

HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR SHORT STORY

by

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Do you enjoy writing short stories but never have any success placing them? Maybe your problem is one of structure. A short story is not just a very short novel but a distinctive literary form in its own right. To write stories that sell, you need to understand short story structure – in other words, what makes a short story tick.

There are various approaches to structure, but in this article I'd like to present my own, which I call the Four C's. I believe that, to be successful, a short story requires four essential ingredients: characters, conflict, crisis and change. This simple model provides a benchmark against which you can test your own short story ideas, and perhaps turn previously unsuccessful stories into saleable ones or potential competition winners. Let's look at each of the Four C's in turn.

Characters: Any short story needs characters the reader can believe in and identify with. In particular, there will normally be one key character around whom the action in the story revolves. This is usually also the viewpoint character, through whose eyes and other senses all the action of the story is portrayed.

In a typical magazine story of 1,000 words or so there is no time to develop complex, multi-faceted characters such as you might find in a novel.

However, even short story characters must be brought to life for the reader, and there are various methods for doing this. One popular approach is to give each of your main characters a particular strong personality trait (honest, wily, untidy, lazy, shy, etc.).

However, it is best to avoid simply describing someone's character (i.e. their personality) in your story. Instead, try to reveal it by showing the person in action. Thus, rather than write, 'Mary was shy' you might write, 'Through the meeting Mary never spoke and her eyes seldom left the floor.' If you've ever been to a creative writing class, you might recognise this as a variation on one of the oldest (but most valuable) pieces of advice for fiction writers: Show, don't tell.

You can develop your characters even further by giving them little quirks of speech, unusual interests or hobbies, a particular taste in food or clothing, and so on. There's no need to go mad about this, however. Give your readers one or two nuggets of information about each of your characters, and you can then rely on their imagination to fill in the other details about their appearance and personality.

Conflict: This is the engine which drives a short story. It might be a conflict between characters, or between your key character and something in her environment, or within your main character herself (in a psychological short story), but conflict is what 'hooks' readers and keeps them involved. A student once sent me a story about a pop group who enjoyed success after success, till eventually they became world superstars. It was so dull it was unreadable. Give readers characters they will care about, then make life difficult for them by introducing conflict into their lives. It may seem cruel to

treat your creations like this, but they're only fictional – and your readers will be captivated by the need to find out how (or if) they resolve the conflict.

Crisis: The conflict in your story will normally lead to a crisis point; this is the dramatic high point in the story, the point of maximum tension and the hub around which the story revolves. At the crisis point the key character is normally required to make a decision or take a particular course of action. Note that there must be something significant at stake here. The crisis need not necessarily be a matter of life and death, but it must be something important to the key character.

Change: The situation at the end of a short story must be significantly different from how it was at the start. Without change, there is no story. The change could be an internal change – the character has learned something and changed in some way; or it could be an external change – something about your key character's circumstances have changed for ever. In most cases change follows naturally from the resolution of the crisis referred to above.

A good way of testing the Four C's model is to apply it to a published short story. Obviously there is not the space here to reproduce a whole story, but below is a summary of a story called 'Blind Date' by Hazel Shaw, a recent 1,200 word Bella Mini Mystery.

Gillian, a 29-year-old single woman with an interest in Egyptology, advertises for a soul-mate in the personal column. She gets a reply from a man called Eric. They meet at a station cafe. Eric is in fact a petty thief and conman who uses such ads as a means of getting into his victims' homes and stealing their possessions. Although Eric sees limited potential in Gillian at

first, his ears prick up when she mentions her antiques collection. He sees her home and wangles an invitation for coffee. He is impressed by the collection of Egyptian artefacts in Gillian's flat, but disappointed to find most are cheap reproductions. Then he sees a small jar with a basketwork lid. Gillian tells him it is the pride of her collection, 3,000 years old and extremely valuable. Just before he leaves, Eric manages to slip the jar unnoticed into his 'poacher's pocket'. When later Gillian discovers the theft, at first she is angry and upset – but then it occurs to her that Eric will be in for a shock when he opens the lid and discovers her bewildered and angry pet asp!

Even in this summary, did you notice how the characters of Gillian (lonely, interested in Egyptology) and Eric (devious, conman) came over as much more than mere cardboard cut-outs? The conflict in the story concerns Eric's attempt to rob Gillian, and this builds to a crisis when he manages to steal her jar. The change in this story – as with many twist-ending stories – is one of revelation. At the end we discover the true nature of the jar, and share in Gillian's gleeful anticipation of Eric's reaction when he opens it.

Summarising published short stories is a good way to learn about short story structure, and I recommend it to all aspiring short story writers. You can also use this method in reverse to develop your own story. Produce an outline of around 150–200 words, check that the essential 4 C's are all present, add an extra twist or two if necessary – then all you have to do is write it!

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