

Prose Fiction Terminology

Short Stories

Short Story: A fictional tale of a length that is too short to publish in a single volume like a novel. Stories are usually between five and sixty pages: they can be read in a single sitting. Usually, short stories concentrate on relatively few characters and events.

The short story is considered to have three elements: plot, characterization and setting - as well as several devices or features. As well, stories contain the following devices: theme, conflict, point of view, suspense, foreshadowing, flashback, deus ex machina and in medias res. Theme is so vital to the short story that some critics prefer to consider it the fourth element, rather than a device or feature.

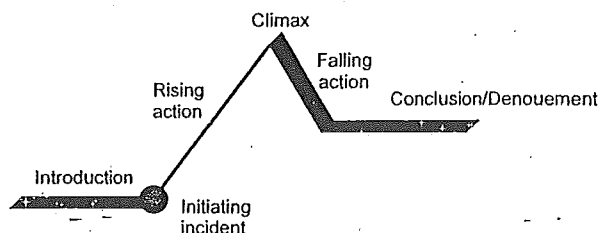
Elements

A. Plot: The events of the story or the series of actions that take place in the story are referred to as the plot. Basically, the plot is what happens in the story. Traditionally, it is divided into five parts.

1. **Introduction:** The reader meets the characters and discovers the setting. Reader interest is aroused here. The conflict that drives the story's action is discovered at the end of the introduction, with the initiating incident.
2. **Rising action:** This builds up the story, is the longest part of the story and is a series of steps that lead to the climax. You get more information about conflict and character here.
3. **Climax:** Here, the reader finds out what happens to the conflict, or how the conflict is resolved. It may not yet be finished, but the reader now has a good understanding of what way it is going to go.
4. **Falling action:** The plot begins to wrap up in this section of the story, which is usually brief.
5. **Denouement/Conclusion:** This part follows quickly after the climax and provides the last pieces of information for the reader. Denouement is French for "unknotting"; you may therefore think of denouement as the unknotting or untangling of the plot. Another word for denouement is conclusion. There are four types of denouement or conclusion and they have a variety of names:

1. **expository happy** (all loose ends are tied up and explained and the ending is happy)
2. **expository sad** (all loose ends are tied up and explained and the ending is sad)
3. **surprise or twist** (something happens that the reader does not expect at all)
4. **unresolved/indeterminate/cliffhanger** (the reader is left with questions and has to, in part, supply the ending him or herself. Some loose ends are left to dangle)

Plot Diagram: Also known as Freytag's Pyramid, the story diagram or plot diagram, was invented in 1864 by Gustav Freytag to visually represent the five plot parts and their relationship with one another. Modern stories may or may not tidily fit Freytag's Pyramid.



B. Characterization

Character Types

- **Protagonist:** The main character in the story. Is usually, but not always, a "good guy".
- **Antagonist:** The force against the protagonist. Is usually another character, but not always, especially if the conflict is "person against self". The antagonist is usually described as "the bad guy", although that description doesn't work if the conflict is person against self or person against environment.
- **Flat:** This is a minor character with one or maybe two sides to the personality. These characters might not seem very realistic or life-like because so little is known about them.
- **Round:** These characters are believable and complex people with several sides to their personality. They are lifelike and behave like real people would, if real people were in those same situations.
- **Dynamic:** Also known as a kinetic character, a dynamic character changes in some important way because of plot events. For example, a cruel old man might see the error of his ways and become generous and kind. Or, a gentle girl becomes vicious and angry because her parents divorce.
- **Static:** These characters are the opposite of dynamic characters. These are people who don't change in the course of a story. They have the same personality throughout.
- **Stock:** Also known as stereotypical, these characters are people who are easily recognized as "types". It wouldn't matter what story they appear in, they are always the same. For example, the old witch-like woman, the geeky scientist, the airhead, the dumb jock.

Character Analysis: The author may choose any of six ways to reveal a character to the reader. The reader must therefore be prepared to watch for "clues" about each character in these same six ways:

1. physical appearance
2. things the character says
3. things the character does (actions)
4. things the character thinks
5. author information
6. things other characters say about the character

Character Sketch: A character sketch is a description of a character's moral and personality qualities, written in paragraph form and with specific examples from the story in question. Usually, the character terms (see above) are used in the course of the description. Physical appearance or dress is sometimes described as well.

C. Setting: the author may choose to state the setting clearly or leave it to the reader to infer from textual clues (such as weather). There are two parts to a complete setting:

- **Emotional Setting** (mood or atmosphere)
- **Physical Setting** (time, place, season)

Setting may also be considered as divided into the categories of **general** (season, town, etc.) and **immediate** (the actual surroundings in the story/novel).

