

How to Write a Short Story

Many short stories contain a formula, as do many novels. The following is an example of a common model: *AN ENGAGING CHARACTER faces ALMOST UNBEATABLE ODDS and BY HIS OR HER OWN EFFORTS achieves a WORTHY GOAL.*

**This is only one example of a model. Like everything else, there are exceptions to this model. For example, the main character could be a very unlikable person who in the end gets what is coming to him/her.

Challenges novice writers may face

1. ***The character is not engaging/interesting enough:*** The reader wants to be able to identify with how the main character resolves his/her problem(s).
2. ***The odds are not unbeatable enough:*** The character must have a REAL PROBLEM. For example, the character must walk through a desert in order to save a friend. It would not be nearly as effective if someone showed up in a Jeep and just gave him/her a ride.
3. ***The character does not solve his/her problem(s) through his/her own efforts:*** The reader will be disappointed, to say the least, if the problem is solved for the character. One wants to sweat and worry about what will become of the character. The reader needs to watch him/her struggle and overcome the odds.
4. ***The solution is expected:*** The reader has known from the start how the character will solve the problem. It is the writer's responsibility to keep the reader engaged, even if the outcome is expected.
5. ***The goal is not worthy enough:*** Or else the audience does not see its worthiness. Who is the target audience? A child may see things as worthy that an adult may not.

Beginning your story

Before you even begin writing, here are some things to keep in mind:

1. **Choose a place to write** away from all distractions, and gather all your materials. Try to use the same place every time you write.
2. **The first paragraph is the toughest to write.** Don't waste all your time agonizing over it.
3. **Don't criticize your work as you go along.** Compliment yourself as you go along.
4. **Avoid editing prematurely.** Wait until the editing stage, because if you start too early, you'll lose momentum in your writing.
5. **Create incentives** to keep you working. If you tend to procrastinate, make a deal with yourself (i.e. vow that you'll write a page or two a day).
6. **Use a computer** when possible. Most writers work faster when they have a computer at their disposal because they can make the corrections easily.

**If you still have problems starting, take a look at The Aspirin Alternative (to Writer's Block) handout by Daisy Steinke or find it at this address:

http://www.cuw.edu/WritePlace/writing_helps.htm#writers

The 5 W's and How

WHO is your main character? Male? Female? Old, young, human, alien, rabbit, snake, strong, weak, rich or poor?

WHAT kind of story are you writing? The first paragraph would be different in a Gothic as compared to a Western. Develop the mood early, also. Is it funny, sad, serious? Who are you writing for? Who is your target audience (i.e. young adults ages 12-15)?

WHEN does this take place? In order for your readers to be able to form a picture in their heads, they need to know if this is happening in the past, present, or future.

WHERE does this take place? Is it set in an old mansion or a dungeon? Perhaps it is a different planet. This also is important when the reader is trying to form a mental picture.

WHY does this take place? What is the theme or main point you are trying to get across to the readers?

HOW does the plot unfold?

Analyzing your story

Ask yourself:

What kind of person is your main character? Is this someone that your readers will be willing and able to relate to? Keep your target audience in mind.

How can you best tell the character's story? Would first person, third person, or omniscient observer be most effective? Is the story funny, creepy, mysterious, dramatic?

At what point does the story **begin**? At what critical part of the main character's life do you begin? Normally you would not begin where the character is born.

What are you trying to say? What is the point to your story? You can not just say at the end "the moral of this story is..."

Show your readers, don't **tell!!!**

Remember

Keep the reader interested. If they get bored with the story, there's nothing easier for them to do than just put it down. You can lose the reader at the beginning of the story where he or she just can not get into it, or at the end, where he or she disagrees with the resolution. Try to keep the reader *wanting* to turn the pages.

Bradley, M. Z. What is a Short Story?. 1996 <http://mzbworks.home.att.net/what.htm>.

Hairston, Maxine, John Ruskiewicz, and Daniel Seward. CoreText: A Handbook for Writers. New York, 1997.

By Wendy Rissman, 2002