

What is a Short Story?

The short story developed during the 19th century in response to the growth of the monthly magazines in America and Britain. Short stories vary in length from 50 to 10 000+ words following the basic 'rules' established by one of the earliest Short Story writers, Edgar Allan Poe:

- A short story should create a single impression.
- It must be capable of being read in one sitting.
- Every word should contribute to the planned effect.
- The effect should be created in the opening sentence and developed throughout the work
- The story should end at its climax.
- Only such characters as are essential to the effect should appear.

These 'rules' have resulted in a particularly condensed and dramatic method of telling a story which probably accounts for its popularity in a society where time has a premium.

The Short Story has the same elements as the novel and the play:

- Plot
- Theme
- Setting
- Character
- Point of View
- Style

Whereas the novel and the play can spend a lot of time in establishing the elements and building up the reader's expectations, the short story does not have the time or space to do this. A useful comparison is to consider it as being similar to a television advertisement where an entire story or mood has to be conveyed in 30-60 seconds. In the same way as the advertisement the short story writer uses each of the elements and may give them greater or lesser emphasis depending on the purpose of the writer.

What to look for in a Short Story and take notes on.

What is the writer's purpose?

A writer can create a story to entertain, to be thought provoking, to state an opinion, to play with the reader's emotions of sorrow, anger, sympathy, happiness, disgust and so on. The purpose can often be worked out by examining the tone of the language the writer uses. A story can be ironic, sarcastic, humorous, serious or tongue-in-cheek depending on the writer's overall purpose and this will be affected by the choice of language and style.

How does the story begin?

By establishing the setting or by putting more emphasis on the background of the situation the writer can direct the reader to focus on the issue the story will explore. Same with the character if that is the focus.

How does the story develop?

The writer has to consider the way the story is built up. He or she can tell the story in a series of blocks that move rapidly through time and space, rather than a film using flashbacks and rapid cutting to speed the action. The writer can choose to tell the story as it happens, chronologically. Each writer will use different ways of developing the story in order to develop a feeling of suspense, surprise or tension.

How does the story end?

The ending is important to the overall effect the writer wants. For example Roald Dahl's stories usually have a surprise or twist ending which leaves the reader admiring the way he has brought all the little blocks of action together. Frank Sargeson however build toward the inevitable climax and do not require the ingenious twist of a Dahl story. Some writers prefer to leave it to the reader to provide an ending in the same way as some popular television programmes.

Who tells the story?

There are several options that writers can use. They can choose to be a character and either observe the action as it involves another character or tell the events as they concern them. This is **First Person Narration**. The writer could tell the story as if they were observing the action from outside like a reporter who knows what has and will happen to the characters. The commonly used pronouns will be: he, she, his, her, they, them, their. This is known as the **Eye of God** technique or **Third Person Narration**. Another way is to tell a story as a series of thoughts, each 'thought block' building up an impression or action. These can be logical or random. This is known as the **Stream of Consciousness** technique.

What is the language and style like?

The writer will create a particular impression from the way the language is used.

Sargeson has a chatty, colloquial style that creates an impression of 'mateiness' that gives his stories a distinctly 1930 – 50s New Zealand flavour.

Language is important, particularly if the writer uses dialogue to develop character and action. It will help give the setting and background to the story.

What images are used?

Look for particular symbols and references and understandings that the writer uses and intends for them to mean. For example in *Schooldays* by Maurice Gee Trevor Jones' hair becomes a symbol for freedom, non-conformity and creativity, while in Patricia Grace's *Journey* the old man's trip into the city becomes a symbol of the gap between the Maori and Pakeha cultures.

What are the characters like?

Short stories don't always need fully developed characters. Some might just be referred to as *the boy* or *the soldier* while in others the characters are fully developed and given personalities and motivations. Think about what we learn about Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon*.