



# Reading short stories

**BBC**

**Student  
Critics**

with Cambridge University



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# Introduction



**The BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University (NSSA)** is one of the most prestigious awards for a single short story, with the winning author receiving £15,000.

Over its 15-year history, the award has celebrated established writers such as Hilary Mantel, Zadie Smith, Deborah Levy, Sarah Hall, Jackie Kay, Jon McGregor and William Trevor, and new stars such as Ingrid Persuad, Caleb Azumah Nelson and Lucy Wood.

Each year the award is judged by five expert judges, The judges select a shortlist of five stories from approximately 1,000 entries, considering the originality and excellence of the prose, the story structure and the overall impact of the story on the reader (for the full judging guidelines, see p9).

The judges' chosen shortlist is announced in September, and the winner at the start of October during a special edition of BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* live from BBC Broadcasting House in central London

## You can be a judge too



**BBC Student Critics with Cambridge University** offers you the challenge to join the judges of the BBC National Story Award to read and critique the shortlisted stories.

Read or listen to the five shortlisted stories, discuss them as a group, choose your favourites and then host a listening party to hear the winner announced live on *Front Row*.

Taking part will encourage you to read critically, and build confidence in expressing your opinions. It will also introduce you to a diverse range of exciting new writing.

Your response as a reader or listener to a short story (or a novel, piece of music, work of art or architecture) is unique and valuable – and it's fun to discuss and debate your ideas with friends.



## This resource is designed to give you:

**An understanding of the elements of the short story form (e.g. structure, characters and imagery) and what makes a good short story**

**Tips on how you can become a better reader**

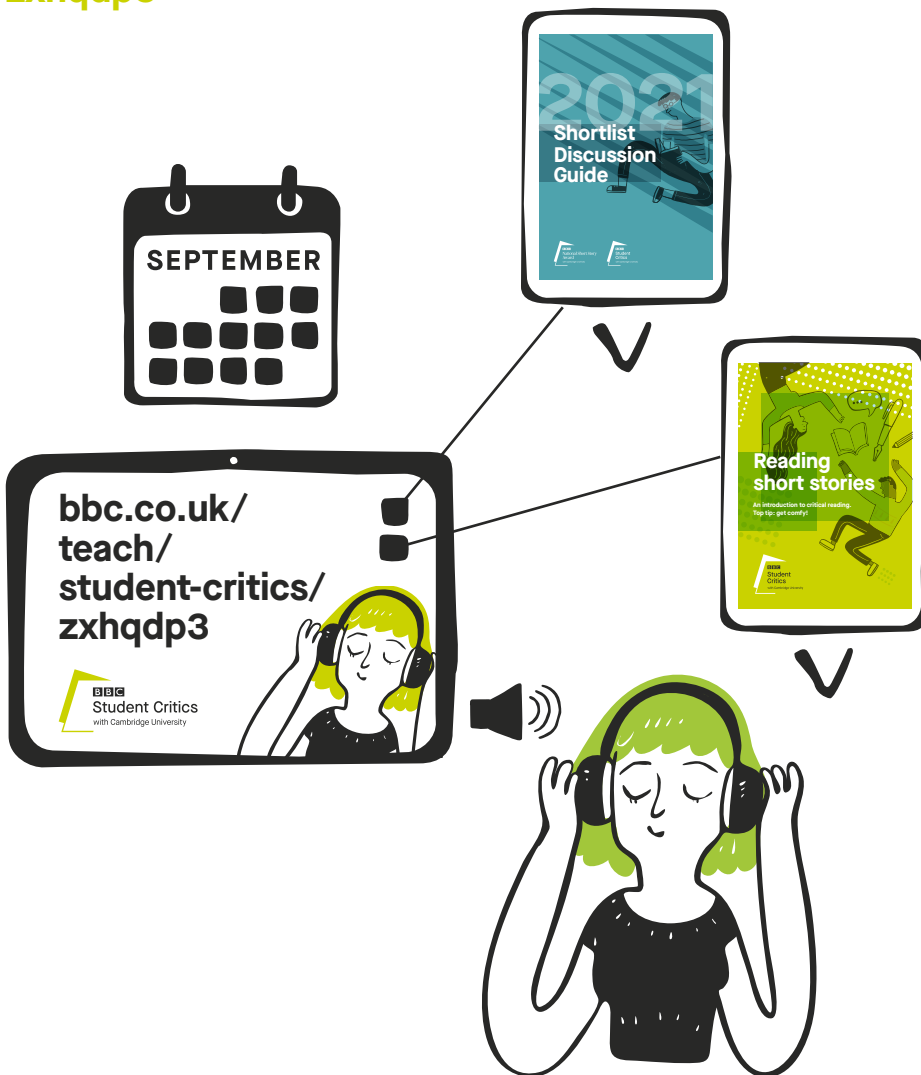
**Ideas for how to formulate your opinions and communicate them – while being open to other points of view, and respecting the writer's endeavour.**

