

A FIELD GUIDE FOR WRITERS AND TEACHERS

THE SHORT STORY TODAY

Lengths, Genres, and the Word Counts Editors Accept



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Guidelines were checked against each publication's own pages in October 2026. Magazines change their limits and reading periods often; always read the current guidelines before you submit.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

A story that is too long for a magazine will usually be declined before anyone reads its first sentence. Length is the first fact an editor checks and the first decision a writer should make with the market in mind. This guide gathers, in one place, the length categories that writers, editors, and prize committees use, the word counts that a range of respected magazines currently accept, and the genres those magazines publish.

Every figure for a named publication comes from that publication's own guidelines, which are listed with addresses in the Sources. Guidelines change. Use this guide to plan and to shortlist, then confirm on the magazine's website before you send anything.

THE SHORT VERSION

- A **short story**, in the definition used by the major genre awards, is under 7,500 words.
- Many literary magazines publish most of their stories in the **3,000 to 6,000-word** range, and several set firm caps at 4,000, 5,000, or 6,500 words.
- **Flash fiction** is usually 1,000 words or fewer; **microfiction** is often 400 or fewer.
- Stories over 8,000 words have far fewer homes. If yours is that long, look first at magazines with no stated limit or at markets for novelettes.

THE LENGTH CATEGORIES

There is no single legal definition of a short story, but two sets of definitions are widely used. The Nebula and Hugo Awards, given for science fiction and fantasy, define their short-fiction categories precisely, and many editors in every genre use the same boundaries. Flash and microfiction limits come from the magazines that specialize in them.

CATEGORY	TYPICAL LENGTH	BASIS FOR THE FIGURE
Microfiction	400 words or fewer	<i>Fractured Lit</i> defines microfiction as 400 words or less.
Flash fiction	Up to 1,000 words	<i>SmokeLong Quarterly</i> publishes flash “up to 1000 words”; <i>Fractured Lit</i> defines flash as 401–1,000.
Short-short story	500–2,000 words	<i>Narrative</i> magazine’s short-short category.
Short story	Under 7,500 words	Nebula Award rules: “fewer than 7,500 words.”
Novelette	7,500–17,500 words	Nebula and Hugo Award definitions.
Novella	17,500–40,000 words	Nebula and Hugo Award definitions.
Novel	40,000 words and up	Nebula and Hugo Award definitions.

Words and pages

Editors think in words, but writers often think in pages. In standard manuscript format (12-point type, double-spaced, one-inch margins on letter paper) a page holds roughly 250 words. In a typeset book the figure is usually higher, often 300 to 350 words, depending on the trim size and type.

WORD COUNT	MANUSCRIPT PAGES (ABOUT 250 WORDS EACH)	WHAT IT USUALLY IS
250–400	1–2	Microfiction
1,000	4	The upper limit of flash
2,500	10	A compact literary story
4,000	16	The cap at several literary journals
6,000	24	The upper end of the most common literary range
7,500	30	The boundary between short story and novelette
10,000	40	A long story; few literary markets
17,500	70	The boundary between novelette and novella

WORD COUNTS ACCEPTED TODAY: LITERARY MAGAZINES

The table below lists current fiction guidelines for a group of well-known literary magazines. It is a sample, not a ranking; there are hundreds of good journals. Notice how often the ceiling falls between 4,000 and 8,000 words.

MAGAZINE	FICTION LENGTH	NOTES FROM THE GUIDELINES
<i>One Story</i>	3,000–8,000 words	“Because of our format, we can only accept stories between 3,000 and 8,000 words.” Publishes one story per issue.
<i>Ploughshares</i>	Up to 6,500 words	One prose piece per submission during the open reading period.
<i>Granta</i>	No set limit	“Most of our submissions are between 3,000–6,000 words.”
<i>The Threepenny Review</i>	4,000 words or less	“Stories and memoirs 4000 words or less.”
<i>The Sun</i>	No formal limit	“We tend not to publish work longer than 7,000 words.”
<i>The Kenyon Review</i>	Up to 7,500 words (general reading period)	A separate December–January fiction portal has specified no more than 4,000 words. Check which period is open.
<i>The Missouri Review</i>	No length restriction	Recommends reading previous issues first.
<i>The Paris Review</i>	Up to 40 pages of prose	One prose piece at a time; fiction accepted via Submittable from October 1, 2026, until capacity is reached.
<i>Narrative</i>	500–2,000 (short-short); 2,000–15,000 (stories and other works)	Submissions accepted year-round.
<i>The New Yorker</i>	No limit stated	Stopped accepting e-mailed submissions on August 7, 2026; reopening via Submittable on November 1, 2026.

