



Thinking creatively: how to write... a short story

Overview: Like reading or writing stories, life itself presents us with lots of challenges and times when we have to make decisions – sometimes difficult ones! Even if we don't always make the right decisions (and there are lots of short stories about people who have made the wrong decisions!) we should be able to make the best decision we can at the time.

Time: 30-60 minutes per activity

Teachers: You can use these activities with a class, as a one-off activity, or as part of a series on developing the life skills 'thinking creatively' and 'decision making'.

Learners: You can do these activities on your own, or with a friend. Just follow the instructions!

Level: Intermediate

Introduction: Why a short story?

This is the first decision you need to make!

The short story is a great form for writing about characters, about decision making and about small moments in people's lives which can have big consequences.

A short story is mostly a description of a narrative, a scene, a memory of a place, or a character, but it needs some kind of conflict: a decision is a great way to introduce this.

The short story is a form which works well for a lot of 'genre writing.' By genre writing, we mean mystery, or science fiction, or horror (have a look at the Macmillan Literature Collection *Crime Stories*, *Science Fiction Stories* or *Horror Stories* for some great examples). Decide if you want to use a particular genre, or mix different genres. How about a science fiction crime story? Or a historical horror story?

Some people think that a short story is a mini-novel but others say that a short story is more like a poem. A short story does not have to have lots of characters, or even a narrative – sometimes a strong image or idea can work better than a plot! If you look at a classic short story like Charles Dickens' *The Signalman*, for example, the image of the man waiting for the train to come is stronger, and scarier, than the plot.

Activity 1: Notebook

In the first set of activities **in this series**, we encouraged you to keep a notebook. In this notebook you should write down all sorts of things: a good idea for a story, a description of a person you have seen or know, a line of speech or dialogue you have overheard.

Now is the time to use your notebook! If you haven't started to keep a notebook yet, think of a place or person you know.

Choose one of these things you have written in your notebook: a description of a place, a memory, or a character.

When you have chosen, ask yourself these questions:

- Q.1. *If you are describing a place, who is the person talking? Is it you, or could it be another character? Why are they in this place? What will happen next?*
- Q.2. *If you are describing a memory, who is remembering? Why are they remembering it now? Has something happened in the present that is making this person remember the past?*
- Q.3. *If you have chosen a character description, think about these questions: Where is the character? What is she, he or it doing?*

Now imagine the person or character has to make a choice or a decision: what is it? Say 'yes' or say 'no'? Accept or decline? Leave or stay? Open the door, or turn back? Talk to a stranger, or ignore them?

How does your character make their decision? What influences their choice?

Remember, that a short story doesn't have to be about the consequences or results of the decision: a great short story can be about the process of decision making itself.

James Joyce's short story *Eveline* is about a girl deciding to leave her home town, or perhaps not – we never know if she leaves or not! Some of Somerset Maugham and D.H. Lawrence's short stories, available as Macmillan Readers, also deal with people making decisions.





Thinking creatively: how to write... a short story

Activity 2: Questions

When we have a decision to make, it helps if we ask ourselves the question we face, very clearly. This is true when writing a story as well. In exercise 2, we looked at some questions to ask to help build our story.

In this exercise, you will need to make some decisions and answer some questions. For each question below, write at least two or three sentences. This will help you build a short story.

- Q. *Who is this person?*
- Q. *What does this place mean to him/her?*
- Q. *Was it always that way?*
- Q. *Is he/she sure he/she was right to come here?*
- Q. *Is he/she afraid that he/she won't come here?*
- Q. *How long since he/she last saw him?*
- Q. *Why does he/she think he/she won't come?*
- Q. *Why does it matter so much?*
- Q. *What has he/she brought with him/her?*
- Q. *What does he/she hope will happen?*
- Q. *What if it doesn't work out?*
- Q. *Is that him/her coming now?*



Look at the answers you have written; add details, and you can make this a short story.

Activity 3: Character

If you did the first of **these exercises**, you will now have a fictional character. Now is the time to use your character!

As we noted, many short stories are about a character having to make a difficult decision. What decisions could your character make?

Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ Your character is offered a huge salary to leave the place where they live and go and do an interesting job. However, it means he or she won't be able to see their family again for a year.
- ▶ Your character sees an old lady drop a hundred pounds in the street. Your character needs money: does he or she take the money, or give it back to the old lady?
- ▶ Your character has an argument with their best friend. The next day, the best friend is found dead – murdered! Your character was the last person to see them alive. What do they do: go to the police and tell the truth, try and find out who killed the best friend, or run away?
- ▶ Your character wants to buy his or her friend an expensive present for Christmas. However, they have little money, and the only thing they can do to get the money is to sell something of their own that they value.
- ▶ Your character sees a friend steal something from a shop. The owner of the shop is your character's uncle. What does she or he do?
- ▶ Your character borrows something very valuable from a friend (what: some jewellery? An expensive phone? Some designer clothes?) and then loses it. Does he or she tell their friend, or do something else?
- ▶ Your character has to take an important exam. They know it is possible to cheat (how: using a mobile phone? Finding the answers in the teacher's desk? Waiting until the teacher stops watching?), but if they get caught cheating, they will lose everything (the chance to go to university or get a good job? The support of their parents?). What do they do?

Put your character into one of these situations, and using what you know about them, see what happens!

THINKING CREATIVELY



Thinking creatively: how to write... a short story

Activity 4: Tales

While a lot of short stories are mostly realistic and look at characters, a lot of other short stories are more like fairytales. They are mostly about plot or narrative, and do not have realistic characters (the Macmillan Reader *Viking Tales* is a good example of this).

1. Think of a traditional or folk story from your country (or choose one from *Viking Tales*). Which one will you choose? One you like? Or one you don't even know? One you remember from your childhood, or one you haven't come across before?
2. When you have chosen, think about putting this story into a modern context. Where will it take place? In your country, or another one? Could you move the setting from a small town to a big city? Will the king or princess in the old story become a president, or the leader of a big company? If there is magic in the original story, will you keep it, or find some other reason for incredible things to happen (maybe a new scientific invention, that can make people very big or very small...).

Activity 5: Read

The best writers are the best readers. If you like to read, you do not have to write, but if you like to write, you do have to read.

1. Look at great short stories from the past. There are several available in the Macmillan Literature Collections, and others as graded readers – the stories of O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, Charles Dickens, D.H. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald and M.R. James for example. Have a look at these **perfect short reads** and see if you know any of them.
2. Look at how these writers structure a story. Do their stories have a surprising beginning, or an unexpected ending? Think about the characters they use. Are they realistic, or quite flat? Look at how they create an atmosphere or a setting with a few simple details. Describe your observations and discuss with a friend or in class.

Remember

- ▶ Experimenting is important! Sometimes your stories will not be perfect first time. You can always change them later.
- ▶ Draft! The first version of a story isn't often the best one. If you can, show your work to a friend, classmate or your teacher – a person whose opinion you respect. Ask them to comment on the story, and give suggestions. Don't be upset if they say some things need changing!
- ▶ Give it time. The best decisions are made when you have time to think. If you don't know what to do, or write, wait. Think about it. Ask a friend's opinion.

Follow up

- ▶ Making decisions is not only important when developing a character or writing a short story – it's an important life skill. As a follow-up activity, think about a situation in your life where you had to make a difficult decision.
- ▶ Keep an eye out for the next set of activities: how to write... a film script.