the story. So if an item or detail doesn't aid characterization or plot, then it likely shouldn't be included in a short story.

The Time Span

Typically, a short story spans a condensed period of time such as an hour, an afternoon, a day, a few days, or even a month. Rarely does a short story span several years. Alice Munro is an exception to this as her stories often span many years, such as in her story, *Royal Beatings*. Most short stories, however, are more like Anton Chekhov's story *Fat and Thin*, which involves the chance meeting at a Moscow Train station between two old school friends and doesn't span more than a few minutes.

Dialogue

Short stories may or may not contain dialogue. Some stories like *Hills Like White Elephants* by Ernest Hemingway, are all dialogue. Other stories have little or no direct dialogue such as *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin. In any case, similar to longer works of fiction, the key thing to remember about writing dialogue is that the fewer the words the better. Dialogue is not conversation. See if you can limit all dialogue to just the most essential words and if you can have your characters speak at cross purposes (ie: one character wants one thing and the other character wants the opposite).

Character

Short stories have fewer characters than novels. In fact, many short stories have only one, two or three characters. Having a least two characters means there is more potential for conflict and conflict is very important in fiction. It helps to engage readers and keeps them reading. Vonnegut said that the writer should portray at least one character the reader will care about and cheer for. In the short story your main character is your point of view character and so the reader sees most action through that character's perspective.

If your story only has one character, it is more difficult to create conflict, but not impossible. Conflict in such stories can evolve from the character struggling against some force in the external world (like the sea or desert or city, etc.) or with internal demons. Short stories work best when your main character has someone or something to bump up against.

Don't describe characters right away. It is better to show characters in action. We learn more about characterization through what a character does and says than through a description of their physical attributes. We can also learn about a character through what other characters say about them. That works better in longer works of fiction, but can work in short stories, too. I recently read the story, *Three Feet in the Evening*, a new short story by Richard Bausch, where early on in the story we have dialogue between several characters talking about another character long before that character appears in the story.

Plot

All short stories require a plot and a question that engages your readers in your story. Your reader wants to learn the answer to, such as getting back to Bill and his brother's wedding – will he arrive in time for the ceremony?

A short story has only one plot though and no subplots. A short story may contain rising action and a climax, but that often is not as significant as in longer works of fiction.

Unlike a novel a short story may contain as little as one scene. If a short story contains more than one scene, those scenes are very short perhaps only one or two paragraphs in length. The more complex and longer a story is the more scenes it may have. Sometimes those scenes can be very short, so they don't always have a scene goal.

Setting

All stories have a setting whether that setting is implied, carefully rendered, or whether that setting is a real or imaginary. The importance of setting though does not mean that you establish a setting first. Often the details of a setting are worked in carefully and minimally. The American writer Elmore Leonard stated that a writer should never start a story with the weather as that tends to be boring. I agree with that, but also extend it to the setting. Although all stories occur in a setting, don't open your story by describing that setting. If you do that you risk losing your reader right away. However, as with all things regarding fiction, if you make the writing exciting or engaging, it is possible to open a story that way.

End Strong

For short stories the ending is crucial. If your story ends strong it is more likely to be considered great, than if it starts strong, but ends weakly. If your ending leaves the reader a bit confused with a few questions at the end of the story, that is a strong way to end. A word of caution though. If you leave the reader with too many questions, that will cause frustration and they are more likely to dismiss your story as ineffective. Readers are more likely to remember your story and have it stay with them (maybe even haunt them) if they are left wondering about the ending and/or what happens next.

Anton Chekhov expanded the possible endings for short stories. He declared that when he was finished with his characters, he returned them back to their lives. A key insight that Chekhov created and others short story writers now employ is ending with an epiphany that a particular character (or multiple characters) or even readers have about themselves or their lives. One variation of this can be the surprise ending. Although if handled poorly, this method can seem inauthentic.

Besides Anton Chekhov, you can read the stories of Flannery O'Connor or Alice Munro to get a sense of how a short story successfully ends. In stories by those authors, readers hurry toward the end, as it is right to the last sentence, the very end of the story, that the full meaning of the short story is revealed.

Here is two links to show how Anton Chekhov changed how short stories end:

<http://christinabakerkline.wordpress.com/2009/12/17/what-chekhov-can-teach-us-about-endings/>

And here is the complete list of 12 Chekhovian endings:

<https://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/jauss-essay>

Some Favourite Short Stories

Some of my favourite short stories that I recommend you read include: *The Bear Came Around the Mountain* by Alice Munro; *Rock Springs* and *Quality Time* by Richard Ford; *The Boat* by Alistair MacLeod; *So Much Water So Close to Home* by Raymond Carver; *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Good Country People* as well as every story in *Everything that Rises Must Converge* by Flannery O'Connor; *The Chain* and *Bullet in the Brain* by Tobias Wolff; *Name of the Game* by Colm Toibin; *Matchiminito* by Louise Erdrich; *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid; *Hell-Heaven* by Jhumpa Lahiri; *Hills Like White Elephants* by Ernest Hemingway; *Victory Lap* by George Saunders; *So Late in the Day* by Claire Keegan; and, of course, *The Lady with the Pet Dog* and most other sort stories by Anton Chekhov.

Robert Hilles is the author of *Don't Hang Your Soul on That, From God's Angle, The Pink Puppet* and others. He has published short stories in magazines in Canada and the US.

Written for Wordstorm Society of the Arts, 2024