

# Writers Toolbox

Free ebook with  
hints and tips to get  
you started.

From the creators of the  
Global Short Story Competition

[www.inscribemediaco.uk](http://www.inscribemediaco.uk)

# Writers Toolbox

Writing can be a  
daunting business.

We hope that these  
tips help make the  
process a little easier.

# The rules of writing

Some general rules as you develop your story

- \* Consider the reader - do not write for yourself, always write for the reader.
- \* Be disciplined - you may wish to pack lots of information in but does the reader need it?
- \* You may not have put enough information in - you can imagine where a scene is set but have you given the reader the information they need? You may have drawn a character but can your readers see them?
- \* Be brutal - if you have overwritten, chop out the fat.

# Rules of the short story

1. The best stories are the ones that follow a fairly narrow subject line: too many plotlines and you end up with a novel!
2. An effective short story often covers a very short time span. It may be one single episode that proves pivotal in the life of the character.
3. Don't have too many characters. Each new character will bring a new dimension to the story, and too many diverse dimensions dilute the theme. Have only enough characters to effectively tell the story.
4. Make every word count. There is no room for unnecessary expansion in a short story. If each word is not working towards putting across the story, delete it.

## Where do ideas come from?

For some writers, stories always start with a place, somewhere that strikes them so forcibly that the story unfolds around them.

Other writers start with a character, someone so interesting, so intriguing that they can almost tell the story on their own.

Other writers begin with the story itself, an idea inspired by a newspaper snippet, something someone says, a sudden sense of 'what if?'

Some write for additional reasons, to get a point over, to add to our knowledge of the world or to make us think about an issue in a different way.

Whatever your motivation - and there will be many others - one thing is certain: if it drives you to sit down in front of that computer or lift up that pen, it's got to be worth writing about.

# Creating the triangle

Good story writing depends on many things but can be boiled down to three factors, the triangle.

At the top is the narrative, a strong story, plenty of pace, a tale that enthral's the readers.

At one bottom corner is a sense of place, a strong sense of where the action is taking place.

At the other corner is a sense of being, the creation of characters strong and interesting enough to carry the story.

Get the triangle right and the rest flows from it.

# The Narrative

## Structuring the short story

Some writers opt for the beginning, middle, end approach, a traditional and proven format which has served short story writers well down the decades.

Others go for deliberately confusing the reader, creating stories which are not clear at the start but which slowly reveal themselves. They may do it by concealing where the action takes place, or perhaps who the central characters are. Or keeping back the salient piece of information the reader needs to make sense of everything.

Some writers go for the flashback approach, beginning the story with an incident then working backwards to explain how we arrived at this moment.

Knowing what happens at the end can make the events that unfold that little but more poignant.

## Beginning your short story

However you start your story, the beginning should have The Question, something that hooks your reader. You need to grab them from those first lines.

One way do to this is intrigue the reader.

For instance, "Bill Bloggs was dead" may give the end away but the readers wants to find out why he died and if he deserved it.

The dropped introduction can also work:

"Betty was a pleasant woman. She would do anything for anyone. Everyone liked old Betty. A true angel, they used to say. Which was why it was such a shock when she was killed by a Mafia hitman."

There is another way of hooking readers, in which the writer can draw us in with the sheer quality of their writing, as in books like 'Cider with Rosie' by Laurie Lee.

Whatever you do, remember that all stories begin in the middle - the people you write about have already plenty of history. What you are doing is catapulting the reader into their life.



## The middle of the story

The middle is there to keep the story going, fill in gaps, create tension and allow the story to develop but it should only be as long as if needed, not overwritten or underwritten.

Write your short story in a series of episodes, maybe only a few lines long. Short stories are a series of small chapters, maybe only a few lines but representing a development in the story.

This requires really effective writing because, whereas in a novel you might have eight or nine pages to recount an incident, that luxury simply does not exist in a short story.

If you take our competition, our limit for a story is 2,000 words. Sounds a lot but not if you let your episodes run too long.

So, how do you achieve such tight writing? Well, it might be that you describe a location in a line rather than a paragraph, produce only sparing details of your character or recount a conversation in four snatches of dialogue rather than a page.

