Guidelines for Writing Short Stories

If you want or need to write a short story, here's some advice that you might find helpful.

Some important things to remember as you plan and write:

- **Write what you know**—keep the story believable and authentic by staying within the boundaries of your knowledge and experience.

- **Keep it simple**—if you get too ambitious, you will make it much more difficult to write, and it's unlikely to work out well.

- **Include a lot of descriptive details**—details of the characters' appearance, reactions, emotions, etc. are especially important. Create a vivid atmosphere through your descriptions. Vivid and interesting *details* are also the main way of making your story unique and real instead of clichéd and unoriginal.

If you want to focus on the main character's thoughts and feelings (and his internal conflict, if he has one) and keep the other characters' thoughts unknown to the reader, the **first person point of view** works well.

One thing you might consider is **writing the story in the present tense**. Sometimes that gives a story an element of tension and excitement because it seems to be happening and unfolding NOW. Just make sure you stay in the present tense and use it consistently and correctly.

Don't worry too much about the thematic/symbolic/figurative level of meaning as you write. These elements help give a story depth, and you should give them some thought as you plan your story, but they can also weigh you down when you're doing the actual composition. In the interest of keeping the writing process and the story itself simple and natural, focus on writing something that works well on a literal level. A good story will almost always work on a deeper level in some way, too, even if the author doesn't consciously design it that way. When you go back and revise your draft, you might try to bring out these aspects of the story more fully.

Your main character could be sympathetic and likable (main characters usually are), but he or she could also be an unlikable character, though it's more difficult to make a story about such a character work well. **The best characters are usually complex**—likable, sympathetic, or understandable in some ways, but flawed in others. Does his or her "level of likability" change as a result of the story?

Short stories usually don't involve many characters or a complicated plot because there isn't enough space to explore these things in sufficient depth. **The scale and scope of a short story should be limited and focused** so that you can explore the story in detail.

Elements to include in your story

Including these elements in your story will give it depth and power:

- **a well-developed protagonist** (central character) who undergoes some kind of change, evolution, development (or perhaps stays the same despite the changes and forces around him or her—it's up to you)

- **plot**: conflict (between characters, with nature, within protagonist's own mind, etc.), climax (where the conflict reaches a high point), resolution

- **dialogue**: meaningful interaction between protagonist and other characters—the speech of each character should be distinct and reflect his personality

- **detailed description/imagery**: draw the reader in, and make the characters and setting seem real with vivid description

- **theme/motif**: an issue or concept that you're concerned with, a message you want to convey

- **symbolism**: a central symbol of some sort that is meaningful in terms of the protagonist or the theme

- **figurative language**: metaphor, simile, personification, pathetic fallacy, allusion

- **attention to tone, mood, atmosphere**: convey emotion carefully through your choice of words: ironic, sarcastic, desperate, liberated, hopeless, celebratory, reflective

- **point of view**: decide whether to use 1st person, 3rd person limited, or 3rd person omniscient point of view—if the narrator is a person (the protagonist, another character in the story, an objective observer, another person with feelings and opinions about the story, or even yourself), make sure that the narrative voice appropriately reflects this choice

Getting started

If you're having a hard time getting started, try the following techniques:

- brainstorm about all of the elements listed above separately, and see what kind of story emerges from your various ideas when you put them together

- begin by developing a well-thought-out protagonist:

  1. come up with a list of adjectives that describe this person

  2. model the character on an actual person, but with some differences, of course, or compare and contrast your character with people you know—this is often easier than trying to create a character from scratch

  3. imagine how your character would react to various scenarios (hypothetical situations) you come up with: how she would feel, how she would act, what thoughts she would have—this will give you a clear, consistent idea of your character's personality