

# Shaping the Short Story

by NANCY SMITH

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**“The viewpoint from which you choose to tell a story will depend on how you, the author, see it; on your own experience.”**

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**W**HILE TRYING TO MASTER THE complexities of the short story many years ago, I made a wonderful discovery: the link between the short story and Greek drama, which has survived for two thousand years. This “discovery” helped me turn rejections into acceptances and, years later when I became a teacher of creative writing, to pass this knowledge on to my students, often with the same happy result.

Two words closely associated with all story-writing, *crisis* and *climax*, come from the Greek, meaning *decision* and *ladder*, and if you add to them the Unities of TIME, PLACE and ACTION observed in Greek drama, the idea of structure begins to emerge. Structure, shape, or form—call it what you will—is the first principle for fiction writers to grasp if they are to be successful.

Fiction writers must also realize that an idea is not a plot. A plot needs to be constructed, building on that first exciting germ of an idea. Writers cannot let it all pour out: There is a lot

of thinking to be done first. J.M. Barrie, once asked by an admirer if he would soon be seeing another of his plays, replied: “Yes, I’ve just finished one. Now I only have to write it.” Spending time thinking about your plot in advance will considerably increase your chances of success.

There are many definitions of a short story. H.E. Bates called it: “A brief brilliant insight into a situation and the people involved in it.” William Trevor referred to it as “. . . the art of the glimpse.” My own offering of a working definition is that it is a short piece of fiction, highlighting a single incident of importance in the life of the Main Character, which forces him or her to surmount at least one obstacle, and probably more, until the resolution is brought about by his or her own efforts.

Now let us take a look at structure, beginning where every short story should, as close to a CRISIS point as possible in order to engage the reader’s interest immediately.

Since crisis means decision, let us suppose our Main Character has just received a letter that is going to affect his life disastrously, possibly from a bullying landlord intent upon evicting him. What is he going to do about it? If he does nothing, no story. If, on the other hand, he decides on an action that may actually worsen his situation, our story is on its way to another crisis and, eventually, to the CLIMAX.

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A teacher and lecturer on creative writing in Great Britain, NANCY SMITH is also the author of two books in the field, both published in England: *The Essential A to Z of Creative Writing* (Cassell) and *The Fiction Writers’ Handbook* (Piatkus Books), which is also available in Australia and New Zealand (through Doubleday’s Book Club).

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## **“Conflict is the heartbeat of all fiction. Without it, there is no story . . . .”**

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From this initial crisis will stem the CONFLICT, and it is through conflict that our Main Character will reveal himself. Conflict is the heartbeat of all fiction: Without it, there *is* no story. It need not, and indeed often does not, entail physical violence. It can be mental or emotional, that is internal, not external (man against himself, rather than man against man or against nature). And, if you can combine both internal and external, you will greatly increase the tension of the story.

Suppose, under normal circumstances, our Main Character is a meek man only too eager to comply with the wishes of others, the “anything for a quiet life” type. But now his home of thirty years is threatened—his security, his beloved garden in which, for half a lifetime, he’s cultivated the best roses in the neighborhood and where his old dog, Bess, is buried. It will be through the resulting conflict that his inner strength finally emerges. When the stakes are high, he shows what he’s really made of.

With the MC now at a crisis point, what might be the CLIMAX (the “blackest moment”) for him? It is sometimes said that climax *is* plot. In other words, it is essential, when writing a short story, to know how your Main Character will resolve his dilemma. It is at this point, before ever putting pen to paper, that we need to ask the “what ifs” and “suppose thats.” “What if” he learns that the landlord is going to allow a supermarket to be built on the land? His roses, his dog, and his precious memories will be obliterated forever beneath layers of concrete, but there seems no way out. “Suppose that” he decides to protest, to make a final gesture of defiance, knowing it will leave him penniless or even put him in jail, but he doesn’t care. Whatever you have him decide to do—perhaps fill his garden with the most beautiful roses he can buy with his meagre savings, then maybe paint an enormous slogan on the rooftop after barricading his door and refusing to come down—he will have successfully drawn attention to his plight, and the media gets hold of the story. The proprietor of the super-

market hears about it and, being a lover of roses, dogs or whatever, grants a reprieve: Building plans will be changed to allow our MC to remain in his home.