WORD COUNTS ACCEPTED TODAY: FLASH FICTION

MAGAZINE OR PRIZE	LENGTH	NOTES
<i>SmokeLong Quarterly</i>	Up to 1,000 words	The limit excludes the title and is firm: a 1,060-word story will be rejected.
<i>Fractured Lit</i>	Up to 400 (micro); 401–1,000 (flash)	Publishes new work twice a week.
Bridport Prize, flash fiction	Up to 250 words	A long-running international prize with a very short flash limit.

WORD COUNTS ACCEPTED TODAY: GENRE MAGAZINES

Genre magazines tend to accept a wider range of lengths than literary journals, and the science fiction and fantasy magazines publish novelettes and novellas as well as short stories. Several were closed to submissions when this guide was prepared; they open for set periods, so watch their pages.

MAGAZINE	GENRE	FICTION LENGTH
<i>Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine</i>	Mystery and crime	“2,500–8,000 words is the preferred range”; less likely to publish under 700 or over 20,000.
<i>Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine</i>	Mystery and suspense	Prefers stories not longer than 12,000 words; most are “considerably shorter.”
<i>Asimov’s Science Fiction</i>	Science fiction	Seldom buys stories shorter than 1,000 or longer than 20,000 words.
<i>Clarkesworld</i>	Science fiction and fantasy	1,000–22,000 words, “no exceptions.”
<i>The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction</i>	Fantasy, science fiction, horror	From flash up to 25,000 words.
<i>Lightspeed</i>	Science fiction and fantasy	1,500–10,000 words, with 5,000 or fewer preferred; flash under 1,500 considered separately.
<i>Uncanny</i>	Speculative fiction	750–10,000 words.
<i>Strange Horizons</i>	Speculative fiction	Up to 5,000 words, a firm limit.
<i>Nightmare</i>	Horror and dark fantasy	1,500–7,500 words, with 5,000 or fewer preferred; nothing over 7,500.

Prizes

Prize limits are worth knowing because a story is often revised to fit one. The Bridport Prize short-story category, for example, has a 5,000-word maximum with no minimum, title excluded.

THE GENRES OF THE SHORT STORY

The short story is published across nearly every genre. What changes from one genre to the next is less the length than the contract with the reader: what the story promises and how it pays off.

GENRE	WHAT READERS EXPECT	CLASSIC MODELS	WHERE IT IS PUBLISHED
Literary fiction	Depth of character, precise language, and a change in understanding; the ending may be open.	Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”; Joyce, “Araby”; Mansfield, “Miss Brill”	Literary journals, university quarterlies, general-interest magazines
Flash and microfiction	A whole world implied in a few hundred words; one image or turn carries the story.	Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour” (about 1,000 words)	Flash magazines and the flash sections of literary journals
Mystery and crime	A puzzle, a crime, or a moral threat, resolved fairly from clues the reader could see.	Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”; Conan Doyle, the Sherlock Holmes stories	Mystery magazines, crime anthologies
Science fiction	An idea about science, technology, or society followed through to its human consequences.	H. G. Wells, “The Country of the Blind”	Science fiction and speculative magazines
Fantasy and fabulism	An impossible element that is necessary to the story’s meaning, not decoration.	Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”	Fantasy and speculative magazines; many literary journals
Horror and the Gothic	Dread built steadily toward a single effect.	Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”; Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”	Horror magazines, Gothic anthologies
Historical fiction	A past period rendered from inside, with attention to how people then thought and spoke.	Willa Cather’s prairie stories	Literary journals and historical anthologies
Humor and satire	A comic premise sustained with control; satire with a target.	Mark Twain, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”	Humor sites, general magazines, literary journals
Hybrid and experimental	Unusual forms (lists, letters, instructions, fragments) that create meaning through their shape.	Story-in-letters and story-as-list forms	Literary journals open to experiment

CHOOSING THE RIGHT LENGTH

1. **Let the story find its natural size first.** Draft without a count in mind. A story that wants to be 2,000 words will be weakened by padding, and a story that needs 6,000 will be damaged by cutting it to 3,000.

