Writing a Short Story

If a man makes a bargain with the devil about the fate of his soul, can he escape the consequences? If you were given the opportunity of the fountain of youth, would you make the same choices? When does an obsession lead to your own decay?

As you’ve seen in this collection, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allen Poe answer these questions in **short stories**—short, fictional narratives that create imaginative worlds in very few pages. In this workshop you will learn how to develop a story idea into an interesting short story—to make readers cry, laugh, or shriek in terror.

Prewriting

Consider Audience, Purpose, and Tone

**Have You Heard the One About…?**The kind of story you will write will be short enough for your readers—or **audience**—to complete in one sitting. When you write a short story, your **purpose** is a literary one—that is, you use language creatively to express an idea. The attitude you have toward your readers and your subject establishes your **tone,** which may be serious, comic, or ironic.

Explore Story Ideas

**"What if…?" Situations**Many authors say that their best ideas for short stories come from real life—from a news story, an interesting-looking person, or an everyday situation. To find a story idea, try looking around and making note of your observations. Next, brainstorm a “What if?” question about each news event, person, or situation you have recorded. Then, choose the most interesting idea for your short story.

Imagine Characters and Setting

**Who?**   Once you have a story idea, imagine the people who will appear in the story—the **characters,** or the fictional individuals that have human traits (even if the characters are animals). Your short story will usually have one or more main characters and perhaps one or two secondary characters. Because believable characters act and behave in stories the way people do in real life, use **concrete sensory details** in making the characters come to life. To help you create complex characters, write responses to the following analysis questions for each character.

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| **•** | **What is the character’s appearance?** How does he or she speak and move? Does this character have distinctive actions and gestures? |
| http://my.hrw.com/images/points/1.gif | |
| **•** | **How does the character behave?** What actions or reactions could help develop and reveal information about the character? |
| **•** | **What motivates the character?** What is important to this person? What does he or she want? |

**Where?**As you develop your characters, also develop the times and places—or the **settings**—for their actions and speech. Locate the scenes in your short story in specific places with unique sights, sounds, and smells, which you will describe, again using concrete sensory details. Limit the number of settings in your story to one or two places to avoid confusing your reader. Here is how one writer used sensory language to make one of the settings of her short story immediately recognizable for the reader.

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| They walked into the permanent sausage-and-potato-salad smell of the restaurant. |

Plot Your Story

**Make Trouble**To keep your readers interested in the situation, characters, and setting you’ve chosen, something has to happen. The sequence of events in a short story is called the **plot.** To develop a plot for your story, answer the questions in the chart below. One writer’s responses to the questions appear in the right-hand column.

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| --- | --- |
| QUESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING PLOT | |
| **Questions** | **Examples** |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **1.** | **What’s the conflict—the problem in the story?** The conflict can be **external,** in which a character struggles against an outside force such as another character or the environment; or it can be **internal,** in which a character struggles against his or her own feelings. | | Leticia and her best friend Jennifer have a misunderstanding. Jennifer has decided she won’t go to college after all, and Leticia doesn’t understand her reasons. |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **2.** | **What happens next?** The characters’ actions or decisions complicate the plot. They make up the **rising** **action** that advances the plot toward the climax. | | Leticia begins to change; she has a new friend and a new hairstyle. She tells Jennifer she wants everything to be new. Jennifer thinks Leticia wants a new best friend, too. |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **3.** | **Will things like this go on forever?** The **climax,** or crisis point, is usually the moment when the outcome of the conflict is imminent. | | Leticia apologizes for saying she wanted everything to be new, but Jennifer tells her she doesn’t need her sympathy. |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **4.** | **What happens to the characters at the end?** The resolution of the conflict is the**denouement,** the results or significance of the story’s events for the characters. | | Jennifer explains that she wants to help her dad with the restaurant. It’s a choice she has made. Leticia realizes that things change, even friendships. |

**As It Happens**    Decide when to vary the **pace** in your short story—the rate at which you relate events. For example, you can build suspense by lingering over details that describe a character or setting, or you can create tension by speeding up the narrative. Although you’ll present most plot events in **chronological order,** you may sometimes skip forward in time **(flash-forward)** or backward **(flashback).** In either case, give readers time clues to make sure you don’t lose them.

**Put Words in Their Mouths** Let the characters speak for themselves. **Dialogue**—characters’ actual words—can help move the plot forward and develop a character’s personality. While dialogue shows a character’s spoken words, **interior monologue** shows unspoken thoughts and attempts to mimic the flow of thoughts, feelings, and memories through a character’s mind.

Choose a Point of View

**See It My Way** The perspective from which a writer tells a story is called its **point of view.** The term *point of view* refers to two separate but related ideas: *who* tells the story and *how much* he or she knows. As a general rule, maintain a consistent point of view throughout your story. Choose from the following points of view.

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| **•** | **First person** The narrator, usually a character in the story, tells only what he or she knows and experiences. |
| **•** | **Third person (limited)** The narrator is not a character but tells the story from the perspective of one of the story’s characters, describing only what that one character knows and experiences. |
| **•** | **Third person (omniscient)** The narrator is not a character in the story. The narrator can tell the story from the perspective of any character and include the thoughts and feelings of any character. Using this point of view allows the narrator to **shift perspectives** from one character to another in the short story. |

Consider Style

**How You Say It** To add interest to your story, enhance your **style**—how you express yourself in writing. Using stylistic devices, such as **figures of speech** (similes, metaphors, or personification), adds to the rhetorical and aesthetic impact of your story—that is, they help you to write more effectively and to make your story more appealing to readers. Other stylistic devices you may use include **imagery** (language that evokes a picture or feeling) and **irony** (a contrast between appearances and reality).