

A CRAFT BOOKLET FOR WRITERS AND TEACHERS

THE SHAPE OF A SHORT STORY

Eight Templates, Measured Beat Maps, and Models from the Masters



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HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

Every good short story has a shape, and the shape can be learned. This booklet offers eight templates for building a short story. Each template is drawn from a famous story that you can read free online, and each comes with a **beat map**: a list of the story's major events and the point at which each one occurs, given as a percentage of the way through the story.

The percentages are not guesses. For every story in this booklet, the full public-domain text was taken from Project Gutenberg and the words were counted. A beat at 58% means that 58% of the story's words come before the sentence in which that event begins. Where a story is read in translation (Maupassant and Chekhov), the figures describe the translation named in the Sources and will shift slightly in other translations.

THREE WAYS TO USE A BEAT MAP

- **To read.** Read the model story first, then check the map. Students are often surprised by how late the decisive turn comes. In every story measured here it falls after the 80% mark.
- **To plan.** Choose a template, set a target length, and use the planning table at the end of each chapter to see roughly how many words each movement can have.
- **To revise.** Map your own draft the same way. If the trouble begins at 40% or the turn comes at 50%, you have learned something about your pacing that no amount of line editing will fix.

A template is a scaffold, not a cage. The writers studied here did not work from percentages. They worked from instinct, revision, and long reading. Use the numbers to train your instinct. Once the shape is in your ear, let it go.

WHAT THE MEASUREMENTS SHOW

When the eight model stories are mapped side by side, a few patterns stand out. They are observations about these eight stories, not laws, but they match what editors and teachers say about the form.

STORY	WORDS	TROUBLE BEGINS	DECISIVE TURN	AFTER THE TURN
Maupassant, “The Diamond Necklace”	2,840	17% (the invitation)	Last sentence (the paste)	None
O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi”	2,057	0% (\$1.87, Christmas tomorrow)	82–92% (combs; the watch)	92–100% (narrator’s coda)
Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”	6,616	8% (the meeting)	93% (the mirror; true love)	93–100% (open ending)
Joyce, “Araby”	2,330	38–40% (her question; his promise)	99% (the epiphany)	None
Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”	2,079	4–7% (the eye)	99% (the confession)	None
Mansfield, “Miss Brill”	1,931	Withheld until 85%	89% (“who wants her?”)	93–100% (the walk home)
Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado”	2,310	0% (“The thousand injuries”)	95% (“For the love of God”)	99–100% (fifty years)
Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”	5,232	0–7% (departure; the forest road)	80% (“Welcome, my children”)	92–100% (a lifetime of gloom)

Five lessons from the table

1. **Start close to the trouble.** Five of the eight stories put their central problem in the first tenth. In Poe and O. Henry it arrives in the first sentence.
2. **The decisive turn comes late.** In all eight stories it falls after the 80% mark, and in four of them it falls in the final 5%.
3. **Aftermath is short or absent.** No story here spends more than about one-twelfth of its length after its turn. Several stop the moment the meaning lands.
4. **The middle is where the work is.** The middle 50 to 60 percent is where pressure accumulates: the waiting in “Araby,” the seven nights in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the ten years of labor in “The Diamond Necklace.”
5. **Length follows design.** The two longest stories, Chekhov and Hawthorne, are the two that follow a character through time and change of place. The single-scene stories run about 2,000 to 2,300 words.

A general proportion guide

Read as ranges, not targets, the measurements suggest the following map for a conventional short story of 2,000 to 6,000 words.