Many winning short story authors in competitions around the world have been those who achieved such effective writing.

All of this is not to say that when you write a novel, you can waffle on to your heart's content. Indeed, the disciplines of short story writing can be invaluable when you tackle a novel. Whatever you write, every word must do its job. it's a good mantra to live by.

## The end of the story

There are all sorts of ways of ending a short story but the most popular is some kind of twist, something that startles the reader, or perhaps makes sense of the rest of the story. On the other hand, you may go for a poignant ending.

There is also a growing trend for stories that simply stop.

Any of these is fine: the really important thing is that you do it well.

## A sense of place

It is crucial if you write about a place that the reader can see it.

You have choices: do you write rich and vivid prose to paint a word picture or do you keep it minimalist - describe a tree in a park and we all see a different tree in a different park? Perhaps we only need to say it is a tree in a park?

Whatever you do, do not make it too long, you do not have a lot of words to play with in a short story.

If you seek to describe the setting, and the reader does need something to focus on, seek to use the following components:

- 1 Physical characteristics - what does it look like, any quirks which bring it to life?
- 2 Use your reader's senses - what does the place smell, taste, sounds like?
- 3 What does it feel like to be there?

## A sense of being Creating characters

You can create the finest landscapes, the greatest stories, the most remarkable writing but you can not make your stories live unless you have characters. They are your vehicle to tell the story.

Characters have jobs to do within the story, making things happen, imparting information, allowing other characters to react to them etc

They should also be realistic (unless in over-the-top comedy where stereotypes can sometimes work) - your reader should feel that your characters can actually walk into the room.

When creating a character, describe what they look like and how they move, speak, react, dress etc but also try to get into their head - how do they think?

Keep secrets, reveal the character as the story progresses.

Remember, minor characters are important, too - take a little time to develop them.

## A word to the wise - creating good dialogue

Dialogue is crucial to the success of any story. Good dialogue can make a story, bad dialogue can wreck it.

Bear in mind some of these rules of conversation and reflect them in the dialogue that you write.

A lot of the time, we do not speak in correct sentences/we often use short sharp phrases.

Keep your dialogue crisp - we can tell a lot about a person in a short snap of conversation.

Dialogue must take the story on.

Do not pack dialogue with extraneous information. Don't write like this:

"I saw William, although everyone calls him Bill, my neighbour of ten years in Acacia Avenue, in Darlington, and observed that he was his normal glum self, to which we - that is my wife,

Edith, and I - have grown accustomed in the weeks since his wife left him for a younger man and filed for divorce. I assumed that the darkness which seems to have assailed him since then has not lifted."

If you need to slot in that information, find a way of doing it more subtly: ie "Saw Bill this morning. His usual gloomy self. Not sure he'll ever recover. The divorce really has knocked him backwards."

## Conflict - why does it matter?

Why is conflict important in writing?

Because stories need things to happen and that usually comes out of conflict - characters argue, fight, feud etc.

It is through seeing characters in conflict that we see them at their truest, when their guard is down, when they are fighting something.

You can develop a character through conflict: the meek little parlour maid suddenly becomes the towering heroine of the story

Conflict takes the story on: a school is to be closed, two friends fall out, a community is torn apart by an event. All these types of conflict are a rich hunting ground for the writer.

Conflict can evoke a strong reaction in a reader

Conflict makes for good drama - and if that is happening then writing is easier.

It also gives you a structure for your story, a story to tell



## Writing from the heart

Emotion is something of which some writers are wary, preferring to produce work without revealing too much of themselves.

However, for many other writers, there cannot be fiction without a sense of themselves in it.

For some authors, there is always part of them peering through, their fears, their hopes, their aspirations, their take on life. They may not say 'and this is me' but it is there all the same. For many authors, writing has to be a deeply personal art.

Of course, it is not all autobiographical - many writers write characters and scenes which readers find abhorrent and use language and ideas with which readers might not agree but which need to be there because they reflect the world about us.

However, in there somewhere are also tantalising glimpses of what the writer really thinks of the world.

## Triggering a response from your writing

Good writing is about triggers - words, phrases, images, places, sensations - that reach deep into the reader's mind to bring about a strong reaction.

