



Short Stories

WRITING BOX

What is a short story?

A short story is a self-contained, condensed piece of prose fiction under about 10,000 words that often focuses on a single incident and has few characters.

Why write a short story?

Short stories are perfect for ideas that fit into a small package and don't require a lot of pages to tell. They help you practice your writing skills, try new things, and gain confidence. A short story can also help you develop a character or flesh out an idea before adding it to a longer work. **Flash fiction**—a very short story (under 1,000 words)—can be a fun place to start.

What are the most important components of Short Stories?

A great explanation of the components of a short story can be found in this resource, based on the classic *Cinderella* (<https://www.slideshare.net/TroyMoore8/elements-of-a-short-story-with-cinderella-examples-1>). Also see the story included in this toolkit for examples.

EXPOSITION is background introductory information about the setting, characters' backstories, prior events, and historical context that helps the reader's understanding. Too much of this kind of information can slow down the action, though, and because short stories are brief, they typically do not contain a lot of exposition.

SETTING gives the reader context. When and where does the story take place? In a house? In the countryside? In an apartment on a busy street in the city? What does it look, smell, and sound like? Usually, short stories have a single setting.

CONFLICT is what readers live for! It may sound strange, but the discord between people or things is at the heart of most stories. Examples of conflicts include an outcast trying to fit in, an athlete attempting to make the Olympics, or someone struggling to survive in the wilderness. The main character is usually on one side of the central conflict and struggling against another character, society, nature, technology, or even themselves.

CHARACTER: Short stories usually have just a few characters at most. It's important to establish in just a short space what your characters are like. What do they look like? Do they wear glasses or carry a briefcase? What kind of voice do they have? What is their personality like?

PLOT is a planned, logical series of events with a beginning, middle, and an end. The plot typically includes:

- **Beginning:** Describe the characters and setting.
- **Rising Action:** Things get a little complicated for your character(s), and the conflict of the story is introduced. Every good story has a conflict—something that makes you wonder what the character will do in this particular situation.
- **High Point/Middle:** The pivotal, most high stakes part of the story. A good high point keeps readers guessing about whether the conflict will be resolved.

- **Falling Action:** The story begins to resolve and events and/or conflicts begin to wrap up.
- **End:** The story's conflicts are wrapped up and the final outcome is revealed and usually resolved.

POINT OF VIEW: The most common points of view are first person (where the story is told from a particular character's perspective, that is an "I") or third person (where the story is told from the perspective of an all-knowing narrator).

THEME is the use of one or more repeating images or ideas in a story that create a certain mood or message.

Tips to help you with writing a Short Story

Finding an Idea

Write what you love or write about what interests you. For example, you could set your story on a basketball court or have a character who enjoys gardening. Some authors keep a running list in a notebook about the ideas they may want to write about someday.

Think about a memory, problem, or conflict that resonates with you and see where it leads. Keep your eyes and ears open to experiences you read about or see playing out around you for inspiration that could lead to a short story.

Check out some writing prompts or a plot generator to help you get started. *See the Further Resources for Writing Short Stories section below for websites with prompts and generators.*

Getting Started

Use an **outline, graphic organizer, or even a sketch** to help crystalize your thoughts, develop the structure, and organize the plot of your story. This is a great way to get your ideas on paper and give you a map for where you're going. Remember that it's always possible to revise your outline! See <https://freeology.com/tag/short-stories/> for some graphic organizer templates. Here are some suggestions for creating an outline, graphic organizer, or sketch of your own:

- Create a rough outline of your premise, settings, characters, and conflict. What are some elements of your story? Is there a theme? What is your character's goal? Where do you expect to begin and end?
- Develop a list of scenes. You have the beginning and end, now figure out how the story will progress.
- Flesh out your scenes and add details, such as which settings and characters will be involved. Include as much information as possible.
- Remember to “show, not tell”; in other words, show the reader what the character is like through dialogue or description or metaphors (i.e. rather than writing “Joe was a quiet man,” you could write, “Joe listened to his sister, nodding occasionally, never opening his mouth to agree or disagree.” Or rather than writing, “The car drove down the street,” try “The car sped by, leaving gape-mouthed pedestrians frightened.”
- *See the Further Resources for Writing Short Stories section below for websites with outlining advice and templates.*

Just go with the flow by picking up your pen or starting to type, allowing your imagination to soar. Write what seems right and see where the story takes you. This approach sometimes leads to more revisions than using an outline, but it allows freedom and creativity.

Revising and Editing

- Once you've finished your story, you'll want to polish and refine it. The processes of revising and editing help you fix major problems such as plot holes as well as grammar, transitions, and word choices.
- Try not to edit as you write since this slows down the process and can easily bog you down. The brief nature of a short story means every detail counts, so look carefully at long passages. These may need to be cut shorter during editing, but write as much as you want at first and leave the editing for later.
- *See the Further Resources for Writing Short Stories section below for websites with further editing advice.*

More Tips and Tricks

- Writing is harder than it looks! Give yourself time to go at your own pace and just enjoy the experience.
- Try to get into a writing routine, even if for only a few minutes a day. Make writing a habit!
- If you get stuck on a story, try setting it aside for a while. Starting a new story is a good way to get over "writer's block," or who knows, the second story may end up being even better.
- Developing short story writing skills takes practice. Try writing a story with a low word count, then push the word count up until you've reached your goal.

Some samples to help you as you write your own short story are attached.

