



Writing a short story

BBC

**Young Writers'
Award**

with Cambridge University



**I think of writing like running.
The short story form is a 5k and
the novel is a marathon.**

**You need to train precisely for
both but the rewards of the short
form come within months rather
than years.**

Ingrid Persaud



**Winner of the 2018 BBC National Short Story Award
with Cambridge University.**

Contents

What is a short story?	3
Starting points	4
Structure	6
The elements of a good story	7
Editing your story	10
Next steps	11
Useful resources	11

What is a short story?

There's no rule about how long a short story should be – some are 20 pages, some only two paragraphs.

But short stories all have far fewer words to play with than a novel does. The short story writer has to make every word count. You'll need to think carefully about what each scene, character or image is contributing to the story.

After you've written a first draft of your short story, you can tighten it up by deleting anything unnecessary. But try to keep it brief from the start.

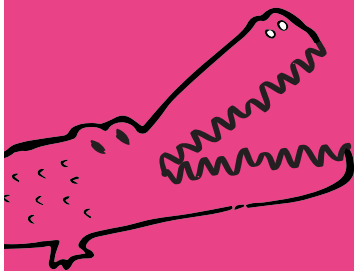
Remember, a short story isn't a novel that's been harshly edited. It's a different form with its own rules. For some inspiring examples of what the short story can do, check out the stories shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University at bbc.co.uk/nssa

Ready to get started?

This guide explores how to write a good short story. We're going to focus on structure, characters, imagery, timescale, starts and ends, dialogue, tense and point of view.

When you are writing your story, concentrate on:

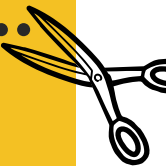
short, snappy paragraphs,



punchy description,



and ~~blah blah...~~ leave the flabby parts out of your plot.



Starting points

Whatever kind of writing you're doing, take some time to play and experiment with ideas to get you started.

Try these suggestions for starting points which work especially well for short stories.

1.

Take the first line from an existing short story and use it to start a new piece of writing.

Short stories have to grab the reader's attention from the beginning and so often start with something intriguing and punchy.

Try one of these lines from BBC National Short Story Award stories and see where they take you (ideally without reading the rest of the story first!).

“

When he was a baby, Ghillie's mother was mostly an orangutan.”

(*Ghillie's Mum*, Lynda Clark, shortlist 2019)

There's a stand-off in the front yard”

(*In the Car With the Rain Coming Down*, Jan Carson, shortlist 2020)

Mr Ingram and his invisible daughter Miss Ingram live close by.”

(*The Invisible*, Jo Lloyd, winner, 2019)

2.

Use a picture or photo to inspire you to write a short story that captures a moment in time.

Many short stories are set in small time periods – an hour or a day or even a minute! Scour magazines to find an image that interests or intrigues you, or open a book of photography at random. Black and white pictures work well, or try vintage photos, paintings (it's easier when they feature people) or images from newspapers.

RESOURCES

Historic England has a great online archive of old pictures:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/>

as does the National Archives:

<https://images.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Now look at the picture you've chosen and answer the following questions:

What has just happened?

What happens in the moment after this?

What are the people's names?

What do they want?

What do they fear?

What are they thinking and feeling in the moment of the picture?

What can you smell, taste and hear?

What is to the right and left of the picture?



Starting points [continued]



3.

Use an existing song title as the title and/or first line of your story and let it inspire you.

Song titles can be hugely evocative and set a mood without you even listening to the song itself! You might have a favourite, or try one of the following:

All Along the Watchtower

Jimi Hendrix

No Body, No Crime

Taylor Swift

Since I've Been Loving You

Led Zeppelin

I Constantly Thank God for Esteban

Panic! At the Disco

One Last Look Around the House

Before We Go

Kate Bush

4.

Describe an item as if it was the most precious thing to your main character.

Short stories employ striking imagery to make quick impressions in the reader's mind. Start a story by choosing a personal belonging – a handbag, key, jumper, wallet, piece of jewellery – and describing it in vivid detail for a few sentences that begin “The (item) is/was...”

Include the item's smell, colour, shape, features (chipped? worn? ripped? shiny?). Use a simile or metaphor – what will you compare it to? In your next paragraph, explain who it belongs to.

Then consider why the item is important to your character, and what has happened to it. Has the character lost the item? Has it been left at the scene of a crime? Was it a gift from someone important to them?