# How to join in

Visit the **BBC Student Critics website in September** for links to audio recordings of the shortlisted stories, plus interviews with the authors: [bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3](https://bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3)

You'll also find a **Shortlist Discussion Guide**, plus lots more ideas and tips for debating and discussing the stories with your Student Critics group.

You can also purchase copies of the BBC National Short Story Award anthology (available for £7.99 from any good bookshop).



*Please note that the shortlisted stories for the BBC National Short Story Award may contain adult themes.*

## Looking for more?

Teachers and librarians can express an interest in signing up groups of 20 or more for an **enhanced experience**. Each year, up to 600 students will receive:

**An invitation to the premiere** of an online Student Critics event, where there will be the opportunity to put questions to judges and writers.

**A free copy** of the BBC National Short Story Award anthology.

An opportunity to receive a **visit from a shortlisted writer or judge** from the BBC National Short Story Award or BBC Young Writers' Award (this may be filmed).

**Find out more:**

[bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3](https://bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3)

# How to become a better reader

Here are our top ten tips...

## 1 Get comfy!

**Let the body rest so the mind can work.** Always have your feet up and your defences down as you read.



## 2 Read twice

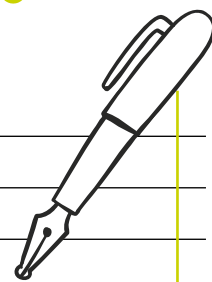
**Once for affect, once for analysis.** And then a third time just to see what else happens... This technique works particularly well for close reading of short stories; the judges of the BBC National Short Story Award will usually read each story four or five times.



## 3 Discuss what you've read

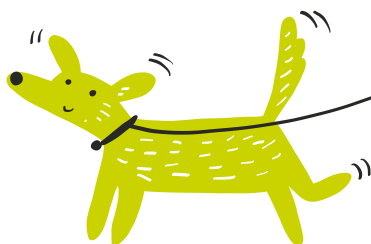
**Join a book group or find your herd on social media** (there's so much #bookchat on YouTube, Twitter and Instagram) to reach beyond your own reading experience and connect with others.

## 4 Note down key quotes, but add your own thoughts and comments with every quotation so that you have a record of your thoughts and experiences.



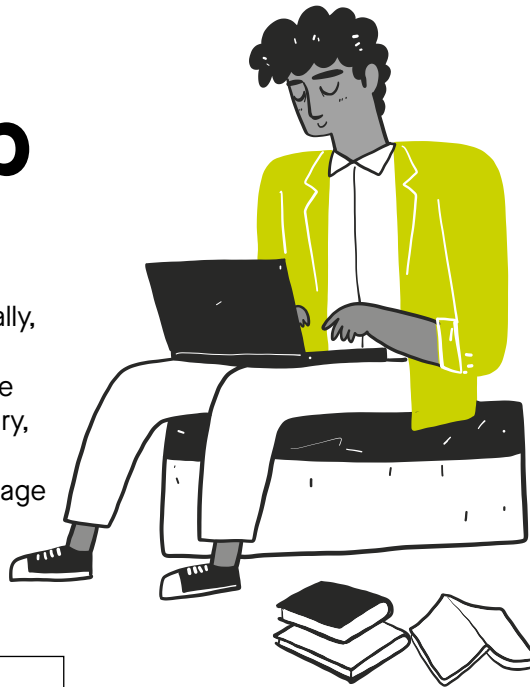
## 5 Read A LOT

**The more you read the better you get.** Libraries and bookshops are great places for inspiration and recommendations.



6  
**Look  
things up  
Everything.**

This is quicker if you read digitally, but there's something very satisfying about discovering the meaning of a word in a dictionary, and tracing its etymology or translating it into another language for a deeper understanding of it and its application.



