



*the Art of
Writing Flash Fiction*

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The Art of Writing Flash Fiction

Flash Fiction Defined—Proponents, contest administrators, and publishers of flash fiction place length restrictions variously up to 500 or even 1,000 words, but one of the largest markets restricts the form to 55 words (not including the title, which should not exceed five words). Because writing with fewer words is much more difficult than writing with more words, and because you want to learn the craft (that's why you bought the book, right?) for our purposes, flash fiction is a complete story—one with a beginning, a middle, and an end—written in 99 words or fewer not including the title. You might refer to it as “double-digit fiction.”

An old saw regarding fiction teaches us to introduce a character, put him up a tree, throw rocks at him, and bring him down. Be wary of writing only part of a story, omitting the resolution.

Before we get down to what flash fiction is, I want to be sure you understand that it's a genre in its own right. To achieve that, I'll first explain what flash fiction isn't.

Genres That Are *Not* Flash Fiction

Essay—No matter its purpose, every well-written essay has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In that way, it resembles fiction, but the essayist seldom establishes conflict except to make her point in the context of argument, and without conflict there can be no resolution.

Vignette (Slice of Life)—The vignette is an incomplete fictional account, a verbal snapshot. It will have a character or characters and a setting, of course, and it might very well have a conflict, but it never has a resolution. Imagine you are walking along a sidewalk that abuts a large apartment building. As you near an open window, the voices of two people inside the apartment begin to come into range. If you write what you overhear from that point until the voices fade out as you pass by the window and move farther away, you have written a vignette, a small, thin slice of the life of the people in that apartment.

Story Premise—Although you can use a flash fiction story as a basis from which to launch a longer story, it is much more than a premise. The premise contains none of the elements of fiction; it only hints at them. Most often, the story premise is framed in the form of a question that begins “What if?” For example, “What if a jealous husband suspects his wife of cheating on him with a priest?” is a premise. In this case, the premise provides the characters, but it only hints at the conflict and it omits the setting and the resolution. Building on that premise to include a conflict and a satisfactory resolution makes the premise a story.

The Elements of Flash Fiction

Any complete short story has four distinct elements: setting, characters, conflict, and resolution. Flash fiction has a fifth element that is more necessary than in other forms of creative writing: suggestion (implication). Let's look at some definitions.

Setting is the locale wherein the characters act out the scene(s) and the events or occurrences take place. Don't worry about coming up with a setting. It's impossible to begin a story without one.

Characters aren't limited to human beings. They might also be animal, vegetable, mineral, mechanical, or alien. Most flash fiction stories have only one or two characters.

Conflict is the source of tension that keeps the reader interested in the story. This is arguably the most important component of fiction: Conflict begs resolution. You can find many excellent ideas in Chapter 2 of *Writing Realistic Dialogue & Flash Fiction* for introducing conflict and building tension.

Resolution is the natural, satisfactory outcome of the conflict. *Satisfactory* is the key word. As with longer works of fiction, the flash-fiction writer must not save the protagonist or otherwise resolve the conflict through miraculous means. The writer must live within the rules she's established for her fictional world. Many flash fiction stories have a twist ending, but the reader must immediately recognize that the resolution fits, that it is not only a plausible outcome, but a likely one. The best resolution is one that makes the reader slap himself across the forehead and say "Why didn't I think of that!"

Suggestion (or implication) is the fine art of letting the reader know what you're talking about—or letting him think he knows what you're talking about—without telling him directly. When she uses suggestion, the writer hints at an emotion or an occurrence and lets the reader invent it himself rather than telling him about it outright. Misdirection is an important function of suggestion.

Notes

Change (the Character Arc)—In most short stories, novellas, and novels, the protagonist and/or the antagonist experience a change in her personality, her behavior, or her outlook on life. In flash fiction, more often than not, change is more likely to occur not in the character, but in the reader's perception of the character or even his perception of the world at large.

Action Verbs, Adjectives Adverbs, and Contractions—Flash fiction is an exercise in word economy. Action verbs are essential; adjectives and adverbs are anathema. Contractions also are essential. After all, "haven't" is only one word, whereas "have not" is two. And there's no reason you can't be inventive: "should not have" is three words; "shouldn't have" is two; "shouldn't've" is only one. Remember that when you're truncating "have," it's "'ve" not "of": "should've" not "should of."

Dialogue Versus Narrative—Dialogue generally is more economical for delivering suggestion and innuendo. Dialogue always immediately engages the reader and, when it's written the way people speak, it's composed in great part of sentence fragments.

If you're aiming for a particular word length, say 55 words, it sometimes helps to write on a pad on which the lines are numbered (or number them yourself). Then write down the left side of the page, one word per line. When you've reached the bottom of the page, begin at the top again, say in the center of the page. You can easily monitor your word count, and replacing individual words with better ones is easy.