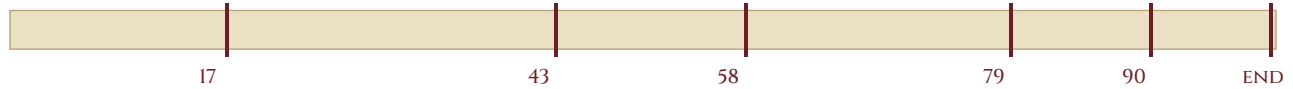
MOVEMENT	TYPICAL POSITION	WHAT IT DOES
Opening and disturbance	0–15%	Establishes a voice, a person, a place, and something already wrong or wanting.
Commitment	10–40%	The character acts, promises, or chooses, and cannot easily go back.
Pressure	30–80%	Complications, waiting, repetition, or descent; each scene raises the cost.
Decisive turn	80–99%	A reversal, a recognition, a reveal, or a confession changes the meaning of what came before.
Aftermath	0–10% of the length, or none	A gesture, an image, or a line that lets the reader feel the change.

TEMPLATE 1: THE IRONIC REVERSAL

Model: Guy de Maupassant, “The Diamond Necklace” (also translated as “The Necklace,” 1884). 2,840 words in the translation measured.

What it is. A character wants something, gets it, pays a price for it, and learns at the very end that the price was paid for nothing. The story is built so that its last sentence reverses the meaning of everything before it.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0–17%	Portrait of desire	Mathilde, “born, as if by a slip of fate, into a family of clerks,” dreams of luxury she cannot have.
17%	The opportunity	Her husband comes home “with a triumphant air” holding an invitation to a ministry ball.
32%	The obstacle	As the ball nears she is “sad, uneasy, anxious”: she has no jewels.
43%	The fatal choice	She borrows a diamond necklace from her friend Madame Forestier.
46%	Brief triumph	“She danced with rapture, with passion.”
58%	The loss	“I have lost Madame Forestier’s necklace.”
68–69%	The cover-up	They go from jeweler to jeweler and buy a replacement on borrowed money.
79–86%	The price	Ten years of “the horrible existence of the needy” until the debt is paid.
90%	The encounter	One Sunday on the Champs Élysées, she meets Madame Forestier, she meets Madame Forestier, still young and beautiful. “still young, still beautiful, still charming. she meets Madame Forestier, still young and beautiful.”
Final sentence	The reversal	“Why, my necklace was paste!”

Why it works

The reversal is fair. Maupassant never lies to the reader; he simply never shows Madame Forestier telling anyone what the necklace was worth. Notice also that the loss sits near the middle (58%), so the story has room to show the long consequence. A reversal hurts only if we have watched the character pay.

Write your own

- A character who wants a thing that seems to promise a different life.
- A single choice made to get it, and a single mistake that follows.
- A cost that is shown in time, not summarized in a line.
- A final fact, planted fairly but unseen, that changes the meaning of the cost.

FOR A 3,000-WORD STORY	APPROXIMATE WORDS
Desire and opportunity (0–20%)	600
Choice and triumph (20–50%)	900
Loss and cover-up (50–70%)	600
Price paid (70–90%)	600
Encounter and reversal (90–100%)	300

TEMPLATE 2: THE TWIST OF MUTUAL SACRIFICE

Model: O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi” (1905). 2,057 words.

What it is. Two characters each give up the thing they value most to please the other, and the twist reveals that each sacrifice has cancelled the other gift. The structure is a mirror: her half, then his half, then the moment the halves meet.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0%	The problem in the first line	“One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all.” Christmas is tomorrow.
3–24%	The world and the narrator	Della cries; the narrator tours the eight-dollar flat with comic asides.
24%	The two treasures named	“There were two possessions”: Jim’s gold watch and Della’s hair.
34%	Her sacrifice	She climbs to “Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds” and sells her hair.
41–44%	Her gift	A platinum fob chain for the watch, bought for twenty-one dollars.
54–59%	The wait and the stare	“Jim was never late”; he stops inside the door and stares at her.
76–82%	His gift	He draws out a package: the tortoise-shell combs she had longed for.
92%	His sacrifice revealed	“Let’s put our Christmas presents away”: he sold the watch to buy the combs.
94–100%	The coda	The narrator declares the two “the wisest”: “They are the magi.”