9  
Ignore received opinion and literary snobbery. **Read what you want to read. Study what moves you.** The benefit of academic study of texts is demonstrated by the quality of the criticism rather than perceived prejudices about the quality of the material.

7  
**Go beyond character and theme. Think of books as machines; of reading as figuring out how the machines work and the role their different parts play. You'll be surprised how quickly you build up knowledge of literature, for instance, knowing how to scan poetry, recognise rhetorical tropes, identify style and analyse narrative devices.**

8  
**Express your opinions...**

...but also listen to others. It's important to articulate your thoughts and be able back them up, but hearing other people's ideas – particularly those contrary to your own – will open you up to healthy debate. Reading is subjective and every reader's point of view is valid.

10  
**Respect  
the work**

Getting anything published is tough – so before you begin to decimate a book or story, think about its author and the hours they spent writing it. **And consider recalibrating your appraisal into a more measured critique.**



# How to read a short story

**Close reading is a way to get to know short stories. It's like making friendships: there aren't any rules, and how it goes depends on you and the story, each time. But here are some ways to make good friends with stories that you could try out.**

## Experiment

Close reading isn't a science but it can be fun to pretend it is. Trying out the following experiments helps you think creatively about stories and gets you closer to the ways they work.

### 1) Imagine you have a microscope.

Hold it over sentences, words, even punctuation marks, and observe. When you zoom in to make up your mind about a small bit of a text, it can look very different to what you expected, just like cells under a microscope. Some words turn out to have several meanings, or no obvious meaning. Some quiet-looking commas are actually teeming with life.

**2) Read aloud.** How do the words sound when you speak them? Does the dialogue sound like conversation overheard? Do you notice rhythms? Is the prose musical? What do you learn about the pace or tempo? Where are the pauses and how long do they last?

**3) Put the brakes on.** Slow down: read a paragraph once. Read it again. Note down your thoughts after each time and see how they change and develop. Sometimes you may arrive at a completely different idea to the one with which you began. Write notes around the words on the page, underline them: get your fingers inky.

**4) Compare.** Think of an image (a painting or photograph) that you could look at alongside the story. Think of a song, melody or lyric that this story brings to mind. Or even draw that picture or compose that song. This can help you to place your feelings about a story, to analyse its tone, atmosphere and power.

## Engage

Once you've worked out what you think and feel about a story, then you need to work out how to let other people know this. There

are many different ways to shape good critical argument. You might tell a story of your own about your reading experience. You might try to persuade others by presenting a case, like a lawyer in court. Think carefully about the shape and style of your argument, and how you want others to respond.

It's important to consider other points of view and understand that different readers will have different responses to texts that may contradict your own.

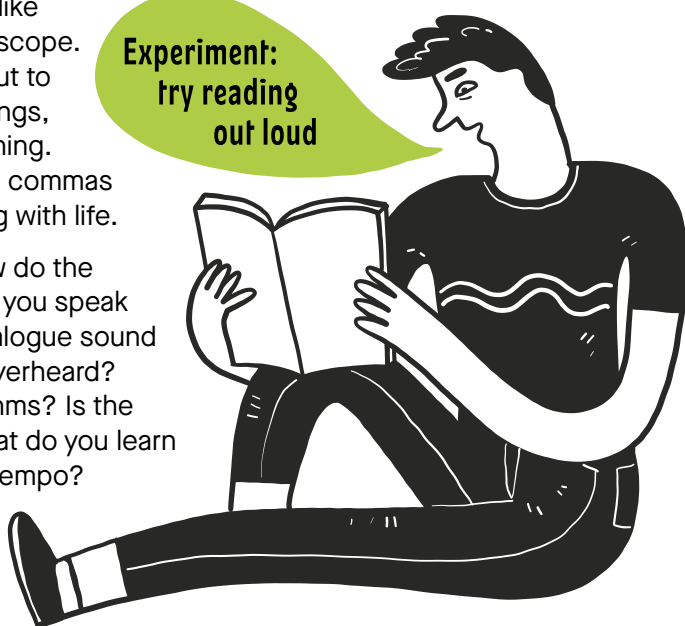
Listen and take stock: have they presented their argument well? Has what they said changed your mind, or can you at least see some merit in their points?

