

COOKING UP A WINNER

Writing good short stories isn't difficult. In fact, it's within everyone's grasp – if you know the right techniques.

Basically, fiction writing is a mechanical process that anyone can master. True, you need that spark of creativity – the gem of a quirky idea – to get you started. But after that, actually turning the idea into a saleable piece of prose is merely a question of following basic rules. Stick to them and you can't go far wrong.

I always draw a parallel with cookery. Finished dishes can look amazing – especially if a top chef has lavished time and effort on them. But although the colours, tastes, textures and shapes all blend together to provide a treat for the senses, the chef hasn't used sorcery or paranormal skills to create the feast. All he's done is use ordinary ingredients plus a little experience and easily copied cooking techniques.

Given a recipe and access to the same ingredients, most competent cooks could re-create the same dish. It may not look quite as appealing the first time you make it – but after a few attempts most cooks would have a passable version that tasted and smelt great.

The same is true for short story writing. You may not be able to re-create every nuance of the haunting prose of highly experienced writers – that only comes with years of practice – but there's no reason why you can't write short stories that are technically competent, containing all the right ingredients in the correct amounts and in the correct order.

In later chapters I shall be looking at all the individual ingredients and techniques in some detail, but for now – by way of introduction – let's look briefly at the necessary facets of a gripping yarn. Using this quick and easy recipe you should be able to rustle up a tasty short story. Even if you are already turning out acceptable tales, this 13-point checklist will enable you to polish and improve your prose.

So let's get cooking...

A good short story has:

- **A single narrative thread.** Because the space in a short story is so limited – perhaps as little as 850 words – there isn't time to explore the stories of several different characters or look at how your main character reacts in a series of different environments.

Stick to one storyline and don't deviate from it: Helen plots revenge against the woman who stole her job; Cynthia decides whether to keep the purse she found in the street; Gary faces up to his arch rival in a motorbike race to the death.

If you find yourself widening your plotline – maybe looking at the lives of all the competitors in Gary's bike race – then you're starting to write a novel. Anything over 4,000 words is difficult to sell. Anything over 6,000 words is really a novella.

- **A short timescale.** A short story is like a snapshot – it's a moment frozen in time. It examines how a character deals with events at a particularly trying or traumatic period of his life. It isn't his life story, or a character study, or a chronicle of his various adventures.

All the best short stories are tightly focused – one storyline covering no more than a few days. The most gripping yarns recount events happening to your hero in a few

crucial hours.

- **Only one mood, pace and style.** A short story should have the same feel throughout. It shouldn't start as an emotionally packed tale of grief then suddenly switch to knockabout comedy.

It shouldn't speed up and slow down erratically or switch from a tightly written story with short, punchy sentences and simple vocabulary to a flowing, languorous piece of prose oozing baroque expressions and overblown imagery. The moment you change gear or the voice you use, you give the reader a jolt.

- **Brief descriptions.** A short story isn't the place to show off your descriptive skills. Long descriptions kill the pace and divert the reader's attention from the plot.

You should always aim to get the maximum effect with the minimum number of words. You may want to spend a page describing every aspect of an old woman's appearance but the only useful information you'll have given the reader is that the woman was elderly. You could achieve the same effect in six words: Ethel had salt and pepper curls.

- **Minimum background information.** We're only going to spend five minutes or so with the characters of a short story – not marry them or let them invest our life savings – so it's not necessary to know everything about them.

Only give the background information that is relevant to the plot. If the story is about how John copes with the break-up of his marriage, the fact that he took six attempts to get his 100-metres swimming badge or that he is allergic to bananas is of no importance.

The trick is to maintain a good balance between keeping information tight and giving enough relevant facts about a character so that the reader can visualise him. In chapter five we'll look at some techniques for making characters come across as real, living, three-dimensional individuals and not just stereotypes.

