

Big Punch in a Little Package: Creating Short Stories that Sizzle and Sell

With KC Grifant

A writer is a writer before, as well as after, publication.

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
WRITERS' CONFERENCE**

January 2026



Overview of Workshop

- **Part 1: Intro to Short Stories**
- **Part 2: Short Story Formula (w/ writing exercise)**
- **Part 3: The Business Side of Submitting**
- **Q&A**

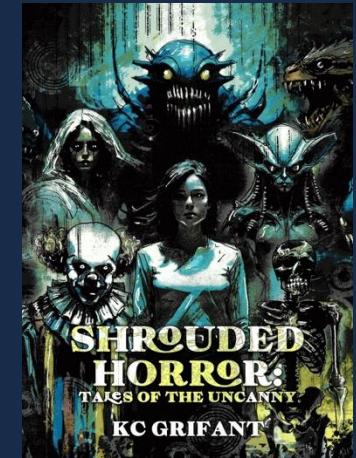
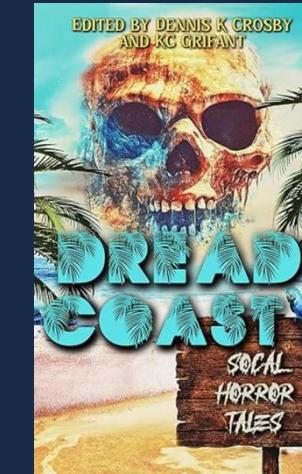


About KC Grifant

- Award-winning author & editor of numerous books, short stories
- Co-founder of the Horror Writers Association San Diego chapter
- Associate editor at Stars & Sabers Press
- Science Fiction and Fantasy Association (SFWA) mentor
- Instructor: UC San Diego, Reach Your Apex and others
- Speaker, moderator, panelist
- MS in Science Journalism, working professional



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Reasons To Write A Short Story



Time



Practice



Fun



Connections

Note: The short story market has been experiencing a resurgence, so now is a great time to write and submit short fiction.

Reasons Not To Write A Short Story



Fame



Money

Note: Short story collections typically do not sell as well as novels.

By The Numbers

Word Counts

100 words – Drabble

101-1,000 – Flash fiction

2,000-6,000 – Short story sweet spot

8,000 and beyond – Novelettes and novellas

Tip: If the length feels appropriate for the story, write to the 2,000 to maximize your submission market options.

What Makes a Sellable Short Story

“What many people resist is what’s testily dismissed as a ‘typical New Yorker short story:’ a tale in which nothing much happens to one or more not especially interesting people until it all ends on a note of melancholy ambiguity.”

– Laura Miller, *Slate*

Focus on a single character or event; few or no subplots

Strong beginning, quick inciting event, and satisfying ending

Economical language

NOT a vignette

Short Story vs. Vignette

Short Story

Three-act structure (narrative arc)

Character-driven

Character faces a challenge, grows

Something happens

Vignette

A verbal portrait, a moment in time

Focus on description (external or internal)

More of a scene than a standalone story

No character change; no obstacle or challenge to overcome

How To Strengthen Your Plot & Avoid Vignettes



Understand the main character's core desire, flaw and transformation



Use the same structural points as in a novel: inciting incident, conflict, resolution



Try the 5-sentence or 5-paragraph structure (next slide)



(c) KC Grifant

Short Story Strategy

A formula for sellable short fiction

Short Story Formula



1: Hook

An irresistible first line that makes your reader want to find out more.



2: Scene Setting/Atmosphere

Atmosphere/mood. This is the bare minimum background to establish the story.



3: Challenge

Show what your character is grappling with.



4: Confrontation

“The incident.” **Something happens**; the tension reaches a tipping point.



5: Resolution

How does your character rise, or fail to rise, to the conflict? Ending line critical.