As well as listening to other perspectives, it's good practise when critiquing a short story (in fact this principle applies to most pieces of 'art'), to ensure that there is some balance in your argument. If a piece of writing doesn't speak to you personally or ring true, you are entitled to your opinion but you should always respect the writer's endeavour – the time and energy they have put into the writing and getting it published. When you are discussing a short story with friends, imagine that the author is in the room listening.

## Example

Being able to cite specific examples from the literary work in question will help support your argument. Make sure you note down particular phrases from the work, or you might start with a quotation, like you're a scientist presenting data.

**Experiment:  
try reading  
out loud**



# What makes a good short story?

**Although there's no rule about how long a short story should be – some are 20 pages, some only two paragraphs – they all have far fewer words to play with than a novel does.**

The short story writer then has to make every word count. In other words, they need to think carefully about what each scene, character or image is contributing to the story. In thinking about the point of the story, and judging whether it is successful, you also need to be alert to all these things. Reading short stories teaches you to read attentively; it's easier to notice every detail in 10 pages than it is in 100. You'll be surprised by how much you can get from the close reading of a text.

Short stories rarely try to present the whole of a character's life, but instead focus on some break in the routine or a moment of crisis that can be a turning point for a character. Perhaps the most important question to ask about a short story then is why the author has started it and finished it where they have. Why is this particular moment or observation the starting point? And then, why stop right now? Do you feel the story has come to a satisfying end? That doesn't mean there has to be a twist in the tale, or a punchline like in a joke, or a great revelation. But the stop, like the start, has to feel meaningful.

In order to answer the question of why a story starts and ends where it does, you might want to think about who is telling the story, and why? Is it told in the first person (by an 'I') or the third person (telling us about 'he' or 'she') or perhaps even in the second person (imagining what 'you' might do)? Do we trust the storyteller or do we suspect they have a particular agenda in telling their tale?

**Here is more detail on the different elements to consider when you are critiquing short stories:**

## Structure

Not all short stories will necessarily follow the same format, but a standard short story structure is below. The main point to note is the climax, or epiphany, that happens towards the end of the story. Tensions break, truths are told, big things happen.

**Exposition** is the start of the story. The writer should quickly set the scene, giving a sense of the

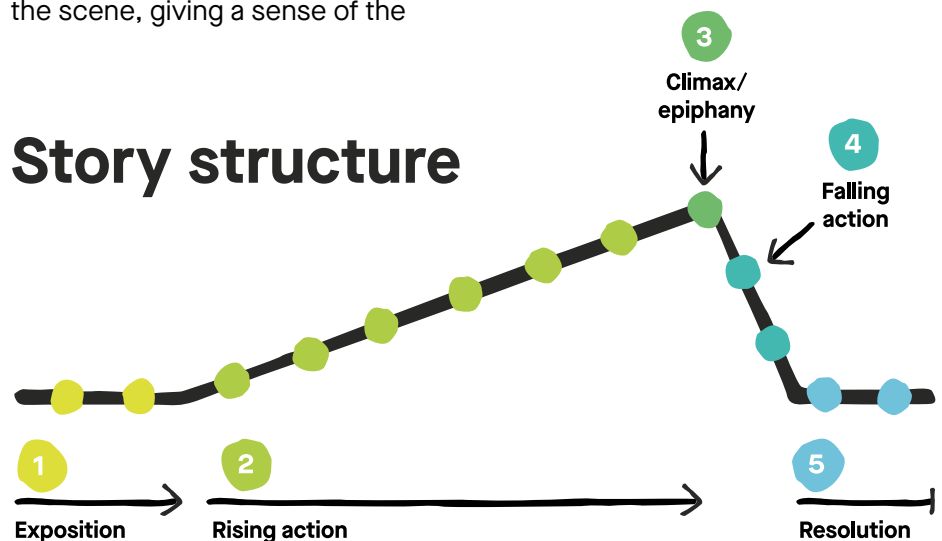
location and feel of the story, and introduce the main character/s. The start of the story should be intriguing and perhaps form a thematic link to the end.

**Rising action** means that the story gets more involved. The action doesn't have to be epic, but the situation evolves.

**Climax** is the 'top' of the story, and can be where the main character faces whatever has been building up in the rising action. Alternatively, the climax can involve an epiphany or realisation for the main character.

**Falling action** is where the story starts to wind down. If the main character has made a decision, it shows the consequences.

