

Short Fiction Terminology

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but the terms below should help you to analyze and to write about short stories.

Characterization: terms helpful for discussing the characters in a story.

- Protagonist or hero(ine): the main character.
- Antihero: a protagonist who is not heroic.
- Antagonist or villain: the main character in conflict with the protagonist.
- Foil: a character who sets off, by contrast, the character of the protagonist.
- Confidant: a character in whom the protagonist confides.
- Dynamic character: a character who changes as a result of the story's events. Many short stories have only one dynamic character.
- Static character: a character who does not change.
- Round character: a character with many traits, three-dimensional.
- Flat character: a character defined by a single trait, often a stereotype.
- Stock character: a stereotypical character with whom readers are familiar.
- Caricature: a character exaggerated for comic relief.
- Motivation: what causes a character to do what she or he does.
- Modes of characterization: what a character says or does; what other characters say of and to the character; and the author's word choice in descriptive passages.

Plot: the arrangement of the action in a story.

- Exposition: the setting-up of the story (setting, introduction of characters).
- Rising action: a series of incidents that build toward the point of greatest tension.
- Climax: moment of greatest tension, the turning point when the outcome is decided.
- Denouement: the story's resolution.
- Conflict: the opposition between forces in a story.
- Internal conflict: a battle within the character's self.
- External conflict: a battle between the character and an outside force.
- Suspense: anxiety about how the story will end.
- Foreshadowing: clues to the ending.
- Flashback: when the story travels back in time.
- Complication: a new conflict.
- Epiphany: sudden revelation of the truth of a character or situation.
- Open plot: the conflict is not resolved at the end of the story.
- Closed plot: the conflict is resolved at the end of the story.

Setting: the surroundings in which the story is set; scene; environment.

- Locale: the specific place.
- Period of time: the span of time that the story covers.

Point of View: the position of the narrator in relation to the story.

- Narrator: the one who tells the story.
- Narration: story.
- First-person narrator: the narrator is a character within the story, who tells the story through the first person ("I"). The narrator may or may not be the protagonist.
- Second-person narrator: very rare. The narrator addresses the reader as "you."
- Third-person narrator: every character is referred to by the narrator as "he", "she", "it", or "they", but never as "I" or "we" (first-person), or "you" (second-person). The narrator is an unspecified entity or an uninvolved person, not a character within the story.
- Omniscient narrator: all-knowing third-person narrator who sees into the minds of all characters.
- Limited omniscient narrator: third-person narrator who sees into the mind of a single character.
- Objective narrator: describes events only from the outside—gives no character's inner thoughts.
- Naïve observer: narrator who fails to understand all the implications of the story.
- Stream of consciousness: a narrative mode that seeks to portray a character's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes.
- Interior monologue: the presentation of a character's thoughts in an ordered manner.
- Dialogue: the conversation between characters.

Literary Devices: Literary terms not specific to fiction, but often applicable.

- Theme: central or dominant idea; broad message or moral of the story.
- Imagery: language that appeals to the senses: sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch.
- Metaphor: implicit comparison between two unlike things ("Achilles is a lion.").
- Simile: explicit comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as" ("Achilles is like a lion.")
- Allegory: in narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two or more levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or a chain of events external to the tale.
- Tone: details, characters, events, situations, and words that lead us to infer the author's attitude towards the subject of the narrative.
- Style: a narrative's individual characteristics: how it uses language, images, sentence structures, patterns of sound.
- Irony: wherever there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. Verbal irony is saying one thing but meaning something completely different. Situational irony involves a contradiction between what the reader expects to happen and what does happen. Dramatic irony occurs when the reader knows something that a character or characters do not know.
- Allusion: reference to other literary or cultural texts.