The Importance Of The Opening

A hook is the first sentence or first (short) paragraph

Critical in short fiction

A good hook intrigues, presents a question to the reader

Hints at the conflict and show character

Avoid dreams, waking up, looking in mirror, empty room

Opening Examples

- ▶ “She’s staring back at me with those ancient iridescent bug-eyes of hers. They’re starting to frost over — her eyelashes are limned with white and it’s spreading. She’s grinning at me.” Homesick, by Sarah Gailey (*Fireside Fiction*)
- ▶ “When the cave’s ceiling crumples, so do I. Through my body, stone kisses stone. I die.” My Body, Herself, by Carmen Maria Machado (*Uncanny Magazine*)
- ▶ “As though to make up for his absence in life, your father’s ghost follows you everywhere.” Some Breakable Things, by Cassandra Khaw (*The Dark*)

Nailing the Hook

Ground the reader in who, where, and what's happening (sensory details)

Introduce a question to the reader (via juxtaposition, mystery, oddities) or interesting tension

Promise a tone or mood (indicates the type of story)

“A short story is like a chess game: The opening is a huge part of whether you win or lose. The first sentence of a short story doesn't just "hook" readers, it also sets the tone and launches the plot.”

- Charlie Jane Anders

Writing Exercise: Openers

Write 2-5 intriguing opening sentences based on one of the prompts below or your own idea.



Ground the reader in what's happening; introduce a question; promise a tone or mood

Techniques To Make The Middle Shine

- Word choice: Create your sentences with precision; strengthen verb choice (the right words imply tone, character and meaning)
- Sharpen the writing: Don't head-hop, changes tenses or be overly vague
- Pacing: Keep the story moving, eliminate filler descriptions and sentences
- Incident: Show a transformative moment where your character rises, or fails to rise, to a challenge presented (can be subtle)

1: Hook

- An irresistible first line that makes your reader want to find out more.

2: Scene Setting

- Atmosphere/mood. This is the bare minimum background to establish the story.

3: Tension

- Similar to #2. Show what your character is grappling with.

4: Conflict

- “The incident.” **Something happens**; the tension reaches a tipping point.

5: Resolution

- How does your character rise, or fail to rise, to the conflict? Ending line critical.

The Art of the Short Story Ending

Common Problems:

- Abrupt or unclear resolution
- Feels like a setup, not a payoff
- Falls flat (no change)
- Does not earn the change (comes out of left field)
- Feels disconnected from the beginning
- Evokes the “huh?” reaction rather than “oooh!” reaction

“Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending.”
– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Tip: Spend some time experimenting with different endings and ending lines.

A Good Ending Can Include...

Emotional or thematic resonance

Transformed character (or community, environment)

The feeling that something meaningful happened

Some mystery or a logical twist

Example: Ground Control

“Ground Control” by Gwendolyn Kiste in *The Were Traveler*

On the morning our father was due to arrive home from his two-year space flight, all my little sister could do was whine about her dress being itchy, and all my mother could do was holler for us girls to “Get ready quicker!” and all I could do was gape when Mission Control opened the hatch where our father and his comrades should be, only for the cameras and the families to discover all that was left were intestines draped from the white sterile walls like tinsel and a message carved into the ceiling that read, “Thanks for the appetizers.”

How does this story effectively achieve its impact?

Example: Ground Control, Breakdown

1: Hook

On the morning our father was due to arrive home from his two-year space flight,

2: Scene Setting

all my little sister could do was whine about her dress being itchy, and all my mother could do was holler for us girls to “Get ready quicker!”

3: Tension

and all I could do was gape when Mission Control opened the hatch where our father and his comrades should be,

4: Conflict

only for the cameras and the families to discover all that was left were intestines draped from the white sterile walls like tinsel

5: Resolution

and a message carved into the ceiling that read, “Thanks for the appetizers.”

Flash Fiction vs. Short Story

“For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.”

-Hemingway

“In many ways, flash fiction has more to do with prose poetry than a short story—every word has to be carefully selected, some having multiple meanings, relying on inference, foreshadowing, and declarative sentences to fill in back story and events that take place off the page, while still creating characters that we care about.”

-Richard Thomas

Writing Exercise: 5-Sentence Structure

Choose one of your openers and write a 5-sentence micro story using this structure (one sentence for each number).

The challenge is keeping each of the components to one sentence for this exercise.

