



Writing a short story

KS4 > Skills > Creative Writing 2 (KS3/4)

How it works An introduction to planning and writing a short story, a selection of resources from the openings of novels and a recipe for writing. Use it as it stands, or ...

Try this! Cut up the selected openings (maybe add a few more) and give them out on cards. Ask students to put them in a rank order to show which they think is the best opening. Then ask them to say why. What makes a good opening? If you've got an IWB, you could annotate them on the board and save them for future reference.

Or this! Remember the game you played at school, where you wrote a bit of a story then folded the paper over and passed it on? Make it a class activity, but without the passing on... Give the students a couple of minutes (no more than that) on each stage of the story. Once they've done that, they've got a plan and they can start to write.

Got technology? Do it on the computer and then all they have to do is expand on the plan rather than starting to write it out all over again.

Or this! Limit them to two sides. They need to get into the habit of being concise for an exam situation and you need not to have to mark 90 pages of short stories.

Alison Smith

Writing a short story

A short story should be just that - short! It is pointless writing at length when the examiner is looking for your ability to use language and will have decided upon a mark within the first three sides of A4. Aim to keep your story brief but to structure it well and show off your technical ability.

Planning If you cannot think of a situation, find a photograph that shows a few people and build your story around them. Do not simply describe the photo; that is not a story and will not be interesting. Analyse it, think of ideas associated with it and give your story structure.

Limit plot and style to what you can deal with within the length available. Do not change the scene too often or introduce too many characters. Successful stories can often be produced from ordinary experiences told from a different angle.

Do plan your story before you start. Make notes on the characters that you will use and the setting of the story. Work out a chain of events that will lead up to a satisfying conclusion. Doing all this on paper will make it easier for you to alter events.

Economy This does not mean brevity, which can reduce a short story to little more than an anecdote. It does mean that every word should count. Descriptions should be kept short, characters revealed through what they do and say and atmosphere created through a few significant details.

Dialogue There is nothing worse than death by 'he said', 'she said' stories. They slow the action down and get very confusing to the reader. **DO NOT** use dialogue unless it really advances the action and only do so if your punctuation is absolutely reliable.

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The opening Sometimes you will be given an opening sentence or the title will suggest an opening but, if not, begin with an exciting one and a good first paragraph, where the action will encourage the reader to go on. Have a look at the following openings and decide why the author chose them. What can you say about the story?

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there...

The Handmaid's Tale copyright © Margaret Atwood
.....

The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years - if it ever did - began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain.

It copyright © Stephen King
.....

It was a warm October evening in 1978 with the distant skyscrapers sparkling in the dusk as Maxine glanced through the limousine window at the familiar New York skyline.

Lace copyright © Shirley Conran
.....

On the morning after the night it happened, Bruce Delamitri was sitting in a police interview room.

"Name?" said the interrogating officer.

It wasn't really a question. The officer knew Bruce's name, of course, but there was a procedure and he was required to follow it.

Popcorn copyright © Ben Elton
.....

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

1984 copyright © George Orwell

The Ending This may be a decisive conclusion, an unexpected turn of events or an open one which leaves the reader guessing. Whichever it is it should give a satisfying, positive impression to the examiner, and not trail off feebly.

The cliff-hanger ending



1. First think of a strong main character - but don't make them superstrong or readers can't imagine being in the same position. Make this character brave and willing to take risks, but let them make mistakes, too. Picture them in your mind and then write down everything you can about them - name, age, sex, personality, where they live, what they like doing...
2. For the moment I'll call this character Goody. Now make Goody want something very badly. Perhaps it's to be picked for an adventure abroad, or the lead in the school show, or just to collect the biggest pile of bonfire wood in the neighbourhood. What does yours want?...
3. Next thing is to invent another character, Baddy, who's out to stop Goody getting what he/she wants. It's important to make Baddy just as strong (but not as nice) as Goody, to build up excitement and ensure the reader does not know who will win. Build up a picture of Baddy, the same way you built up Goody but include why they are out to get Goody...
4. Now get Goody and Baddy together. Perhaps at an auction, or knocking on neighbours' doors for bonfire wood, or... where?
5. Then let an argument develop between them. It must end with Baddy making threats that worry Goody - and the readers too...
6. Now make Goody keep trying to get what he/she wants, but let Baddy keep putting problems in the way - just when we think that Goody has cracked it! Plan two or three big problems plus a few smaller ones...
7. Decide on how many instalments your Cliffhanger is going to have. Put a big problem in each one - but don't let Goody solve it until the next instalment. Leave Goody struggling while you end the instalment with questions such as:
 - “Will Goody get out of the snake pit alive?”
 - “What has Baddy put in the soup?”
 - “How will Goody untie himself from the rail tracks?”and then, “Read the next nerve-wracking episode to find out!”
8. Eventually the story has to end. Of course Goody will win, but how can it happen? This is the hardest part to write. The best way is to use your knowledge of your characters and work out what might Baddy be afraid - or ashamed - of?...
9. Now you have to work out how Goody could discover that information and make use of it. Try not to settle for the easy option of finding Baddy's secret and very personal diary, with all his / her innermost feelings and fears written down, lying on the pavement.
10. You've planned the story, now write it...