Why it works

O. Henry names both treasures at 24%, long before either is sold, so the twist is set up in plain sight. The reader's attention is on Della's sacrifice; Jim's is hidden by point of view, because we stay with her. The closing coda turns irony into blessing. Without it the story would be merely clever.

Write your own

- Two people, one limit (money, time, health, distance).
- Name what each treasures early, in the same passage.
- Follow only one of them until the meeting.
- Let the twist reveal love rather than mere cleverness.

TEMPLATE 3: THE INWARD CLIMAX AND THE OPEN ENDING

Model: Anton Chekhov, "The Lady with the Dog" (1899), translated by Constance Garnett. 6,616 words.

What it is. The deepest action takes place inside a character. A man who has treated affairs as trivial discovers, slowly and against his will, that he loves. The story ends not with a solution but at the point where life becomes most complicated.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0–8%	The habit of mind	Gurov, in Yalta, calls women “the lower race”; “bitter experience” has taught him nothing.
8%	The meeting	One evening in the gardens he speaks to Anna Sergeyevna through her little dog.
17%	The affair	Part II: “A week had passed”; they become lovers.
34%	The still point	At Oreanda they sit silently above the sea, and he feels the beauty of the world.
48%	Return to ordinary life	Part III: at home in Moscow he expects her to fade from memory.
58%	The crack	A friend’s remark that “the sturgeon was a bit too strong” makes his life seem empty.
61–70%	The pursuit	He sets off for her town; at the theater he sees her and understands that there is “no creature so near, so precious, and so important to him.”
84%	The double life	Part IV: secret meetings at the Slaviansky Bazaar hotel in Moscow.
93%	The inward climax	In the mirror his hair is “beginning to turn grey”; only now has he truly loved.
100%	The open ending	“The most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning.”

Why it works

Chekhov gives the outward story (meeting, affair, separation) by the halfway mark. The second half dramatizes a change of heart. Small, ordinary details carry the turns: a dog, a slice of watermelon, a remark about sturgeon, a gray head in a mirror. The open ending is not a failure of plot. It is the honest end of an inward story, because the characters’ problem has just become real.

Write your own

- A character with a settled, slightly false idea of himself or herself.
- An experience that should have been minor.
- A return to routine in which the experience will not fade.
- One ordinary detail that cracks the routine open.

- An ending at the moment the real difficulty begins.

FOR A 5,000-WORD STORY	APPROXIMATE WORDS
Habit and meeting (0–15%)	750
The experience (15–45%)	1,500
Routine that fails (45–60%)	750
Pursuit and recognition (60–90%)	1,500
Inward climax and open end (90–100%)	500

TEMPLATE 4: THE EPIPHANY STORY

Model: James Joyce, “Araby,” from *Dubliners* (1914). 2,330 words.

What it is. A young or innocent character pursues a romantic ideal, and a single disappointing moment shows him the truth about himself. Joyce called such a moment an epiphany: a sudden revelation through something ordinary.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0–16%	The closed world	North Richmond Street, “being blind,” and a dead priest’s musty house.
16–38%	Devotion	“Mangan’s sister” on the doorstep; every morning he watches her door.
38–40%	The quest	She asks if he is going to Araby; he promises to bring her something.
47–49%	Enchantment	“What innumerable follies”: the syllables of Araby fill his days.
54–68%	Delay	He reminds his uncle; at nine o’clock the uncle is still not home.
83–90%	The bazaar	He arrives late; most stalls are closed; a young lady at a stall talks with “English accents.”
98–100%	The epiphany	The light goes out: “I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity.”

Why it works

The quest is not announced until 38%. Before that, Joyce builds the boy's inner world so completely that a trip to a bazaar can carry the weight of a pilgrimage. The epiphany is brought on by nothing dramatic: a flirtation overheard, a light switched off. Its force comes from the distance between what the boy imagined and what he finds.

Write your own

- A narrower world than the character admits.
- An ideal attached to a person or a place.
- A small errand that becomes a quest.
- Delays that test devotion.
- An ordinary scene that shows the character to himself, ending within a few lines.