Later, you can revise or expand the story as you'd like—but for the first step, draft a standalone, complete story in 5 sentences.

1: Hook

2: Scene-setting

3: Tension

4: Conflict

5: Resolution

Future Exercises For Your Stories

Can you expand or shrink the story to make it resonate more? Try 500, 1000, 3,000 words.

Can you shrink the story to exactly 100 words (a drabble)?

What happens if you change the tense or the POV?

What would make the story more interesting? More stressful? More urgent? Weirder?

What themes might be emerging in your story that you can draw out?

The Importance of Titles

Examples

- Woman Embracing Woman, On Loan From Private Collection By Liv Strom (Apex)
- Informed Consent Logs From The Soul Swap Clinic By Sarah Pauling (Clarkesworld)
- Do Houses Dream Of Scraping The Sky? By Jana Bianchi (Uncanny)
- Concerning The Upstairs Bathroom By Kiera Lesley (Nightmare)
- The Quiet Of Drowning By Kel Coleman (Uncanny)



In a slush pile or long TOC, a creative or catchy title can make your story stand out.

Your title is a vital part of storytelling. It can add another dimension to the story or underscore the theme.

How to Prepare and Submit Your Story

The business side!

Pro vs. Semi-Pro Short Story Markets

Pro:
~5 or 8 cents per word min

Semi-pro:
~1-5 cents per word

Token:
less than 1 cent per word (often flat fee)

Charity:
contributor copy

Tip: shoot for the highest paying market first

Finding Short Story Markets

Submission
Grinder

Duotrope
(paid)

Social Media

Professional
Orgs

Fellow
Writers

Facebook Groups:

Open Call: Horror Markets

Open Call: Science Fiction, Fantasy & Pulp Markets

Angelique Fawns blog:
www.fawns.ca/blog/

Short Story Markets

Anthologies

- One-offs, specific themes, often by various small presses

Magazine

- Editorial calendar, limited open sub calls
(*Apex, Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld, The Dark*)

Podcasts

- Editorial calendar, limited open sub calls
(*Pseudopod, Tales to Terrify*)

Contests and Websites

- Rules vary
(*Apex Monthly Flash Fiction Contest, publishers' Patreon*)

Publications to Consider (Speculative)

Magazines:

- Apex Magazine
- The Dark Magazine
- Strange Horizons
- Clarkesworld
- Lightspeed
- Uncanny Magazine
- Nightmare Magazine
- Andromeda Spaceways
- Small Wonders (flash)

Audio:

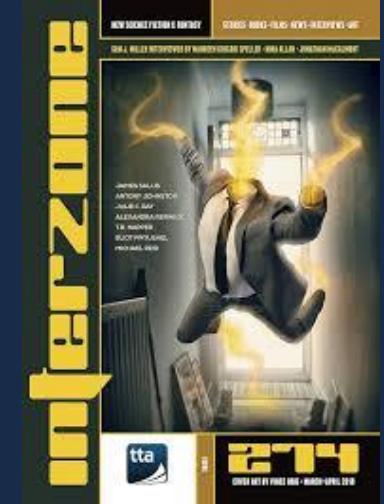
- Pseudopod
- Tales To Terrify
- The Drabblecast
- Escape Pod

- Flash Fiction Online
- 3-lobed Burning Eye Magazine
- Interzone
- Beneath Ceaseless Skies

- The No Sleep Podcast

Presses (anthologies)

- Brigids Gate Press
- Cohesion Press
- Crystal Lake Publishing
- Clash Books
- Ghoulish Books
- Flame Tree Press



Tracking Submissions

Story Title + WC	Place	Date Submitted	Date Heard Back	Outcome (Y/N/ Shortlist)	Link	Notes
"Title"						
Word Count	Mag name	Date	Date	N	URL	Response time, feedback, etc.
	Mag name	Date	Date	N		
	Mag name	Date	Date	Shortlisted!		
	Mag name	Date	Date	N		
	Mag name	Date		Pending, check in X months		
"Title"						
Word Count	Mag name	Date			URL	Response time, personalized feedback, etc.

