

Short and Sweet: Reading and Writing Flash Fiction

 learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/short-and-sweet-reading-and-writing-flash-fiction

By Amanda Christy Brown and Katherine Schulten

Overview | What are the essential elements of a story? How can writing flash fiction help us become better writers? In this lesson, students will consider the nature of stories and learn to write more concisely by reading and writing flash fiction.

Materials | Computers with Internet access, student journals, copies of the article "[Going Long. Going Short.](#)"

Warm-Up | Before students enter, project or write the following famous short short story, attributed to Ernest Hemingway:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

When students enter, ask them to copy the story and consider whether or not they think it *is* a story. Once students have had time to record their ideas, come together as a class to discuss the following:

- What does a story need in order to be a story?
- What questions does this story leave you with?
- What do you think is happening beneath the surface of these six words?
- Is the amount of what's left unsaid unsettling? Interesting? Annoying?
- Do you think it's harder to write a short short story like this one or a longer work, like a novel? Why?

Related | In [this Opinionator article](#)," Grant Faulkner, executive director of [National Novel Writing Month](#), muses on what writers can achieve when they "go short":

Flash fiction, which is defined as being a story under 1,000 words, goes by the names of "short shorts," "miniatures," "sudden fiction" and "postcard fiction," among many others. Flash communicates via caesuras and crevices. There is no asking more, no premise of comprehensiveness, because flash fiction is a form that privileges excision over agglomeration, adhering more than any other narrative form to Hemingway's famous iceberg dictum: only show the top 10 percent of your story, and leave the other 90 percent below water to be conjured.

This form speaks to the singularity of stray moments by calling attention to the spectral blank spaces around them; it can perfectly capture the disconnections that existentially define us, whether it's the gulf between a loved one, the natural world or God.

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

1. According to the author, how is the narrative form of the novel particularly suited to America?
2. How does Mr. Faulkner define flash fiction?
3. What is gained in “writing short”?
4. What must each line of a short short story do?
5. What do you think Mr. Faulkner means by “Such evocative, fragmentary brevity makes this Twitter and Facebook era perfect for flash fiction. Flash allows literature to be a part of our everyday life, even if we are strange multitasking creatures addled by a world that demands more, more, more”? Do you agree?

RELATED RESOURCES

From The Learning Network

From NYTimes.com

Around the Web

Activity | Here are two activities for working with flash fiction before students are invited to compose their own pieces.

Close Reading Flash Fiction: Choose several works of flash fiction to read and discuss. Below, we have provided four, but you can choose from many others via [these links](#).

In the summer of 2012, novelist Curtis Sittenfeld wrote a flash fiction series for the Times Magazine. Learn more about how she composed them in her post for the 6th Floor blog, [“The Story Behind My Very, Very Short Stories.”](#) Here are two she discusses:

“The Margin,” by Curtis Sittenfeld

In 1987, when Jenny Ficker and I were in sixth grade, our goals were to have a double wedding at which we married the McMasterson twins, to trick my sister into drinking a glass of pee and to sneak in the middle of the night to Boland Square and put a bra on the Grecian-woman statue on top of the fountain. Weirdly enough, I did marry Andy McMasterson, but I lost touch with Jenny years ago; whenever I drive by the Boland Square statue, the bronze bosom still hangs there for everyone to see.

“The Femur,” by Curtis Sittenfeld

On my 21st birthday, my father revealed two facts about himself: that he was colorblind and that before I was born, he’d served four years for armed robbery. I suspect the colorblind disclosure was a test of my maturity, and if I’m right, I must have barely passed. After he told me, I became petulant and said, “I just think it’s really weird you hid that for my whole life.”

If you'd like to have students read even shorter works, here are two stories highlighted in a [New Yorker review](#) of "Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer":

"Jermaine's Postscript to His Seventh-Grade Poem Assignment," by Christoffer Molnar.

|"Ms. Tyler, the girl part was about Shantell. Please don't tell anyone."

"Houston, We Have a Problem," by J. Matthew Zoss.

| I'm sorry, but there's not enough air in here for everyone. I'll tell them you were a hero.

Invite students to read one story at a time on their own, annotating as they go. (Or, recording their thoughts via a [double-entry graphic organizer](#).)

Then, have students meet in pairs or small groups to further the discussion. Some of the questions they might discuss:

- What do they know about the plot, characters, setting and theme of the story?
- What questions does the text raise?
- What is unwritten?
- What literary devices do they notice?
- What individual words or phrases jump out? What denotations or connotations are important to note about individual words?
- How "complete" a story is this? Why?

When students are finished, ask groups to share observations about the stories and follow up with these questions for the whole class:

- In general, do you think these stories work?
- How do you read them differently from the way you read a longer work?
- What do they give you that a longer work doesn't?

Classics in a Flash: Tell students that they are going to try their hand at condensing a classroom text into very few words. (Note: Set the word count at whatever limit you like, but it is generally true that the fewer the words, the harder the task.)

Begin by showing students some examples of classroom literary classics summed up in [six words](#) like:

| *The times were good. Also bad. "□A Tale of Two Cities"*
| *Kids sneak around, get married, die. "□Romeo and Juliet"*
| *Desperate, noble poor get shafted. Repeatedly. □ "The Grapes of Wrath"*

Ask that small groups begin by considering what is essential to the text under construction, thinking about character, setting, theme, and plot. What is the bare minimum a text needs to reveal its story?

Once students have crafted their mini-masterpieces, discuss the following:

- What is lost, and gained, by adhering to strict and brief word limits?
- What skills are engaged in writing concisely as opposed to developing an idea?
- What choices did you have to make?
- How is the effect different on the reader?
- How easy or hard was this task? Why?

Going Further | Now it's your turn. Write a piece of original flash fiction, 1,000 words or less, perhaps for submission to the [Scholastic Art & Writing Awards](#) for [flash fiction](#).

Credit

How to begin such a challenge? Take a look at the [essentials](#) of microfiction and consider these [tips](#) from The Guardian newspaper.

Here are some sources for flash-fiction inspiration:

Share stories with a classroom [festival](#), then workshop your stories to fine tune them for the larger world.

Common Core ELA Anchor Standards, 6-12:

Reading

2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Writing

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting or trying a new approach.

Speaking and Listening:

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.

Language:

1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.