2. **Then think about the market.** If the draft runs 4,200 words and your first-choice journal caps fiction at 4,000, a careful line edit can usually close that gap. If it runs 9,000 and every journal on your list caps at 6,500, the story may need restructuring, or a different list.
3. **Know which limits are firm.** Some editors say plainly that a limit is firm (*SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*). Others describe a preference. Treat stated maximums as firm unless the guidelines invite exceptions.
4. **Count the way the magazine counts.** Some exclude the title; most count every word of the story itself. Report an honest count, usually rounded to the nearest hundred for longer stories.
5. **Remember that shorter stories are easier to place.** A tight 3,500-word story fits nearly every market in this guide. A 9,000-word story fits only a few.

PREPARING A SUBMISSION

- **Read the magazine before you send.** Most guidelines ask for this, and it is the surest way to know whether your story belongs there.
- **Use standard manuscript format** unless the magazine asks otherwise: 12-point type, double-spaced, one-inch margins, your name and contact information on the first page, and page numbers.
- **Write a short cover letter.** Name the story, give the word count, mention one or two previous publications if you have them, and stop.
- **Check the policy on simultaneous submissions,** and withdraw a story promptly if it is accepted elsewhere.
- **Keep a submission log:** story, magazine, date sent, response, and date of response.
- **Check each magazine's rules on AI-generated work.** Several genre magazines now state that they do not accept it.

WHERE TO FIND CURRENT GUIDELINES

- **Poets & Writers Literary Magazines database,** a searchable directory of literary journals: https://www.pw.org/literary_magazines
- **Submittable,** the platform many magazines use to receive work: <https://www.submittable.com/>
- **Chill Subs,** a searchable database of literary magazines and their guidelines: <https://chillsubs.com/>
- **Duotrope,** a subscription database of markets and response statistics: <https://duotrope.com/>
- **Writer Beware,** maintained by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, for warnings about scams and predatory contests: <https://writerbeware.blog/>
- **William Shunn's Proper Manuscript Format,** a widely used guide to formatting short fiction: <https://www.shunn.net/format/>

SOURCES

All pages were consulted in October 2026.

- Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, “Nebula Rules”: <https://nebulas.sfwaw.org/about-the-nebulas/nebula-rules/>
- The Hugo Awards, “Hugo Categories”: <https://www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-categories/>
- *One Story*, “Submit a Story”: <https://one-story.com/write/submit-a-story/>
- *Ploughshares*, “Submit Writing”: <https://pshares.org/submit/submit-writing/>
- *Granta*, “Submissions”: <https://granta.com/submissions/>
- *The Threepenny Review*, “Submissions”: <https://www.threepennyreview.com/submissions/>
- *The Sun*, “Submit Essays, Fiction, and Poetry”: <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/submit/essays-fiction-poetry>
- *The Kenyon Review*, “Submit” and “Fiction”: <https://kenyonreview.org/submit/> and <https://kenyonreview.org/submit/fiction/>
- *The Missouri Review*, “Submission Guidelines”: <https://missourireview.com/submissions/submission-guidelines/>
- *The Paris Review*, Submittable guidelines: <https://theparisreview.submittable.com/submit>
- *Narrative*, “Submission Guidelines”: <https://www.narrativemagazine.com/submission-guidelines>
- *The New Yorker*, “Contact”: <https://www.newyorker.com/about/contact>
- *SmokeLong Quarterly*, “Guidelines” and award FAQ: <https://www.smokelong.com/guidelines/> and <https://www.smokelong.com/the-smokelong-quarterly-award-for-flash-fiction-the-smokey-faq/>
- *Fractured Lit*, “Submit”: <https://fracturedlit.com/submit/>
- Bridport Prize listing, Poets & Writers: https://www.pw.org/writing_contests/bridport_prizes
- *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, “Writers’ Guidelines”: <https://elleryqueenmysterymagazine.com/contact-us/writers-guidelines/>
- *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, “Writers’ Guidelines”: <https://alfredhitchcockmysterymagazine.com/contact-us/writers-guidelines/>
- *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, “Writers’ Guidelines”: <https://asimovs.com/contact-us/writers-guidelines/>
- *Clarkesworld*, “Submissions”: <https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/submissions/>
- *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, guidelines: <https://fandsf.moksha.io/publication/fsf/guidelines>
- *Lightspeed*, guidelines: <https://adamant.moksha.io/publication/lightspeed/guidelines>
- *Uncanny*, “Submissions”: <https://www.uncannymagazine.com/submissions/>
- *Strange Horizons*, “Fiction Submission Guidelines”: <https://strangehorizons.com/submit/fiction-submission-guidelines/>
- *Nightmare*, guidelines: <https://adamant.moksha.io/publication/nightmare/guidelines>