That reaction will be based on something the reader has actually experienced, or maybe something that the reader dreads ever having to experience. It is why horror and ghost stories work so well.

Yes, you are messing about with the reader's head, yes, you may be forcing them to confront difficult truths, but isn't that sometimes what writing is about?

If every story, every book, was about sugary-sweet people in lovely situations, then writing could never really move the reader as it should.

So, yes, writing can, on occasion, make the reader feel uneasy, uncomfortable, scared even, but, let's be honest, isn't that sometimes the way we feel in our daily lives anyway?

It's simply art reflecting reality.

## Keeping it short

All writing is about every word doing its job but that becomes an even more pronounced skill when you are writing something short, like a poem or a story.

We do receive entries which are not 2,000 words long but 200 words instead - and that is an art form in itself.

The length means that the writers had to make every word do its job and discard every word, every thought, every element of the story that slowed it down. Those stories were stripped to their basics.

Did they lose anything for that? Not really. They may have left the reader to work out a lot, think through what they were being told and where it was happening, but many of them remained powerful pieces of writing for all that.

So when people send in requests asking how long their story should be, we always remind them that our top limit is 2,000 words (for ease of reading by our judge) but as to the bottom limit?

Well, it is how many words you need to tell the story.

That's the true of storytelling and always will be.

## Tackling the difficult subjects

One of the things apparent in the stories that come in to our competition is the way writers tackle difficult subjects.

There are various reasons for this, one of which is, of course, that difficult subjects make for dramatic stories. A story about two people getting on really well for 2,000 words can tend to be a touch on the boring side. Introduce something spiky into the narrative and your story comes alive.

Another reason writers tackle tough subjects is because their words can have an effect on those who read them, that they can, in some small way, challenge the way people view the world.

It is not the same for every writer - some stories are there purely to entertain, to make the reader laugh, to make the reader smile, without challenging them at all.

But for those who do tackle difficult subjects, there is one rule above all: keep it real. It makes sense to write about what you know. If you have not got that experience, research your subject before you start writing.

## Humour

There's an old saying that if you are not a humorous person, don't try to write humour.

Well, it is only part-true. It is certainly the case that a straight-laced, humourless person might well struggle to write side-splitting comedy but if you are an author, that might not be a good enough excuse.

Why? Because humour is vital to creating good fiction. Even if you are not writing an out-and-out comic piece, humour has a role to perform.

For a start, it can create light against the dark. Take an example: you are writing a sinister piece with the tension building as the tale unfolds. You might decide to keep the tension going right to the end, which would be one way of writing it.

However, you might decide that a flash of humour, a single line of dialogue by a character, could momentarily ease the tension, cause the reader to relax slightly, and provide an even greater impact when you suddenly strike with the next piece of drama, or horror or fear. Ghost and horror writers know that trick well - they are past masters at toying with their readers.

Humour also works well with novels because a relentlessly heavy theme in a story can benefit immensely from the odd break for something a little lighter.

There is another good reason for using humour in your writing because it reveals things about your character and can show another side to them that the reader might not have seen before. Or it can reveal in a brief conversation the depth of two people's relationship.

And it does not need to be side-splitting humour, that is not the intention: it has other roles to perform.

As one critique of the great William Shakespeare said: "Humour is a tool that allows us to see the subtle details of their minds; a glimpse at the inner workings of each character's personality."

It is through the humour that Shakespeare employs that we are able to see "roundness" in characters that could be otherwise doomed to exist as "flat" characters. Shakespeare uses humour to give his players new life, to help them expand beyond the bounds of mere characters and turn into real people."

And look how well he did!

## Show and tell

There is a growing debate within writing circles about what has become known as 'show and tell'.

No, this is not about small children excitedly showing manky things found on the beach to their classmates, rather an important writing technique.

The argument goes like this: for you to truly engage your reader, you must make them feel that they are there when the action is happening.

It matters because if you fail to draw your reader into the story, your tale will lack something, an immediacy, a sense of drama, a sense of narrative.

How do you do it? Think of it like this: reach out a hand to your reader and say, 'come into my world, walk alongside me. Do that and they are hooked.'



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