- Color code – rejected, active, feedback
- List word counts and genres
- Log each submission with date and if simultaneous
- Add link to the submission call

Preparing to Sell Your Short Story

Refine

- Beta reading
- Read aloud
- Spell check

Format

- Shunn's Guide
www.shunn.net/format/story/

Check Market

- Make sure it's open
- Check specific guidelines
(word count, sim., reprint, multiple)

William Shunn (he/him)
12 Courier Place
Pica's Font, NY 12012
(212) 555-1212
format@shunn.net

about 1,500 words

Active member, SCHWA

Proper Manuscript Format

by Bill Shunn

No one knows how many good stories are passed over because the manuscripts containing them are poorly formatted. We can be certain, however, that editors will more eagerly read a cleanly formatted manuscript than a cluttered and clumsy one. Here are a few suggestions for giving your manuscript that critical leg up on the competition.

Start with a fresh white page, no color, no decorations. Set one-inch margins all around—left, right, top, and bottom. This is the default for most word processors, but yo

Cover Letter

Dear Editors,

I am submitting my original, 1000-word sci-fi story, “Title,” for your consideration.

Thank you for your time,

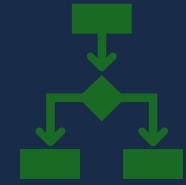
*Name
Website*



Briefly mention relevant awards, pubs, expertise



Attach story as a Word doc or upload through a submission portal



Double check guidelines

Red Flags

Fees (some exceptions)

No pay (charity is the exception)

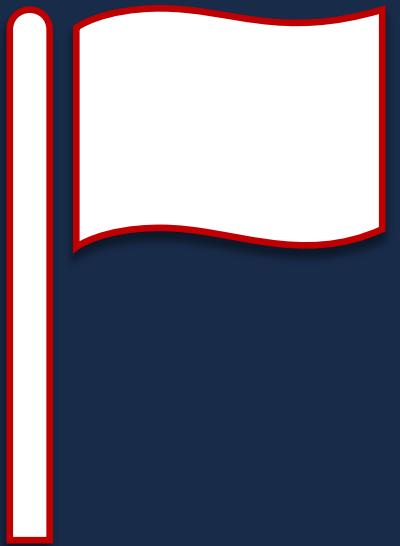
Heavy emphasis on “exposure”

Heavy reliance on Generative AI

No website or online presence

Atypical contract

Editors not communicative, rude, pressuring



Contracts & Pay

Pay

- **Per word or flat fee is standard. Some do royalty or pay dependent on crowdfunding**
- **Some pay when you sign the contract, some pay when the book comes out**

Red flags:

- **Asking for copyright of your work (unless IP or ghostwriting)**
- **Asking for exclusivity for more than 2 years**
- **Asking for blanket rights (film, audio, etc.)**



Resources:

<https://www.sfwa.org/2023/06/27/negotiating-short-fiction-contracts/>

<https://writerbeware.blog/>

More Tips For Short Fiction Writing



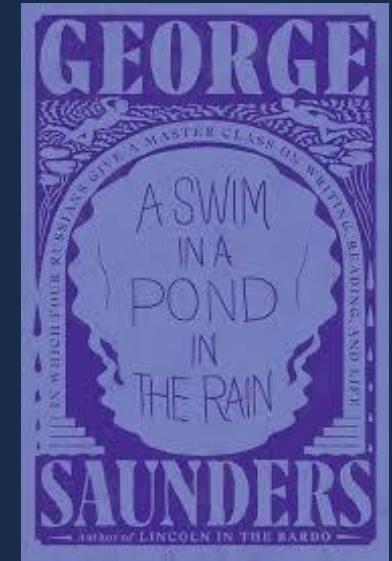
Peruse short stories in various genres to see more approaches in this art form.



Rejections are part of the business. Don't dwell on them and get that story out there again as soon as possible!



Read experimental and unconventional short stories as well as speculative poetry to study how those are effective.



A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life by George Saunders

Resources & Q&A

If you have
questions, email
KC.SciFiWri@
gmail.com

scifiwri.com/
references

@KCGrifant on the
socials