Short Story Devices and Features

A. Theme: The message of the story, stated in one or two complete sentences. When a person describes a story's theme, the person is describing what can be learned about life and/or people from the story. Theme is so important, it is often described as the fourth element of the short story. Although sometimes theme is called "the moral of the story", this isn't accurate because theme and moral are separate entities.

B. Moral: A moral deals with right and wrong, with acceptable and non-acceptable societal values, and is limited to this; whereas, a theme is the subject matter the writer deals with. Although right and wrong may have some bearing in the story, this is mutually exclusive to the subject.

C. Conflict: Conflict drives the plot forward. The reader discovers the conflict by the end of the introduction with the initiating incident, which is an event that demonstrates the conflict to the reader and begins the rising action. There are four different types of conflict:

- **Person versus person**
- **Person versus self**
- **Person versus environment**
- **Person versus the supernatural/machine**

D. Point of view: the writer selects the point of view from which to tell the story that best suits his/her intentions as a writer

- **First person:** "I" is the central character and tells his or her own story.
- **Second person:** the story is told about "you". "You could see the anger in her eyes."
- **Third person:**
 - **Omniscient:** Characters are referred to as "he" and "she" and the reader knows what is going on in their heads. All character thoughts are made clear in the text.
 - **Limited omniscient:** Characters are referred to as "he" and "she" and the reader knows what is going on in some of their heads. The remaining characters are treated in the objective fashion.
 - **Objective:** The story is about "he" or "she" and the author records action objectively, as a movie camera would. The reader does not see any of the character's thoughts (doesn't get inside their heads).

E. Deus ex Machina: From the Latin "god out of the machine." This device refers to any artificial device that is not a natural extension of the plot and that allows for an easy – and unbelievable – resolution of conflict. An improbable plot event.

F. In Medias Res: beginning in the middle of the action. A sample beginning to such a story would be "I saw the punch coming but couldn't duck in time. I collapsed to the floor, nose gushing red, clotted blood."

G. Flashback: When a character thinks back to an event that occurred before the story began. Sometimes flashbacks are written as separate "interrupter" sections within a novel. Flashbacks are also used in short stories.

H. Foreshadowing: A hint of events to come. Also used extensively in short stories.

I. Suspense: Anxiety or apprehension resulting from an uncertain, undecided, or mysterious situation. Excited anticipation of an approaching climax.

Novels

Many of the terms associated with short stories are also used in novels, particularly setting, characterization, plot, and theme. The difference between a novel and a short story is in the length and complexity of the narrative. Novels are longer and more complex than short stories.

- **Novel:** An extended piece of prose fiction formed into a narrative. A novel takes several sittings to read in its entirety.
- **Novella:** A piece of prose fiction that is in between the short story and novel in terms of complexity and length. It is also a narrative (tells a story). A classic example is John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, which is six chapters long (about 100 pages).

Additional Conflict Terms

- **Internal conflict:** When the conflict is inside a character in a novel as an internal struggle. Usually characters, like real people, have conflicting fears and goals that cause them to behave in certain ways. These secret (from the other characters) conflicts represent the character's internal conflict. The reader, of course, is aware of the internal conflict because he/she can see the character's thoughts.
- **External conflict:** When the conflict is outside a character in a novel. External conflict is the opposite of internal conflict, in that it is obvious to all the other characters in the story, as well as the reader. External conflict is best described as the adversities faced by the character during the plot. Either internal or external conflict can be the main-conflict of a story and therefore the primary driver of the plot.

Style: Writers use many, many different techniques to attract reader interest and attention or accomplish their literary purpose in short stories, novels, poems and plays. Several such techniques follow here:

- **Irony:** There are three different kinds of irony.
 - **Verbal irony** occurs when the opposite of what is said is actually meant (sarcasm is an extreme form of verbal irony).
 - **Situational irony** occurs when an event occurs that is the opposite of what was expected by the character and/or reader.
 - **Dramatic irony** is when a character says something, but the audience/reader knows more than the character does about other characters or events, so the statement comes across with a double meaning that the audience/reader "gets" and the character doesn't.
- **Satire:** A style of writing that has the goal of mocking or scolding either an individual, an institution or society as a whole. Angry and bitter satire is called Juvenalian satire while gentle mockery is called Horatian satire.
- **Parody:** A literary work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or work for comic effect or ridicule; a humorous, satirical or off-beat imitation of a person, event or serious work of literature. E.g. "The Simpsons" TV show often parodies classic novels or stories.
- **Symbol:** A symbol has two levels of meaning: a literal level and a figurative level. Objects, characters, events and settings can all be symbolic in that they represent something else beyond themselves. E.g. the dove is literally a bird, but has become a universal symbol of peace.



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