Avoid trying to tell the reader everything. Use suggestion (implication) and innuendo instead and trust the reader to see the scene. Experiment, experiment, experiment. Write, write, write!

An Example of Flash Fiction—Here's my own first very successful flash fiction story. "At Confession" has been published in several magazines and journals, and two separate times young filmmakers have approached me for permission to create a film short based on it. Of course, I said yes both times. You might still be able to find a short film version online if you key "At Confession" into your favorite search engine.

At Confession

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

"How long since your last confession?"

"Two years."

"What's the trouble?"

"I have wished death on a man."

"You haven't acted on your wish?"

"Not yet."

"Who is the man?"

“He is cheating with my wife.”

The priest paled. “I forgive you.”

I shot him through the screen.

In “At Confession,” the setting is a confessional. The characters are the first-person narrator and a priest. Notice, first, how you were immediately drawn into the story by the quiet, but tension-filled dialogue. The conflict is complex: At first it takes place in the protagonist’s mind (2 years since confession, wishing death on a man), then is transferred to the priest just before the resolution, during which the priest is shot. As an aside, the antagonist in this story is not the priest, but the protagonist’s wife, a third character, although she enters the story only through implication.

Notice that implication is also at work coloring the reader's opinion of the priest. The suggestion that the priest is guilty doesn't necessarily justify the harsh resolution, but the priest's implied admission of guilt, first to the reader (“The priest paled”), then to the narrator (“I forgive you”) does justify it. We probably would not have been satisfied with the story had we suspected the priest was innocent.

Notice too that the story seems larger than it actually is, seeming to begin before the narrator begins speaking and to continue after the final line. This is a result of an actual plot in this particular story, with the implied first conflict (the wife’s infidelity) leading to the second conflict (in the protagonist’s mind) leading to the third conflict (the protagonist facing the priest and the priest’s ensuing fear) leading to the resolution. Also, we feel satisfied with the ending; what happens to the narrator as a result of his action is of no consequence to us.

A Few Exercises to Get You Started

Write a story about a conflict or the relationship between

1. a man and a woman; two men; two women.

2. two beings from Jupiter, another solar system, another galaxy.
3. a man and a machine; a woman and a machine; two machines.
4. two inanimate objects (a cup and the desk or table; grass and dirt; your shoe and your sock).
5. (among) three people or beings (any gender or mix of genders or species).
6. seemingly complimentary professionals (a cop and a lawyer, a baker and a cook, a writer and an editor, a teacher and a principal).
7. a human character and his conscience or sense of morality.
8. two or more people in a photograph.
9. a father and son; mother and daughter.
10. rodeo cowboy and bull; two drivers on a race track.

Final Notes and a Few More Examples of Flash Fiction

The market for any kind of fiction changes constantly. To find markets for flash fiction, I suggest you key "flash fiction" into your favorite search engine and follow the links. In addition to whatever markets you discover through your web search for "flash fiction," remember that many flash fiction stories are precisely the right length to serve as fillers for magazines. Another possible market is any fiction venue that does not specify a minimum word count in their guidelines. I know there's also at least one Yahoo Group dedicated to flash fiction. Finally, literary journals almost always are a good venue for flash fiction.

The Mysterious Case of Harlan the Hippie

The ancient Volkswagen Beetle flipped, landing upside down in a ditch. But being high has its advantages.

Harlan climbed out, surveyed the scene, then got behind the wheel again, thinking how cool it was to have the world on his back.

When the officers arrived, the earth was gone, toted off on the roof of Harlan's car.

The Importance of Polish

He's such a bastard!" Margo scrubbed her fingernails with the cotton ball. "Working late every night! Like money's all that important!"

She squeezed the cotton ball, noticed a strong odor, and thought of his early morning habit of breathing through a warm washcloth. She smiled and squeezed again.

Acetone would work as well as ether.

Mary's Recipe

I killed my third wife yesterday. Disposing of the body is the trick, and the third time's a charm.

"She left me," I said, and threw her a bon voyage party. "Better to get on with my life," I said.

Everyone pitied me and cursed her for leaving. Nobody noticed the excellent stew. Mary's recipe.

I hope this little ebook has been helpful to you. If so, I hope you'll take a look at some of my other nonfiction titles, either already published or forthcoming soon. Please see the list below.

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About the Author

Harvey Stanbrough was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. He spent most of his early life in the home of his heart, the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona. After graduating from

a 21-year civilian-appreciation course in the U.S. Marine Corps, he attended Eastern New Mexico University where he managed to sneak up on a bachelors degree. His works have been nominated for the Frankfurt eBook Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the National Book Award. He writes and works as an editor and writing instructor from his home in southeast Arizona. Contact Harvey at h_stanbrough@yahoo.com. Visit his website at <http://HarveyStanbrough.com> or visit him on [Facebook](#).