

A WORKSHOP BOOKLET FOR WRITERS AND TEACHERS

WRITING THE SHORT STORY

Directions, Ideas, and Exercises from First Spark to Final Draft



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HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet walks a writer through the making of a short story in nine stages, from the first idea to the last revision. Each stage gives a direction (what to do), an explanation (why it matters), and an exercise (a way to practice it now). Teachers can use the stages as a sequence of lessons; writers working alone can move through them at their own pace, one stage a day or one a week.

It is a companion to two other Silver Current Press booklets: *The Shape of a Short Story*, which maps where events fall in eight famous stories, and *The Short Story Today*, which covers lengths, genres, and the word counts magazines accept.

THREE PRINCIPLES BEHIND EVERY STAGE

- **A story is about a change.** Something is different at the end: a situation, a relationship, or a person's understanding.
- **Pressure reveals character.** We learn who people are by watching what they do when something they want is at risk.
- **The reader completes the story.** Ernest Hemingway compared prose to an iceberg: "The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water." What you leave out, if you know it well, still carries weight.

STAGE 1: FIND THE SEED

Direction. Collect possibilities before you choose one. Most stories begin not with a plot but with a fragment: an image, an overheard sentence, a memory that will not leave, a question, or an object.

Why it matters. A seed that interests you will survive the long work of drafting. A seed chosen because it seems important often dies by the third page.

Ten places to look

1. A family story that is told one way but that you suspect happened another way.
2. An object in your home that once belonged to someone else.
3. A job you have held and the people you worked beside.
4. A sentence overheard on a bus, in a waiting room, or at a counter.
5. A moment when you said the wrong thing, or failed to say the right one.
6. A place you knew well that has changed or disappeared.
7. A newspaper item of three or four lines.

8. A rule (in a family, a school, a church, or a workplace) and the person who breaks it.
9. A photograph of strangers.
10. A question you cannot answer: Why did she stay? What did he know?

EXERCISE

Keep a list of seeds for one week. Add at least two a day. At the end of the week, circle the three you keep thinking about. For each, write one sentence beginning “What if...”

STAGE 2: BUILD A CHARACTER WHO WANTS SOMETHING

Direction. Give your central character a specific desire and a reason the desire is hard to satisfy. Then give the character something to lose.

Why it matters. Desire is the engine of a story. Della wants a gift worthy of Jim; the boy in “Araby” wants to bring something back from the bazaar; Mathilde Loisel wants to be admired. Each desire is concrete, and each costs something.

QUESTION	WEAK ANSWER	STRONGER ANSWER
What does she want?	To be happy.	To be invited to her sister’s wedding.
Why can’t she have it?	Life is hard.	She told the truth about her sister’s husband twenty years ago.
What could she lose?	Everything.	Her mother’s good opinion, which she has never had.
What does she not know about herself?	Nothing in particular.	That she enjoyed being right more than she loved her sister.

EXERCISE

Answer the four questions above for a character drawn from one of your seeds. Then write a half-page scene in which the character wants something small (a seat, a phone call returned, the last piece of cake) in a way that hints at the larger want.

STAGE 3: CHOOSE THE POINT OF VIEW

Direction. Decide who tells the story and how close the telling stays to one mind.

POINT OF VIEW	STRENGTH	RISK	MODEL
First person	Intimacy, voice, and the chance of an unreliable narrator.	The narrator can know only what he sees and can easily explain too much.	Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”; Joyce, “Araby”
Close third person	Inside one mind, with a little more distance and flexibility.	Drifting into other minds by accident.	Mansfield, “Miss Brill”; Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”
Omniscient	Range, commentary, and irony.	A narrator who talks over the characters.	O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi”
Objective (dramatic)	Readers infer everything from action and speech.	Coldness, or confusion if the clues are too faint.	Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”

EXERCISE

Write the same 200-word moment twice: once in first person, once in close third. Read both aloud. Which one lets the reader see more than the character does? That is often the right choice.

STAGE 4: OPEN CLOSE TO THE TROUBLE

Direction. Begin as near as you can to the moment the character’s situation becomes unstable. Establish a voice, a person, and a place quickly, and let something already be wrong or wanting.