- **Four characters or less.** There just isn't the time or space in a short story to meet an army of new faces and memorise just who each person is and their relationship to other characters. Think how difficult it is to remember all the names of people you are introduced to at a party. That's the problem the reader has if you populate your stories with a huge cast of players.

Two is an ideal number of characters for a magazine short story – that allows you to use dialogue as they talk and react to each other. Three is great for eternal triangle tales, but four is really the limit.

- **No sub-plots, hidden morals or sub-text.** Keep it simple. Tell the tale in the most direct form possible and don't try to be too clever or erudite. The plot is of paramount importance so don't allow anything to interfere with the swift and smooth telling of the narrative.

It may be that your writing speaks on several different levels and reveals all sorts of truths to the reader. If that happens, then great. But don't aim for it deliberately. Let it happen naturally. Don't give your work a message. Don't use symbolism. Don't set out to be all meaningful and deep – the chances are you'll end up with a significant tale that no-one wants to read.

- **No lengthy run-up or wind-down.** The most common reason why short stories fail to grab the reader is that writers waste those precious first few sentences in setting the scene.

Instead of getting the story off and running, they hold everything up by having an

unnecessary description of the weather, or the town where the story is taking place, or the main character's mood, or his appearance, or his family history. Get into the plot right from the first sentence.

Also, know when your story is over. End it as swiftly as possible after the main character's crisis is resolved. Don't let it drift on aimlessly for several extra sentences until it runs out of puff. Just like a good joke, a short story should have a punchline.

- **Taut and punchy dialogue.** There's little point having an enticing title and an attention-grabbing intro if every time your main character speaks he sends your reader to sleep. Dialogue has to be fast-paced, exciting and dramatic.

Dialogue is a great way to inject emotion into a story. It helps build mood and tension. Aim for sound-bite snatches of speech which really bring your characters to life – not mundane chit-chat.

Don't even consider having a story that doesn't contain dialogue. It'll be a guaranteed turn-off.

- **As few points of view as possible.** A short story tells what happens when the main character faces a certain set of events. We should view those events through his eyes – and his eyes only.

Don't start viewing the action from another character's perspective. As well as being potentially confusing, it distances the reader from the hero – breaking the empathy link. When a story works well, it usually has a single viewpoint, with the reader imagining himself as the hero. Only switch viewpoints when it is absolutely vital to the plot and never have more than one viewpoint switch per story.

- **A main character facing up to a conflict.** Conflict is anything that upsets the smooth running of the main character's life. Maybe a bill arrives out of the blue that he can't pay. Maybe he doesn't get the promotion he was counting on. Maybe his fling with his secretary has been discovered by a blackmailer.

Whatever the conflict is – low-key or highly dramatic – it must put your main character on the spot. It must worry him. Dealing with the conflict should force him into acting in extreme or unusual ways and should pose a moral or physical dilemma. He is faced with hard decisions.

- **The plot starting at the point of conflict.** As this conflict is the basis of the story, the plot should begin when the main character faces his dilemma – should he tell his wife about the affair or lure the blackmailer into a trap?

It should end when the decision has been taken and the threat has been neutralized. For example, the blackmailer is dead or has been bought off. Or, the affair is made public and the main character resolves to face his wife's wrath. When the crisis is over, so is the story.

- **The character resolving his own conflicts.** Good fiction is about how human beings react to challenge – about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

Make your main character solve his own problems – especially if it forces him to be ingenious and overcome some of his fears. Don't let him off the hook by having a lucky twist of fate rescue him from his impending doom.

Exercises

Pick three different types of short stories and read through them taking note of all the "ingredients". (You could look at a typical romance story in a women's magazine, a twist-in-

the-tail story, a horror story, an erotic story ... just try to look at three different types.) Study how the writers constructed their tales.

Have they used all the ingredients listed in this chapter? See if they've broken these rules. If so, ask yourself if you think they got away with it. If not, try to say why they failed and suggest what would improve the stories. Have a go at rewriting the tales with your improvements.

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