

Flash: The Shortest Short Stories – A Guide

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<https://www.cellmatesmag.co.uk/post/flash-the-shortest-short-stories-a-guide>

Flash fictions are short-short stories of no more than about 750 words. In our periodical *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, my colleague, Peter Blair, and I publish stories that are no more than 360 words. The oldest flash-fiction magazine, *Vestal Review* (founded in 2000), has a word limit of 500.

At the University of Chester, Peter and I teach flash fiction on BA (Hons) Creative Writing and MA Creative Writing: Writing and Publishing Fiction.

If you fancy writing some flashes and sending them out to be published, here are twenty-one tips.

Do:

1. Get on with it. Jump into the story. If the focus of your flash is the death of Bob, then ‘Bob is just about to die’ is probably a better way to begin than: ‘In 1958, in Nantwich, when Bob was fifteen, he liked to play cricket, which he’d been taught by his father, Jack. Jack was so proud when Bob was made captain of the local team.’
2. Be original. Avoid clichéd plots, e.g. boy and girl meet; boy and girl might or might not get together; boy and girl get together. Avoid clichéd descriptions, e.g. ‘the rain beat on the windowpane’.
3. Be wary of silliness (e.g. a man has a second head that looks like Mickey Mouse), the sensational (e.g. a woman has been tied to a train track by an evil man – and the train is coming!), and the supernatural (e.g. zombies).
4. Make sense. Write clear, accessible prose that doesn’t confuse your readers. And think carefully about what you’ve written: if Beccy gets a bus to Brighton, she doesn’t arrive in a car.
5. Try to *show* something about a character’s personality or mood, rather than tell your readers directly. ‘With the fish fingers parallel and exactly one centimetre apart, Bob can begin to eat’ is more interesting for your readers than: ‘Bob has OCD.’
6. Make your characters talk how they talk. Would Beccy say ‘My tongue suggests that what I need to do is imbibe some liquid’ or ‘I’m really thirsty’? Be careful with swearwords: they can sometimes add realism and/or humour, but they can sometimes seem like the author is just trying to be shocking.
7. Avoid ending a flash with a supposedly profound statement, e.g. ‘We should all love one another’, ‘Life is so fragile’, ‘Our dreams are nourishment in a cruel world’. If your story is good, it will have *shown* these ideas.
8. Avoid unnecessary words. Look at *every* word and ask: ‘Can I delete it?’

9. Think about pace. Look at *every* sentence and paragraph, and ask: ‘Is it going too slowly? Is it going too quickly?’

10. Proofread carefully. Ensure that there aren’t any spelling mistakes or punctuation errors. The final version of a flash must be perfect if you want it to be published.

[370 words]

Don’t:

1. Don’t have lots of characters. You’re a flasher, not a novelist.
2. Don’t have lots of settings. Focus on a limited number of places – perhaps just one.
3. Don’t have lots of similes, like a rabbit has lots of baby rabbits. They can be distracting instead of helpful, like really big spatulas.
4. Don’t tell your readers unnecessary stuff. If it’s not important how Beccy gets to the bus station or that Bob was wearing socks, your readers probably don’t need to know.
5. Don’t explain everything. Feel free to make your readers wonder about things, to ask questions. What did Beccy’s husband do to make her run away to Brighton? Why did Bob smile just before he died?
6. Don’t end with a clunky conclusion, e.g. ‘Beccy was happy in Brighton’, ‘Bob went to heaven’. Let your readers wonder what happened next.
7. Don’t have a title that gives too much away about the story or is trying to impress. ‘To Brighton’ is better than ‘Running Away to Brighton Because of Her Husband’. ‘Life, Death, the Eclipse and Eternity’ is pretentious and terrible.
8. Don’t assume that your first draft (and second, third, fourth ...) is perfect. The best flashes have gone through numerous drafts.
9. Don’t write in isolation. Share your flashes with friends and ask them for constructive criticism. Don’t be precious about your writing: you’re asking for feedback about some words.
10. Don’t forget that your readers want their imaginations stimulated. You *must* be original, interesting, and entertaining. *Never* be boring.

[240 words]

Final Tip:

The best flashers learn from other flashers. Perhaps start by reading the 10th Anniversary Issue of *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*: <https://www1.chester.ac.uk/flash-magazine/issues>

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