

## 11 (BASIC) WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR SHORT STORIES

This handout is a list of tips to think about before you start your short story and while you're writing it. It is meant to accompany handouts on formatting that are available in the Writing Center. *Remember:* when writing for a class and in doubt about what your professor is expecting, consult your assignment or ask your professor directly.

**WRITE OFTEN!** Write as often as possible, even when you don't know what to write about. Getting into the habit of writing will not only make you more comfortable with the act of writing, it will force you to explore and take risks when you run out of ideas (and you will).

**READ OFTEN!** Reading often is a good way to see what works in writing, and to see how and when it works. A good place to start is Francine Prose's book *Reading Like a Writer*. From there, read voraciously, starting with books within the genre you're looking to write. Don't neglect the "classics," though. University of Wisconsin Professor Allyson Goldin Loomis writes, "Read a LOT of Chekhov. Then re-read it. Read Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway, Alice Munro, and Tobias Wolff. If you don't have time to read all of these authors, stick to Chekhov. He will teach you more than any writing teacher or workshop ever could."

**PAY ATTENTION TO POINT OF VIEW.** This is important. Do you want your narrator to interact within your story (1<sup>st</sup> person), or would you rather have your narrator be able to speak outside of the action, perhaps providing commentary (3<sup>rd</sup> person)? Do you want your reader to be able to "see inside" all of the characters (3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient), or would you rather have your reader focus on one character (1<sup>st</sup> person or 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited)? These are questions that you, as a writer, need to know *before* you choose your point of view.

**SOMETHING HAS TO HAPPEN IN YOUR STORY.** Kurt Vonnegut, in *Bagombo Snuff Box*, gives eight rules for writing. One is that "every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water." This advice should hold true for your entire story. The last feeling you want your readers to have once they have finished your story is *why did I just read that?* Sometimes referred to as *climax*, sometimes as the *hook* or *explosion*, your story needs an event, something the reader can be interested in. You can write a simple story with simple characters and a simple setting as long as you have an interesting event. A story about someone shopping in the supermarket could work if, say, the power goes out and people panic.

**IN ULTRA-SIMPLE TERMS, "SHOW, DON'T TELL."** The reason the "show, don't tell" is advice given to new writers is because they tend to tell when they *should* be showing. For example: you wouldn't just tell your reader that "Joe made a funny face." What funny face did he make? Your reader has no idea what you mean. If you write that "Joe crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue," your reader gets it.

**ASK YOURSELF: DOES THIS ADVANCE MY STORY?** Do we need to know that the minor character played the clarinet in ninth grade? No? Then cut it. If it's important (if it *needs* to be in the story for the story to make *sense*), then keep it. Think about every detail, sentence by sentence. Evaluate every word, asking yourself whether or not you *need* it (not if you *like* it).

**DON'T HAVE TOO MANY CHARACTERS.** A short story can be made too dense by having more characters than needed. This follows the point that you should consider whether or not you need something in order to advance your story. A 10-page story about a walk in the park shouldn't have 14 characters; an excessive amount of characters can obscure the story you've written.

**START AS CLOSE TO THE CLIMAX AS YOU CAN.** Another one of Kurt Vonnegut's writing tips in *Bagombo Snuff Box* is to "start as close to the end as possible." In short stories, a writer only has a certain number of pages within which he or she must provide the readers with characters, set up an event, and drive the reader to care about what is happening. This isn't accomplished by spending too much of your precious time and space on needless back story. The closer you are to the end at the beginning, the quicker you can "hook" your reader.

**DON'T WORRY ABOUT VOCABULARY.** Put the thesaurus *down*. Most of the time, if you need to look up a word in a thesaurus, it's the wrong word. Don't worry about using lofty language. Instead, focus on using the language you're comfortable with in the best way possible.

**TRY TO AVOID ADVERBS (-LY WORDS) AND "FILLER" WORDS.** Adverbs are terrible, if only because they can almost always be replaced by something more interesting. The fire was burning quickly? How about the fire was *raging*? This advice extends to the words *very*, *really*, *thing*, and *issue*. It's really big? It's enormous. The music was very loud? The music was blaring. Also, whenever you're using the words *thing* or *issue*, you always mean something else. Be more specific! They're placeholder words that aren't enjoyable; nobody cares if you saw *something* scary looking at you, but if you tell them that an angry bull was looking at you with death in its eyes, they might.

**LEARN ALL OF THE RULES, LISTEN TO ALL OF THE ADVICE, AND THEN DISREGARD.** While it is true that someone *could* write a perfect novel without any knowledge of convention, it is also true that anyone with a dollar *could* win the lottery. Rules and conventions do not exist to hamper your writing or to hold you back; they exist to facilitate the clear communication of ideas. Through honing your craft as a writer, you'll reach a point where you're able to bend or break those rules, but you'll be able to do so in a way that doesn't get in the way of your narrative.

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Resources used:

Jerz, Dennis and Kathy Kennedy. "Short Stories: 10 Tips for Creative Writers." *Jerz's Literacy Weblog*. Seton Hill University, 30 Mar 2011. Web. 2 Oct 2011.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2000. xv. Print.

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