Thus, he solved his own problem by *taking some action*, but that action could, in fact, have made his situation even worse. He could have found himself homeless *and* penniless. If you also gave him a dread of heights, perhaps because of a traumatic childhood experience, you would have introduced both the internal and external conflict mentioned above.

**N**OW the Unities of TIME, PLACE, and ACTION. The Unity of TIME, in Greek drama, was twenty-four hours. For our purposes, we can translate that to mean a short period of time—an hour, a day, or possibly a week—during which the tale unfolds. You can use flashback, of course, to explain something relevant that occurred in the past, but the main action of the story will take place within that hour, day, or week.

The second Unity is PLACE. Two millennia ago, plays were enacted within a single location, which gave them a tight structure. Beginning and ending the modern short story in the same location creates that same effect. For instance, our MC, having just collected the mail, sits down on the front porch to read it. Naturally, there is something in the mail that triggers off the initial conflict. Ending the story on the front porch gives it a roundness, a unity that is aesthetically pleasing and satisfying to the reader.

The third Unity—and by far the most important—is ACTION. Put simply, it means writing from a single viewpoint, that of your Main Character. This last unity seems to cause most confusion for the beginner story writer, but it need not do so if you put yourself totally into the skin of that character. Before you can do that, you need to ask yourself a vital question: Whose story is it? Fortunately, there is an easy rule of thumb to help you decide. Choose the character *from whom you can wrest the most emotion*.

To illustrate, let us take a sixteen-year-old girl

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who discovers she is pregnant. At first, it would seem this must be *her* story. But pause a moment. What will she do now? Tell Mom, probably. And then break the news to Dad. Might it not, then, be told from the viewpoint of either parent, both of whom will certainly be emotionally involved? And what about the youthful father-to-be, her boyfriend—how will he react? Will he be filled with guilt and anxiety and wonder if he should marry her? Or will he turn his back on the situation? Or maybe the girl has a grandmother to whom she’s very close. Maybe Gran is the one who finds it the hardest to cope with what she perceives as her granddaughter’s immorality.

**O**BVIOUSLY, the viewpoint from which you choose to tell the story will depend to a large extent on how you, the author, see it; on your own experience; and also on the market at which you are aiming.

Another related consideration comes into play: Which type of viewpoint will you use? There are four from which to choose: first person as main character; third person as main character; first person as minor character narrator; and the omniscient viewpoint, in which there is no actual narrator. Most short stories are told using either first person (I) as MC or third person as MC. The difficulty with using a minor character as narrator lies in keeping the reader interested in what is happening to the protagonist, making sure

at the same time that the narrator is closely involved in the events.

Here’s an example of this viewpoint:

As I waited by Becky’s bedside that morning, how I wished I’d made her tell me what was the matter.

The “I” is a friend relating what is actually Becky’s story. This can, and often does, result in what is known as a “story within a frame,” considered old-fashioned nowadays, not readily salable. There are also dangers with the omniscient viewpoint, which is normally too detached to allow the reader to become emotionally involved and is best left to the skilled writer. For instance:

The day the neighborhood learned Rebecca Winters was pregnant was the day she disappeared.

No actual character is narrating this—it is purely a detached, “god’s eye” view.

A word of warning: Whichever viewpoint you choose, the reader must not know anything that the narrator could not have seen or learned, perhaps from someone else.

Observing at least two of the three Unities will help you produce a tightly structured story. Keeping to a brief time span (the Unity of Time) is wise. Beginning and ending in the same location (the Unity of Place) is often desirable, but can be, and frequently is, dispensed with without detriment to the story. Keeping to the same viewpoint (the Unity of Action) throughout is virtually obligatory until you have mastered the art of this genre: time enough then to experiment. □

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## The Function of Stories

Stories ought not to be just little bits of fantasy that are used to wile away an idle hour; from the beginning of the human race stories have been used—by priests, by bards, by medicine—as magic instruments of healing, of teaching, as a means of helping people come to terms with the fact that they continually have to face insoluble problems and unbearable realities.

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Joan Aiken, *The Way to Write for Children*