**The resolution** is the conclusion of the story. Here, the conflicts are resolved, many (if not all) loose ends are tied up, and the story finishes either with a satisfying sense of closure or a more ambiguous end.





## What makes a good short story?

[continued]

### Characters

Short stories tend to feature one or two main characters with a few other background, sketched-in characters if the writer needs them to make events happen. Main characters need to be represented vividly but briefly, so that the reader gets a feel for who they are without it taking up too much space on the page.

### Imagery

Short stories often employ vivid imagery that sets the scene quickly, describes a character or makes us feel something distinct. There's no time for flabby description, and good short stories include punchy similes or metaphors or sensual detail to describe characters, moods and locations.

### Timescale

Short stories tend to cover a small period of time – a day, a week, even an hour or less, and if they spread

over a longer period of, say, a few weeks, the relevant parts of the story still focus in on key moments in that timeline. Short stories throw light on the short moments of understanding or illumination that occur in people's lives – sometimes these are dramatic and lifechanging, sometimes they are more subtle.

### Dialogue

Dialogue in short stories should work to push stories forward and reflect the developing tensions and drama between characters. Dialogue should show the reader what characters are like instead of the writer having to describe them at length. It should also be short and to the point. Dialogue doesn't have to be written in short, choppy sentences, but it should be spare and not contain anything it doesn't absolutely need to.

## What to look out for

**The judging guidelines for the BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University are listed below. These aren't exhaustive but you can use these general pointers to frame your discussion around short stories.**

Originality of prose and narrative voice.

Does the opening suggest potential, and does it bear a relationship to the end?

Does the story have structure and are the characters credible?

Does the writing serve narrative and characters, and act integrally within the overall scheme of the story?

Does the story conjure a cogent world out of limited elements (without the need to explain everything or be comprehensive in detail) and is the scheme of the story clear?

Has something happened either within the story or between writer and reader and was this achieved effectively?

Originality of prose and narrative voice



# What next?

Now you understand how to approach close reading and critiquing and the different elements of short stories, put what you have learned into practice.

Check out the discussion guide **'Four short stories to read and discuss'** where you can read stories from the **BBC National Short Story Award**, and apply the principles of critiquing you've learned. There are questions and discussion points

for each story, and some creative writing exercises if you want to have a go yourself!

You can find lots more ideas and resources, including **'Four short stories to read and discuss'** at:

[bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3](http://bbc.co.uk/teach/student-critics/zxhqdp3)



## Activities

**Set up a short story reading group in your school library. Meet regularly and take it in turns to choose a short story to read or discuss as a group.**



**Start a short story blog or podcast to share your ideas and reviews.**

**Take photos, film or record your discussions with friends\* or write notes to help document your ideas.**

\*Make sure you have their permission!



**Invite an audience of students or parents to listen to a short-story themed discussion, or present two opposing viewpoints in a debate-style forum.**



**Visit a local library or bookshop to browse interesting short story collections and anthologies.**



**Email us!**



**We'd love you to share some of your activities with us:  
[bbcscsca@bbc.co.uk](mailto:bbcscsca@bbc.co.uk)**

## What next?

### Got a story in you? We want to hear it

If you have been inspired by reading short stories and would like to share some of your own writing, why not enter the **BBC Young Writers' Award with Cambridge University**? Young people aged between 14-18 years are invited to submit original short stories of up to 1,000 words.

Each year, a shortlist of five stories is chosen by the judging panel, which includes well-known writers and broadcasters. The shortlisted young writers have their stories narrated by an actor and recorded for a BBC broadcast, as well as being published in anthology.

They are also invited to take part in a creative writing workshop with a leading writer – and the winner receives a special one-to-one mentoring session with an author.

Launched as part of the tenth anniversary celebrations for the BBC National Short Story Award the BBC Young Writers' Award aims to inspire and encourage the next generation of writers.

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**Find creative writing resources for students and teachers, the latest news and how to enter at [bbc.co.uk/ywa](http://bbc.co.uk/ywa)**

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## LISTEN UP

### Short Stories on BBC Sounds

**Listen to hundreds of short stories on BBC Sounds including timeless classics and stories shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University.**

**Subscribe to the BBC Short Story Podcast for brand new stories written by today's writers, brought to you by BBC Radio 4.**

**[bbc.co.uk/sounds](http://bbc.co.uk/sounds)  
(search: 'short story')**



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