TEMPLATE 5: THE CONFESSION OF A SINGLE EFFECT

Model: Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). 2,079 words.

What it is. A narrator tells the story of his own crime while insisting on his sanity, and the act of telling becomes the evidence against him. Poe argued that a short story should be planned for a single preconceived effect; here every sentence serves dread.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0%	The defense	"True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?"
4–7%	The motive	The old man's "vulture" eye.
11–24%	The ritual	Every night for seven nights, at midnight, he opens the door.
24–53%	The eighth night	The old man wakes; the narrator waits in the dark; a "low, dull, quick sound" begins.
62–67%	The act	"The old man's hour had come!" and then "stone dead."
71–72%	The concealment	He hides the body beneath the planks of the floor.
77–88%	The visitors	Three officers of the police arrive; he smiles, chats, and then grows pale.
99%	The confession	"Villains! ... I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!"

Why it works

The crime itself occupies less than a tenth of the story. Poe spends his length on anticipation (the seven nights) and on the narrator's self-betraying calm. The heartbeat motif first sounds at 53% and returns at the end, so the climax feels both shocking and inevitable.

Write your own

- A narrator with something to prove to the reader.
- One obsessive image.
- A ritual repeated until it must break.
- A sound, object, or phrase introduced in the middle and returned at the climax.
- An ending in which the voice gives itself away.

TEMPLATE 6: THE OVERHEARD TURN

Model: Katherine Mansfield, “Miss Brill,” from *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922). 1,931 words.

What it is. A lonely character sustains a gentle illusion about her place in the world until a few careless words from strangers break it. The trouble is withheld until very late; most of the story builds the illusion so that its loss will hurt.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0–2%	The talisman	A brilliantly fine Sunday; she takes out her old fur.
21–47%	The watcher	She listens in on the people who share her bench and studies the crowd; a woman in an ermine toque is snubbed.
61%	The illusion at full height	“Oh, how fascinating”: everyone in the park is acting in a play, and she has a part.
85%	The intruders	A boy and girl, “beautifully dressed,” sit down beside her.
89–91%	The overheard words	“Why does she come here at all—who wants her?” Her fur is compared to a “fried whiting.”
93–97%	The broken ritual	She usually buys a honey-cake; today she passes the baker and goes to her “room like a cupboard.”
100%	The final image	As she puts the fur away, “she thought she heard something crying.”

Why it works

Mansfield lets the reader see Miss Brill’s loneliness before she does, in the snubbed woman in the ermine toque at 47%. The turn is only a few lines long, and the aftermath shows the injury through a broken routine and an object rather than through stated feeling. The crying belongs to the fur, and to her.

Write your own

- A character with a cherished, slightly fragile ritual.
- A long middle in which the character observes others, revealing herself.
- An early, minor echo of the injury to come, suffered by someone else.
- A short turn delivered by people who do not know they are cruel.

- An aftermath told through a broken habit and an object.

TEMPLATE 7: THE TIGHTENING TRAP

Model: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). 2,310 words.

What it is. The reader learns the narrator’s intention in the first sentence and then watches a victim walk, step by step, into the trap. Suspense comes not from what will happen but from how and when.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0%	The vow	“The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could.”
11%	The lure	At dusk, during the carnival, he meets Fortunato and mentions a cask of Amontillado.
21–29%	The descent	Down the “long and winding staircase” into vaults encrusted with nitre.
54–55%	The joke that is a warning	Fortunato makes a sign of the Masons; Montresor produces a trowel.
70–76%	The trap closes	Fortunato is chained to the granite; the walling-up begins.
89%	The last tier	“There remained but a single stone.”
95%	The plea	“For the love of God, Montresor!”
99–100%	The long silence	“For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them.”

Why it works

Telling the ending first frees Poe to work through irony. Fortunato’s name, his jester’s costume, his toast “to the buried,” and the trowel all mean one thing to him and another to us. The final sentence opens a gap of fifty years, so that the confession itself becomes the last turn.