Let your item become an overall symbol for your story.

If it's a handbag, is there a secret your character is hiding? If it's a key, is there a revelation or discovery in the story? If it's a piece of jewellery, has something in the character's life lost its shine? Refer back to the item during the story and see how effectively you can make it a symbol of what happens.

Tip:

Relax and take time to experiment with different ideas – there are no wrong ones!



5

Structure

Not all short stories will necessarily follow the same format, but very often, they follow the structure below.

Most important is the **climax or epiphany**, which happens towards the end of the story. At this moment, tensions break, realisations are made, truths are told or action happens. Ideally, this is the moment you've been subtly (or not so subtly) leading up to through the story.

1) Exposition

Exposition is the start of the story. Set the scene quickly, 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. **Short stories often start on a strong first line – look at the opening lines on p4 for some great examples.**

2) Rising action

Rising action is where the story gets more involved. You can introduce more characters, more detail, or some backstory – but bear in mind that any more detail has to be totally relevant and necessary. We only want to be told about the pattern on the curtains if it later becomes essential that we know about it!

3) Climax/epiphany

The climax/epiphany is the 'top' of the story. The main character may face a dramatic event that been building up in the rising action - an argument, a gunshot, a kiss, a surprising revelation. Alternatively, the climax may involve an epiphany (big realisation) for the main character. They might realise they love someone, discover that someone was lying, or remember something important.

In Flannery O'Connor's 'A Story of Good Fortune', the character Ruby climbs the stairs to the top of the building where she lives. At the top of the stairs (literally embodying the story structure) she realises she is pregnant.

4) Falling action

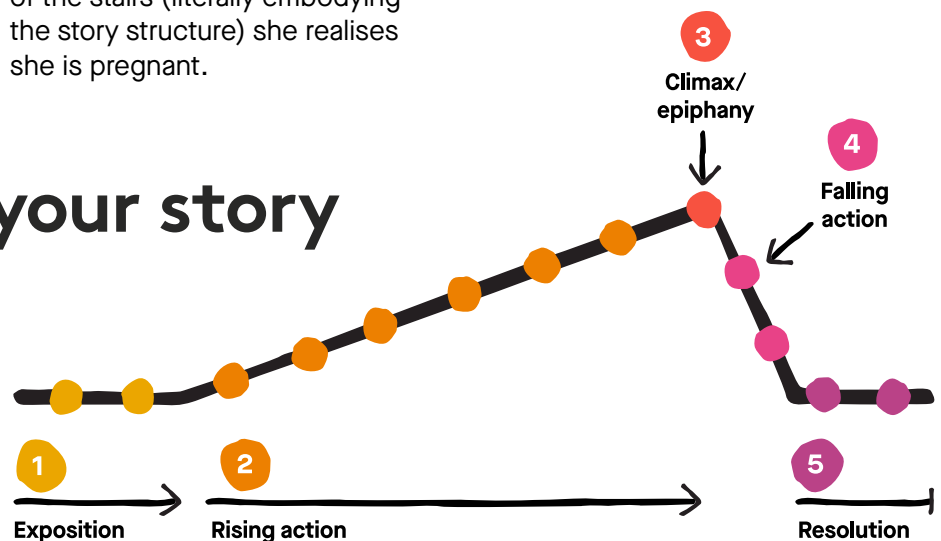
Falling action is where the story winds down. If the main character has made a decision, it shows the consequences.

5) Resolution

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 that might leave the reader wondering.

Once you've reached the climax/epiphany, you should end the story as soon as possible. Try to make your falling action and resolution as short as possible without compromising on the story. It may be that after your climax, you just need a couple of sentences. Be as brief as you can.

