

WRITING SHORT FICTION

By Maureen Sherbondy

Short stories are a brief form of prose writing. The genre has been around for a very long time. Some famous short story writers are Ernest Hemingway, O. Henry, Washington Irving, Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, Amy Bloom, and Kate Chopin. Shorter short stories are called postcard fiction, sudden fiction, flash fiction, or micro fiction. The length varies for flash fiction.

The goal of this workshop is to familiarize students with the elements of the short story, to show some brief examples, and then to guide students through fun writing exercises. Students will gain an understanding of the short story form, and will also write a few flash fiction stories.

Elements of the short story:

1. Setting

Geographical location where the story takes place

Time (historical time/time of day/season)

Weather

Mood or atmosphere (bright and happy/dark and scary)

2. Plot

How the writer arranges events to develop the idea. The sequence of the events.

Introduction>rising action>climax>falling action>denouement>resolution

3. Conflict

Without conflict> no plot

Opposition of forces.

Types: External/internal

Man vs. Man

Man vs. Circumstances

Man vs. Society

Man vs. Self

4. Theme

Idea of the story

Love, evil, identity, etc.

5. Character

Protagonist—central to the story

Antagonist—in opposition to the main character

Develop character through: Physical appearance, dialogue, actions, what other think and say about the character.

(A change usually occurs in the main character by the end of the story.)

Questions to consider:

What is at stake for the main character?

What are the obstacles that get in the way?

Do you hook your readers?

Do you write characters that compel?

What does your character yearn for?

Does your character change?

How is this day different?

Do you give your character a dilemma?

Do you use dialogue to show character and move the plot forward?

Exercise:

Select one from each category. Write a one-page story. Your character must want something.

Situation: Veronica has just lost her job.

William fell through the roof.

The day your baby is born, your spouse leaves.

Character: He keeps sneezing.

She twirls her hair.

He won't look you in the eye.

Item: A hot air balloon

Stinky fish

Broken window

Exercise: Choose a toy/icon/fad from your youth and write a flash piece. Follow your imagination.

Example (By Maureen Sherbondy, first published in the *Southeast Review*):

Mr. Potato Head Reveals his Secrets

Mr. Potato Head nests in the girl's hands, whispering tales about Potato Land, about the famine-massacre in Ireland – how he lost distant cousins, uncles, aunts to the disease. At night his ears sometimes detach and fly to Connecticut and hover over Yale's ivy-covered buildings. He listens for clues about how to create a life beyond deep fryer, oven, and microwave.

He says his mom and dad traveled with the circus dressed as tiny plump clowns and mini-elephants. They dreamed of flying and swinging across the tented air, but their stiff stub-arms would not allow it. When the girl's father makes those Cajun spiced, sliced potatoes for breakfast, Mr. Potato Head rolls beneath the dresser, knocking off his own nose to avoid the scent of fried potato death. Too much for the girl, she yanks out his plastic mouth, silencing the truth.

Exercise: Use a character from a fairy tale as a leaping off point for your own flash story. Change two or more things (like time and place).

Example (By Maureen Sherbondy, published in *Beyond Fairy Tales*):

Gretel still has a sweet tooth, so she grabs butterscotch suckers from the silver bowl in the lobby, candy canes from the main hall Christmas tree. Sure, her diabetes now requires daily insulin shots – but what does she care? Eighty-nine years old and nearing the end, may as well enjoy la dolce vita.

Today when she sees the cook decorating a gingerbread house, she shuffles in and watches him work, her mouth watering with each sugary addition. Then she freezes when she recalls that witch's hungry face, the hot oven, that threat from so many years ago smoldering back.

Additional Writing Prompts:

1. Write a eulogy for someone you dislike.
2. Come up with an odd first line. Figure out what comes next.
3. Write a letter to a dead relative.
4. Write a story that revolves around an article of clothing or an object.
5. Write about an animal following you.