Why it matters. In five of the eight famous stories mapped in *The Shape of a Short Story*, the central problem appears in the first tenth of the text. O. Henry states it in his first line: “One dollar and eighty-seven cents.”

Six ways to open

- **With the problem:** the fact that sets everything in motion.
- **With a voice:** a narrator whose way of speaking is itself a clue (“True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am”).
- **With a place under pressure:** a setting described so that it already means something (Joyce’s “blind” street).
- **With an action already under way.**
- **With a line of dialogue** that raises a question.
- **With an image** that will return at the end.

EXERCISE

Write five different first sentences for the same story, one in each of five styles above. Choose the one that makes you want to write the second sentence.

STAGE 5: PLAN THE SHAPE

Direction. Before you draft, sketch the story in five movements and decide roughly where each will fall.

MOVEMENT	ROUGH POSITION	QUESTIONS TO ANSWER
Opening and disturbance	0–15%	Who, where, and what is wrong?
Commitment	10–40%	What does the character choose, promise, or begin?
Pressure	30–80%	What gets in the way, and how does each scene raise the cost?
Decisive turn	80–99%	What reversal, recognition, or revelation changes the meaning?
Aftermath	Brief or none	What gesture, image, or line lets the change register?

The percentages are drawn from measurements of eight classic stories; they describe what has worked, not a rule. For eight complete templates with examples, see *The Shape of a Short Story*.

EXERCISE

On an index card, write one sentence for each of the five movements. If you cannot write the fourth sentence (the turn), you are not yet ready to draft. Keep thinking about what your character does not know.

STAGE 6: DRAFT IN SCENES

Direction. Write the story mostly in scenes, moments shown in real time with action and dialogue, and use summary to move quickly between them.

Why it matters. Scenes create belief; summary creates pace. The ten years of labor in “The Diamond Necklace” are summarized in a few paragraphs, but the loss of the necklace and the final meeting are dramatized. Save scene for the moments that change things.

A scene checklist

- Someone in the scene wants something.
- Something stands in the way.

- The scene ends differently from how it began.
- At least one concrete sensory detail places the reader in the room.
- The dialogue does more than deliver information; people evade, interrupt, and misunderstand.

Dialogue in brief

- Use “said” nearly always; it disappears and lets the words carry the feeling.
- Let characters answer the question beneath the question.
- Cut greetings, farewells, and small talk unless they reveal something.
- Read every exchange aloud.

EXERCISE

Write a two-page scene in which two people argue about something trivial while the real subject, something neither will name, presses underneath. Do not name it.

STAGE 7: FIND THE ENDING

Direction. End at the moment the meaning lands. Do not explain it. Trust an action, an image, or a final line.

Why it matters. In the eight stories measured in *The Shape of a Short Story*, the decisive turn always falls after the 80% mark, and none spends more than about a twelfth of its length afterward. A long, explaining aftermath drains the turn of its force.

Five kinds of ending

ENDING	WHAT HAPPENS	MODEL
Reversal	A final fact changes the meaning of everything before it.	Maupassant, “The Diamond Necklace”
Epiphany	The character suddenly sees himself or his situation truly.	Joyce, “Araby”
Open ending	The real difficulty is only beginning.	Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”
Image	A concrete detail holds the feeling.	Mansfield, “Miss Brill”
Self-betrayal	The narrator’s own words give him away.	Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”

EXERCISE

Take your draft and cover the last paragraph with your hand. Does the story end better one paragraph sooner? Try again with the last two paragraphs. Many first drafts end once too often.

STAGE 8: REVISE IN PASSES

Direction. Revise in separate passes, each with one purpose, from the largest questions to the smallest.

1. **The story pass.** Is the change clear? Does every scene move toward it? Is the turn late enough and strong enough?
2. **The shape pass.** Make a beat map of your draft. Where does the trouble begin? Where is the turn? How much follows it?
3. **The character pass.** Does the central character want something specific on every page? Do the minor characters have wants of their own?
4. **The scene pass.** Which summaries should become scenes, and which scenes could be summary?
5. **The detail pass.** Replace general words with particular ones. Check that recurring images return at the right moments.
6. **The sentence pass.** Read aloud. Cut repeated words, stacked adjectives, and sentences that explain what the scene has already shown.
7. **The final pass.** Title, first line, last line. Then the word count, against the market you have in mind.

