

Official Fifty-Five Fiction Rules¹

Great storytelling starts with fair storytelling and gets better with practice. Ray Bradbury once told an audience that if they wanted to learn how to write, they should compose a short story every day. "If you do that," he said, "by the end of the year you'll have written 365 stories-and, at the very least, three or four of them are bound to be good because it's impossible to write 365 bad stories!"

...although some may have a more complex definition of just what constitutes a "story," for our purposes, a story is a story only if it contains the following four elements: **1) a setting; 2) a character or characters; 3) conflict; and 4) resolution.**

- All stories have to be happening someplace, which means they have to have a setting of some kind, even if it's the other side of the universe, the inner reaches of someone's mind, or just the house next door.
- Characters can have infinite variations. People, animals, clouds, microbes. Anything.
- By conflict, we merely mean that in the course of the story, something has to happen. The lovers argue. The deer flees. The astronauts wait in anticipation. Even in this last example, something is happening, even though no one is moving or talking. There is conflict, which leads to:
 - The outcome of the story, known also as the resolution. This doesn't necessarily mean that there's a moral ("Justice is its own reward," "In the end, love triumphs"), or even that the conflict itself is resolved. It may or may not be.

Consider "Bedtime Story" by Jeffrey Whitmore.... Besides having a terrific story idea. Whitmore also goes about telling it well. How he does so is worth examining.

Notice how much he achieves through suggestion. We know the characters are lovers, but the author never says so. We also know there's a gun in the story, but it's never directly mentioned. In fact, Whitmore's tale is actually two stories. The second one-the other conspiracy reveals itself in the final two words.

You'll also notice that there are no descriptive adverbs or adjectives, and yet we see the entire scene perfectly. The author then stretches the form by having his story start even before his narrative begins, and end beyond his final phrase, making it seem longer than just 55 words.

The main advantage to suggestion is conveying information economically-when the reader knows what you're talking about without your saying so, fewer words are needed. The disadvantage, of course, is losing sight of whether the reader is following you. Too much suggestion becomes obscure and confusing. That's a common error. So is trying to tell too complicated a story in such a tiny space. Fifty-Five Fiction demands a tight focus.

BEDTIME STORY

"Careful, honey, it's loaded," he said, re-entering the bedroom.

Her back rested against the headboard. "This for your wife?"

"No. Too chancy. I'm hiring a professional."

"How about me?"

He smirked. "Cute. But who'd be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?"

She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.

You can write about anything you like, but you can't use more than 55 words. Hyphenated words can't count as single words. For example, "blue-green dress" is three words, not two.

Your story's title isn't included in the word count. But remember that it can't be more than seven words long.

Contractions count as single words, so if you're really seeking word economy (as you should be), keep this in mind. If you write, "He will jump," it's three words. But if you write, "He'll jump," it's only two. Very economical. By the same token, any contraction that's a shortened form of a word is also counted as a full word. Like using "em" for "them."

An initial also counts as a word (L. L. Bean, e. c. Cummings, etc.) since it's basically an abbreviation of a full word. The only exception is when it's part of an acronym like MGM, NASA, or IBM. The reasoning here is that the wide use of these acronyms has in effect made them into single words.

Remember that numbers count as words, too, expressed as either numerals (8,28,500, or 1984), or as words (eight, twenty-eight, etc.) But keep in mind our hyphenated-word rule. "Twenty-eight" is two words when written out, but only one when expressed as 28. Don't cheat yourself out of an extra word that you may need. Any punctuation is allowed, and no punctuation marks count as words, so don't worry about being miserly with them if they work to some effect.

¹Moss, S. (1998). *The world's shortest stories: Murder. Love. Horror. Suspense. All this and much more in the most amazing short stories ever written--each one just 55 words long!* Philadelphia: Running Press.