Short Stories Study Sheet

Goals of this Study Sheet
Short stories can be difficult, but they don’t have to be. They’re different from writing a research paper, where you have a set rubric and guidelines to follow. In short stories, none of these rules are present. You’re left with only a blank sheet and personal creativity. While it seems hard, the goal of this sheet is to provide you with ways to shape your short story, and tips that will help your short stories become more developed.

Tips for Writing Short Stories
Throughout this explanation, you’ll receive tips that may have been expected, and some that are quirky. Remember, all short stories are different, and every author has their own unique style of writing, so while some of these tips may work for you, some of them very well may not.

Read Short Stories
If you’re going to write short stories, it’s important to read them. When you familiarize yourself with the style of writing, it’ll allow you to become better at writing them, with your own creative twist. Get reading!

Get Creative
This is blatantly obvious, but it’s important to writing a short story. Since they are, as title says, “short” stories, it gives the writer more opportunity to turn farfetched ideas into stories. For example, in “Sea Oak” by George Saunders, a male stripper lives with his relatives, including his Aunt Bernie, who tragically passed away; later, she comes back reincarnated, and she behaves crudely and her body (literally) falls apart as she stays there. With little background information, short stories can explore bizarre ideas without being unbelievable, giving the writer infinite creative control.

From the Writing Center
at the Academic Resource Center
John Tyler Community College
Come up with an Idea, but Not All of It

It’s good to have a general idea for your short story, but if you try and map it all out, you’ll likely become overwhelmed trying to figure out every detail. In addition, when you structure the entire story, it doesn’t allow for creative freedom when you come up with an idea while writing. Not knowing where the story is going allows for interesting narrative. Let your ideas come to you!

Create Your Protagonist

A protagonist is essential to a short story. You might have an idea for your protagonist, but there are several factors to consider when constructing one. The protagonist is the one who moves the story along, so it’s necessary to know what your protagonist represents, their morals, and most importantly, what they want. Know what their ultimate goal is, as that influences where your story goes. The protagonist doesn’t necessarily have to be a “good” person, either. A lot of the best short stories don’t have “good” protagonists, giving the story more tension and controversy/room for discussion.

Use Few Characters

This is a more subjective tip. There are successful short stories with lots of characters, but typically, it’s difficult to develop effective characterization in few pages. This is a case when less is more; throughout the short time the reader has with the characters, they get to know them better when there are only a few.

Use Scenes

Scenes allow the story to move forward in different times and places. Without scenes, a short story can easily become boring. Also, scenes provide the opportunity to introduce new settings and characters that impact the story.

Use Dialogue

Too much description and lengthy paragraphs can leave your reader bored. While it might be exciting, it’s good to add dialogue breaks to keep your story fresh. It also allows
for the reader to see how your characters perform in social situations, revealing more about them and their personality.

Side note: When writing, don’t use words such as “exclaimed” or “said delicately” — these words are distracting. The word “said” usually works well, and possibly a few verbs/adverbs thrown in occasionally.

Make Your Characters Do “ Weird” Things

This may seem unconventional, but, as stated earlier, short stories are prone to being “ weirder” than novels. This means your characters can perform strange actions. Also, when a character does something bizarre, it makes them more “ human.” When reading a story, sometimes the characters seem unrealistic, but when they do random things that aren’t expected, it makes them become lifelike, capturing the reader.

Write, Edit, Repeat

When you think your short story is done, it probably isn’t. Read it through many times; you’ll come across mistakes and words that could be changed each time. Some parts you’ll realize could be cut out. It’s crucial in a short story to only have what’s necessary, as you don’t have but a few pages to make an impression on your reader.

In Conclusion

It’s important to remember that you’re your own writer. Your style of writing is different from everyone else’s. Use these tips to make your short story better, but it’s up to you to write the actual story. Remember, you don’t have to follow all of these tips! Use your own judgement when writing, and make your story your own.

Sources Referenced