EXERCISE

Cut ten percent. For a 4,000-word story, remove 400 words without removing any scene. Notice which kinds of words went first.

STAGE 9: TITLE, POLISH, AND SEND

- **Choose a title that works twice:** once before the story is read, and again, with new meaning, after. “The Gift of the Magi” and “Araby” both do this.
- **Put the story away** for at least a week before the final read.
- **Prepare the manuscript** in standard format, and match the story’s length to the market (see *The Short Story Today*).
- **Send it to several suitable magazines,** keep a log, and start the next story while you wait.

THIRTY STORY IDEAS

Each idea is a starting situation, not a plot. Change anything you like.

1. A woman finds her own name in a dead stranger’s address book.
2. A boy is paid to sit with an elderly neighbor every afternoon for a summer.
3. Two brothers must decide who will clear out their father’s workshop.

4. A substitute teacher discovers what the regular teacher has been telling the class about her.
5. A wedding guest realizes that she is the only person who knows why the bride is crying.
6. A night-shift nurse keeps receiving phone calls meant for a patient who has died.
7. A man returns a library book forty years overdue.
8. Two old friends meet by chance in a hospital waiting room, each there for someone else.
9. A girl is chosen to carry a statue in a procession and does not believe in what it stands for.
10. A father teaches his daughter to drive on the road where he once had an accident.
11. A cleaning crew finds a letter addressed to whoever finds it.
12. A woman takes the wrong coat home from a funeral.
13. A family keeps a place at the table for someone who is not coming back.
14. An immigrant shopkeeper is asked to translate at a stranger's court hearing.
15. A retired priest is asked to perform a blessing he no longer believes in.
16. A dog walker learns more about her clients from their apartments than from their conversation.
17. A teenager takes the blame for something a sibling did.
18. Two neighbors who have never spoken are trapped together in an elevator.
19. A man rehearses a confession on the train and arrives to find the person gone.
20. A woman repaints her childhood bedroom before her parents sell the house.
21. A piano tuner hears something in a house that the owners cannot.
22. A girl's grandmother insists on telling a story differently every time.
23. Someone wins a small lottery prize and tells no one.
24. A building superintendent keeps a list of everyone who has died in the building.
25. A son discovers that his mother has been writing to his ex-wife.
26. A bus driver notices the same passenger getting on at a stop where no one lives.
27. A family vacation is planned around one member's secret.
28. A woman receives a photograph of herself as a child that she has never seen.
29. A man is asked to give the eulogy for a friend he had stopped liking.
30. Someone finally reads the book a parent was reading on the day the parent died.

A FOUR-WEEK PLAN

WEEK	WORK	GOAL
1	Stages 1–3: collect seeds, build a character, choose point of view.	One chosen seed, a character sketch, two point-of-view trials.
2	Stages 4–5: write openings and plan the shape.	An opening page and a five-sentence plan.
3	Stages 6–7: draft in scenes, through to an ending.	A complete first draft, however rough.
4	Stages 8–9: revise in passes, title, polish.	A revised draft ready for readers or for submission.

COMMON PITFALLS

PITFALL	SYMPTOM	REMEDY
Slow start	Two pages of background before anything happens.	Begin at the first moment of instability; fold background in later.
Passive protagonist	Things happen to the character, who only reacts.	Give the character a choice in every scene.
Explaining the feeling	“She felt sad and betrayed.”	Show what she does with her hands, her voice, her coat.
Too many characters	Readers cannot keep names straight.	Combine or cut; most stories need two or three people who matter.
The dream or coincidence ending	The problem is solved by chance or waking up.	Let the turn come from the character’s own act or recognition.
Explaining the ending	A final paragraph tells the reader what the story meant.	Cut it, and trust the image or action before it.

SOURCES

- Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), chap. 16, on the iceberg.
- The model stories cited are available free from Project Gutenberg: O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi” (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7256>); Guy de Maupassant, “The Diamond Necklace” (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3090>); Anton Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog,” trans. Constance Garnett (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13415>); James Joyce, “Araby” (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2814>); Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2148>); Katherine Mansfield, “Miss Brill” (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1429>).
- Story positions and percentages: James Mulhern, *The Shape of a Short Story* (Silver Current Press, 2026).