The shape of your story



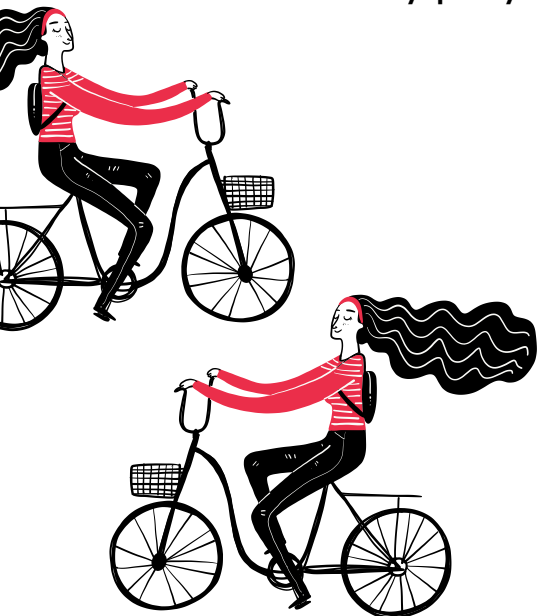
The elements of a good story

Openings and endings

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 becomes a turning point. Perhaps the most important question to ask about a short story is: where should you start and finish? Why is this particular moment the starting point? Has the story come to a satisfying end? That doesn't mean there has to be a twist in the tale, or a punchline, or a great revelation. But the end, like the start, should feel meaningful.

One good piece of advice for deciding where to start is to choose the latest moment you can bring your reader into the story you want them to experience. If you're writing about Rosa Parks refusing to sit at the back of the bus, do you start the story in Rosa's childhood, or in the moment she walks past the first row of seats?

Get in and out of the story quickly.



Point of view

Who is telling the story and why? Is your story told in the first person (by an "I"), or in the third person ("he", "she" or "they") or perhaps even in the second person ("you")?

Writing from the point of view of a character ("I" or "she") gives you the freedom to show their own – perhaps flawed – interpretation of events. This may simply be their personal 'take' on an argument with a friend – or they may be completely unreliable i.e. not telling the reader the truth. If you decide to try this, think about how you will show the reader your character is unreliable. Will other characters or events contradict them? Will they overhear others talking about the fact they are lying – or misguided?

Using a first person character point of view ("I") means you are limited to their version of events they are personally involved in. This gives the reader a greater sense of 'knowing' a character. However, you may have to work harder to show the reader events they need to know about, if the main character isn't present.

Third person narration, even when it's limited to the one point of view character, means that the narrator voice can still know things the character doesn't i.e. "Sanjay didn't know it, but Gemma was creeping up on him in the hall". The point of view can stay with Sanjay, but the narrator can give extra information here and there.

Or you can use a third person omniscient narrator, where the



narrator voice knows everything, and can show different points of view i.e. "Sanjay didn't know it, but Gemma was creeping up on him in the hall. She wondered whether she should just shout something or shove him as well."

In a short story, first and limited third person points of view work well, because they give the fastest connection to a character, and a sense of immediacy that suits the punchy style of the short story. However, plenty of short stories use omniscient third person narrators, so choose what suits your story, or test out different approaches to see what works for you.

Try this! Try rewriting a story that you or someone else has written from a different point of view – another character, an omniscient narrator, or even an inanimate object! How does experimenting with a different perspective and voice affect the story?

The elements of a good story [continued]

Narrative voice

Whoever tells your story, it's important to keep the voice consistent. If your point of view character starts off being confrontational and aggressive, don't let them slip into gentler language or reactions halfway through (unless there's a reason for doing so). Even if you decide to have two, or several different points of view within the same story, each should remain consistent and clear.

Tense

Your story needs to be in either present ("I run to the bus stop") or past tense ("I ran to the bus stop").

Once you've decided which you'll use, stick with it throughout, unless there's a very good reason for changing. For example you might move from the present tense if you have a section in the story where a character remembers something that happened in the past.

Present tense can give a sense of immediacy - the events of the story are happening now. Past tense gives the feeling that events have already happened, and creates a feeling of distance.

Try this! Take a paragraph from your story and try writing it in two different tenses. How do they change things? Which seems to suit your story best?

Characters

Short stories tend to feature one or two main characters with a few other background, sketched-in characters. There usually isn't time to consider detailed relationships between a number of people.

Background characters are there to help make events happen if necessary, or to demonstrate reactions to the main character. 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. Good short stories include punchy similes or metaphors or sensual detail (smell, touch, taste, sound as well as the visual) to describe characters, moods and locations.

Decide what overall feeling you want your short story to have – is it romantic, hopeful, scary, domestic, fantastical? When you have the sense of the feel you want, make your imagery fit that overall dominant impression. If you're writing a kitchen sink drama, should you use dragon and wizard imagery? Probably not. If you want

your imagery to contribute to a romantic feeling, you might use a simile like "the butterflies in her stomach were more like champagne bubbles" – champagne is generally considered romantic, after all. It wouldn't be as effective to your overall impression to compare the feeling of love to, say, the cold silence of a mortuary (unless you're either a) writing a gothic love story or b) want to suggest that all is not as it should be in this romantic relationship).