Sources and Further Resources

[Elements of a Short Story](#)

[Writing short stories](#)

[How to outline](#)

[Author Learning Center](#)

[What is a short story](#)

[How to Write a Short Story](#)

[Elements of a short story](#)

[Writing resources](#)

[Plot generator and writing prompts](#)

[Writing prompt generator](#)

[Plot generator](#)

[Writing Prompt Generator](#)

[Simple outline](#)

[Flexible outline](#)

[Using Conflicts in a Story: 6 Helpful Examples](#)

[How to edit](#)

[Editing](#)

[Elements of a short story with examples from Cinderella](#)

For additional help in writing short stories, YpsiWrites offers one-to-one consulting. For more information, see ypsiwrites.com.

Cinderella Example

EXPOSITION: “Once upon a time, there was a beautiful girl named Cinderella. She lived with her wicked stepmother and two stepsisters. They treated Cinderella very badly.”

SETTING: “She lived with her wicked stepmother and two stepsisters. ... One day, they were invited for a grand ball in the king’s palace.”

CONFLICT: “One day, they were invited for a grand ball in the king’s palace. But Cinderella’s stepmother would not let her go. Cinderella was made to sew new party gowns for her stepmother and stepsisters, and curl their hair. They then went to the ball, leaving Cinderella alone at home.”

CHARACTERS: Cinderella, step-mother, step-sisters

POINT OF VIEW: Third person omniscient

PLOT: BEGINNING

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful girl named Cinderella. She lived with her wicked stepmother and two stepsisters. They treated Cinderella very badly. One day, they were invited for a grand ball in the king’s palace. But Cinderella’s stepmother would not let her go. Cinderella was made to sew new party gowns for her stepmother and stepsisters, and curl their hair. They then went to the ball, leaving Cinderella alone at home.

PLOT: RISING ACTION

Cinderella felt very sad and began to cry. Suddenly, a fairy godmother appeared and said, “Don’t cry, Cinderella! I will send you to the ball!”

But Cinderella was sad. She said, “I don’t have a gown to wear for the ball!”

The fairy godmother waved her magic wand and changed Cinderella's old clothes into a beautiful new gown! The fairy godmother then touched Cinderella's feet with the magic wand. And lo! She had beautiful glass slippers!

"How will I go to the grand ball?" asked Cinderella. The fairy godmother found six mice playing near a pumpkin, in the kitchen. She touched them with her magic wand and the mice became four shiny black horses and two coachmen and the pumpkin turned into a golden coach. Cinderella was overjoyed and set off for the ball in the coach drawn by the six black horses.

Before leaving, the fairy godmother said, "Cinderella, this magic will only last until midnight! You must reach home by then!"

PLOT: HIGH POINT/MIDDLE

When Cinderella entered the palace, everybody was struck by her beauty. Nobody, not even Cinderella's stepmother or stepsisters, knew who she really was in her pretty clothes and shoes. The handsome prince also saw her and fell in love with Cinderella.

He went to her and asked, "Do you want to dance?"

And Cinderella said, "Yes!"

The prince danced with her all night and nobody recognized the beautiful dancer. Cinderella was so happy dancing with the prince that she almost forgot what the fairy godmother had said. At the last moment, Cinderella remembered her fairy godmother's words and she rushed to go home.

PLOT: FALLING ACTION

"Oh! I must go!" she cried and ran out of the palace. One of her glass slippers came off but Cinderella did not turn back for it. She reached home just as the clock struck twelve. Her coach turned back into a pumpkin, the horses into mice and her fine ball gown into rags. Her stepmother and stepsisters reached home shortly after that. They were talking about the beautiful lady who had been dancing with the prince.

The prince had fallen in love with Cinderella and wanted to find out who the beautiful girl was, but he did not even know her name. He found the glass slipper that had come off Cinderella's foot as she ran home.

The prince said, "I will find her. The lady whose foot fits this slipper will be the one I marry!"

PLOT: END

The next day, the prince and his servants took the glass slipper and went to all the houses in the kingdom. They wanted to find the lady whose feet would fit in the slipper. All the women in the kingdom tried the slipper but it would not fit any of them. Cinderella's stepsisters also tried on the little glass slipper. They tried to squeeze their feet and push hard into the slipper, but the servant was afraid the slipper would break.

Cinderella's stepmother would not let her try the slipper on, but the prince saw her and said, "Let her also try on the slipper!"

The slipper fit her perfectly. The prince recognized her from the ball. He married Cinderella and together they lived happily ever after.

THEMES: Rags to riches, good versus evil

Adaptation of Cinderella retrieved from

<https://shortstoriesshort.com/story/cinderella-beautiful-girl/>.

Gift of the Magi Example

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI (O Henry)

POINT OF VIEW - THIRD PERSON

CONFLICTS - INTERNAL and PERSON vs SOCIETY

THEME - LOVE, SECONDARY THEME - SACRIFICE

BEGINNING and EXPOSITION

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

CHARACTER [There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.] SETTING

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. [A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.] SETTING

SETTING [In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."]

EXPOSITION [The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.]

CHARACTER [Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag.] SETTING [She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard.] [Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present.] She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling--something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

→ CONFLICT and RISING ACTION

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pierglass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

CHARACTER

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mne. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation--as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value--the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends--a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do--oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. ^{CHARACTER} He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two--and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.]

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again--you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice-- what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you--sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year--what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

^{HIGH POINT}
White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs--the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims--just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

FALLING ACTION

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

RESOLUTION/END

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

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