TEMPLATE 8: THE JOURNEY OUT AND BACK

Model: Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), from *Mosses from an Old Manse*. 5,232 words.

What it is. A character leaves home for one night, passes through a strange place where the moral world is turned inside out, and returns changed. The return home, not the adventure, is where the meaning settles.

Beat map



POSITION	BEAT	IN THE MODEL
0–1%	Departure	At sunset Faith, with pink ribbons in her cap, begs him to stay.
7–14%	Threshold and guide	A “dreary road” into the forest; a traveler whose staff bears “the likeness of a great black snake.”
27–36%	Revelations	Goody Cloyse, his catechism teacher, and then the minister and Deacon Gookin, all on the devil’s road.
54%	Despair	He cries “Faith!” and a pink ribbon flutters down.
66%	The gathering	A clearing lit by “four blazing pines,” filled with the town’s respected people.
80%	The initiation	“Welcome, my children”; he and Faith are brought forward together.
92%	The return	The next morning he walks into the village and shrinks from everyone.
95–100%	The question and the life	“Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep...?” Whatever the answer, “his dying hour was gloom.”

Why it works

Each step deeper into the forest reveals someone more trusted, ending with Faith herself. The pink ribbon, planted in the first paragraph, is the single object that crosses from the ordinary world into the strange one. Hawthorne then refuses to say whether the night was real; the story’s meaning is the effect on Brown’s whole life, told in a few sentences.

FURTHER MODELS TO MAP YOURSELF

The stories below are among the most taught short stories of the twentieth century. Because they remain under copyright, they are not reproduced or measured here. Read them in an anthology or a library edition, pencil in hand, and mark the beats yourself.

STORY	CLOSEST TEMPLATE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927)	Inward climax	A story told almost entirely in dialogue, in which the central subject is never named.
Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" (1948)	Ironic reversal	How ordinary detail delays the reader's understanding of the ritual until the end.
Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953)	Journey out and back, without the return	A family car trip that becomes a moral reckoning; where the grandmother's turn comes.
James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957)	Inward climax	How a narrator's understanding of his brother changes through music.
Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" (1983)	Inward climax	A resentful narrator transformed by an act of drawing.

HOW TO MAKE A BEAT MAP OF ANY STORY

1. Find the total word count. For a digital text, a word processor will count it; for a print text, count the words on three full pages, average them, and multiply by the number of pages.
2. List eight to twelve events: moments when the situation, the character's knowledge, or the reader's understanding changes.
3. For each event, find the sentence where it begins and count (or estimate) the words before it.
4. Divide by the total and multiply by 100.
5. Draw a line, mark the beats, and ask: where does the trouble begin, where is the decisive turn, and how much of the story follows it?

A BEAT-MAP WORKSHEET

EVENT	WORDS BEFORE IT	POSITION (%)	WHAT CHANGES

SOURCES

All percentages were calculated from the plain-text editions below. Words were counted from the story's title to its final word; each position is the share of the story's words that precede the first word of the sentence in which the event begins, rounded to the nearest whole percent.

- Guy de Maupassant, "The Diamond Necklace," in *Complete Original Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant*, Project Gutenberg eBook #3090: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3090>
- O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi," Project Gutenberg eBook #7256: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7256>
- Anton Chekhov, "The Lady with the Dog," trans. Constance Garnett, in *The Lady with the Dog and Other Stories*, Project Gutenberg eBook #13415: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13415>
- James Joyce, "Araby," in *Dubliners*, Project Gutenberg eBook #2814: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2814>
- Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado," in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 2, Project Gutenberg eBook #2148: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2148>
- Katherine Mansfield, "Miss Brill," in *The Garden Party, and Other Stories*, Project Gutenberg eBook #1429: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1429>
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Project Gutenberg eBook #512: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/512>
- On Poe's principle of the single effect: Edgar Allan Poe, review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore: <https://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/gm542hn1.htm>