Imagery is one of the best ways to 'show, don't tell' – to give the reader the intuitions you want them to have without telling them "it was romantic" or "it was scary".

The elements of a good story [continued]

Timescale

Short stories tend to cover a short period of time – a day, a week, even an hour or less. Even if they do 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 life-changing, sometimes they are more subtle. Consider what would be the shortest amount of time you would need to tell your story. Can you tell it in the timescale of an hour? Does it need longer?

Dialogue

Dialogue can help move your story forward and reflect the developing tensions and drama between characters. It also helps show readers what characters are like, instead of describing them at length. Keep it short and to the point, and try not to include anything that isn't absolutely necessary. Think about what information needs to be disclosed or revealed. What do you want to show about the characters or their relationship?

Try this! Record a real-life conversation and transcribe it. What do you notice about the way people speak? Look at the structure of their sentences and the words they use.



“

For me, the short story can act as a photograph, a moment in time, complete with characters' histories and emotions, without necessarily working towards a resolution. These short and intense pieces can act like a song; for a brief moment, you are swept away by a melody, and when you emerge on the other side, you're not the same as when you started.

Caleb Azumah Nelson

”

Shortlisted for the 2020 BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University.

Editing your story

Tip:

Put your story aside for a few days before you come back to edit it with fresh eyes. Try reading it aloud to see how it sounds.



No-one ever writes a perfect story straightaway. You will need to edit your story – rewriting some parts, deleting others, or maybe even starting from scratch on some occasions.

Here are some tips for editing your story:

Look for any repetitions and delete them (unless it's important that your story features repetition).

Has your story got a snappy and intriguing first line? Does it make sense for the story? Rewrite it if not.

Is the story well-paced, or have you written pages on the end scene and left the rest a bit incomplete?

Is your story too short – or too long? Delete what you don't need, or add what you do

Does all your dialogue do something useful? If your characters are having a meaningless chat, cut it.

Are there any changes in tense or point of view that need to be changed to make your story consistent?

Is it a satisfying ending? If you've finished with a twist, does the twist work?

Do you need to seed in any ideas earlier in the story so that later events make more sense?

Does your rising action contribute to the climax or epiphany?

Is your imagery striking and brief? Does it give the impression you want?

For example: if someone turns out to be deaf at the end but you haven't mentioned it at all until then, you might want to go back and show a hearing aid, the character using sign language, etc.

Have you started as late as you could into the story events and finished as early as possible?

Next steps

Written a short story? We want to read it.

If you're between 14–18 and based in the UK, you can enter the **BBC Young Writers' Award with Cambridge University**.

Each year, the five shortlisted writers have their stories narrated by an actor for a BBC broadcast. The shortlisted writers take part in creative workshops and attend the Awards ceremony at BBC Broadcasting House while the overall winner receives one-to-one mentoring with an author.

For more information, including how to enter, closing dates, terms and conditions, and privacy notice, visit bbc.co.uk/ywa

Want to read more short stories? We can help.

Check out **BBC Student Critics with Cambridge University** for short story recommendations plus resources to help develop your critical reading skills, and boost your confidence in expressing your opinions.

You can also find out how your group can apply to join the judges of the BBC National Short Story Award by becoming one of our official groups of Student Critics.

For more information, visit: bbc.co.uk/nssa

USEFUL RESOURCES

First Story offers a range of activities and resources for secondary school students. Activities include National Writing Day, summer residential courses, regional and national events and regular competitions.

firststory.org.uk

Mslexia magazine provides helpful writing articles online, as well as short story masterclasses, creativity prompts, workshops and competitions.

mslexia.co.uk

NAWE (National Association of Writers in Education) Young Writers' Hub supports young writers from 16-25 years old and publishes their work as well as signposting writing opportunities, providing creative inspiration and more.

nawe.co.uk/young-writers-hub.html

LitHub is an American literary website with a section reviewing new short story collections as well as a section on writing craft and a variety of podcasts.

lithub.com

Creative Writing Ink hosts a listing of writing competitions open to teenagers.

creativewritingink.co.uk/writing-competitions/

Website addresses correct as of 23/02/2021.

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
(search: 'short story')