Features of short stories

Early short stories were prose anecdotes that were sometimes told orally. Sometimes people sang the stories as ballads. These stories would engage the audience because they were told quickly and often had a twist at the end. Sometimes they were moral tales or fables with a message for the listeners. Mostly the purpose was to entertain an audience.

When you write a short story, you need to be concise, limit the number of characters and events and develop the plot quickly. Consider the audience and

- their age and interests
- experience of the topic or subject
- cultural background
- expectations.

Structure of short stories

There is no set length for a short story. You will find samples of stories on the Internet from six words long to a thousand words or more. There are websites for short story competitions that feature microfiction or mini stories of around 100 words.

Short stories are less complex than novels, although they do usually feature a plot and a dramatic structure. Therefore they usually comprise:

- an orientation, sometimes just a sentence or two (setting, situation and main characters)
- a complication (event of the story that introduces the conflict)
- rising action and the crisis (decisive moment when the main character acts)
- climax (the main conflict happens)
- resolution (the conflict of the story is resolved)

There may or may not be an ironic twist at the end or a moral to teach a lesson, such as crime doesn’t pay, or a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Show don’t tell

When you write your own short stories, reduce the words and unnecessary dialogue. Use only key descriptions and bring out atmosphere and feeling through the words. For example:

‘Salty tears stung her eyes and ran in streaks down her flushed, dusty face.’

This sentence shows the emotion, the heat, the location and the character. You can imagine the setting.