Tips for Writing a Short Story

**Fiction** is constructed from the following 6 components:

• **Characters** - Main characters, minor characters, & character development

• **Dialogue**- Reveals character; advances plot

• **Setting** - time, place, mood, & atmosphere

• **Plot** - six basic plots with a central **conflict**; plot motivation; setbacks

• **Point of View** - First person, third person

• **Beginnings, Transitions, and Endings**

**Characters**

The **main character** is also known as the **hero** or **heroine**, or the **protagonist.** In stories with good guys and bad guys, the **villain**, or **antagonist**, can be a main character (Ex.: Wolf in Three Little Pigs).

**Minor characters** are the others in the story who interact with or help the main characters. They are used to enhance and help reveal the main characters' personae, often by contrast. Sometimes they are referred to as **foils** (Ex.: Cinderella's stepsisters).

**Writers reveal their characters through five means:**

1. what they **say**

2. what they **think**

3. what they **do**

4. direct **description**

5. **what the other characters say or think** about them

**Dialogue**

Dialogue can:

1. reveal character traits and show the action

2. advance the plot

**Plot**

There are **6 basic plots** for most of all fiction that have been used by all writers and may be used by beginning writers without fear of plagiarism. These may be used alone or in combination and form the basis of nearly all story conflicts, for books, plays, movies, television programs, etc.

1. **Lost and Found** - Person or object is lost and recovered

Ex.: Home Alone or Finding Nemo

2. **Character vs. Nature** - Character survives a natural disaster

Ex.: Jaws or Volcano or The Cay or Castaway

3. **Character with a personal problem or goal** - character solves it, reaches goal or changes attitude or feelings

Ex.: Rocky, Real Steel, The Giver, The Hobbit

4. **Good Guys vs. Bad Guys** - good guys usually win

Ex.: The Avengers, The Hobbit, Hunger Games

5. **Crime and Punishment** or **Mystery and Solution** - Character solves a mystery or crime and the culprit is caught or punished

Ex.: CSI, Hawaii 5-0, The Mentalist, Sherlock Holmes, Criminal Minds

6. **Boy meets Girl** - Problems or misunderstandings arise; Characters resolve differences or clear up misunderstandings

Ex.: Romeo and Juliet or Snow White or Cinderella, Twilight, The Notebook

Writers need to create **tension** in order to keep their readers interested. Writers want their readers to wonder, "What happens next?"

Writers do this in several ways:

1. **Time pressure** - The character has a limited amount of time in which to accomplish a goal or solve a problem.

Ex.: Dracula, Hocus Pocus, Source Code, Back to the Future

Other time pressures include:

**Forces of nature** - tide coming in, impending storm, sun is coming up, etc.

**Deadline dates** – work deadlines, preparations, contest entry deadlines, athletic training for a specific contest, mortgage payment, bomb set to go off, harvest before the rain frost, onset of winter, etc.

**Arrival of holiday** - birthday or Christmas gifts to make/buy, etc.

2. **Setbacks** - **The most important part of the plot is the series of setbacks the main character faces in trying to resolve the conflict or attain the goal.** **In well-developed fiction, there are often 3 or more of them.** The **series of setback**s is the rising action. **The main character overcomes each successively more difficult setback - the last one is the climax.**

Events or setbacks that might temporarily prevent the characters from solving their problems are:

• **injuries**

• **weather**

• **losses**

• **mistakes**

• **misunderstandings**

• **mishaps or accidents**

3. **Anticipation of a Major Scene** - Characters set up the tension through their dialogue about the Big Event or their warnings. They anticipate another character’s arrival or action(s).

**Endings**

The conclusion of a fictional narrative **must reveal the end of the conflict** and/or the lesson learned or insight gained by the characters from the experience. If you have trouble, go back and identify which of the 6 basic plots that you have chosen to use in your story, and make sure that you have an ending that fits the type.

• End with a **universal word**.

• End with **Finally, Eventually** . . .,

The last thing I need is another broken heart.

Eventually, the scar and the pain will fade, and I will go on.

• End with a **quotation from one of the characters.**

Like my grandma always says, “If life hands you lemons, make lemonade!”

• End with the **main character’s feelings about the event.**

I knew then that I had succeeded. I was overjoyed to have finally found my happily-ever-after.

• End with a **prediction or advice**.

The next time he came across a strange-looking little man, he walked right on by.

• End with a **summary statement**.

No matter how you look at it, laughter is good medicine.

Writers who can't seem to find the right ending may need to review the basic plot types and their corresponding resolutions. They might also try writing several endings and see which one works best.