

On Short Fiction

A (loose) Guide to Writing Short Fiction and Coming to Terms with Limitation

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After attempting to write two novels, I learned that, although writing long fiction can be fulfilling, there is a certain beauty in short fiction—namely short stories, but also novelettes. The beauty lies in the fact that you can complete them quickly, and thus are not tied down to one story plot for an extended period of time. You are as free as a bird, so to speak, when writing short fiction.

However, for the freedom gained in the flexibility of your work, you lose some in the limitation of short fiction. You are limited in scope; you cannot spend a page, for example, explaining the feel of the soil beneath your main characters feet, or the way that the waterfall ricochets off the rocks, ending in a continuous thundering bang as it hits the body of water below. No, it must be reduced, compacted, well-packaged so that the same sentiment is expressed, the same image conjured, in less words. Moreover, it may be more difficult, especially if you have an affinity for bonding with your characters, to understand your characters' personalities and motivations; that is to say, that in short fiction it will be naturally more difficult to create a believable and realistic story, at least in some dimensions.

And as you dive deeper into short fiction you will notice that recurring theme—*of limitation*. You must be selective, picky. “Efficiency!” —that must become your maxim. So, before we continue, you may want to say it aloud proudly, stridently, to get yourself into the proper mindset: “Efficiency!”

Now are you feeling it?

Dilly-dallying will get you nowhere. To illustrate, let us deconstruct an excerpt from a novel, then scale it down to a length more suitable to short fiction.

Here is the original:

The whole business had come as a surprise to everyone involved, not least of all it seemed to the pelican herself, who had engaged in the attempt almost absently and now appeared to be wishing it was over and done. She was by nature a placid bird, slow to take wing and hard to rile, but the pigeon had been presuming on her good nature for several months now, scooting between her and the pieces of bread that people tossed in her direction as they wandered by, fluttering down to snatch the treats of fish almost from her beak.¹

And here it is, after redaction:

The whole business surprised everyone involved, not least of all the pelican herself, who had engaged in the attempt absently and now appeared to wish it over and done. By nature a placid bird, slow to take wing and hard to rile, the pigeon had been banking on her good nature for months now. Scooting between her and

1. Nick Harkaway, *Tiger man* (Great Britain: Windmill Books, 2015), 1.

the pieces of bread that people tossed in her direction, the pigeon fluttered down to snatch the treats of fish almost from her beak.

Here is a detailed explanation of the process you just witnessed undertaken:

1) *Removal of passive voice in favor of active voice.* I know this is already a hard and fast rule in the writing world: that you should always prefer active voice. But the truth of the matter is that in the realm of writing, as much as your English teacher may deny it, there is no such thing as a hard and fast rule. Harkaway, given the context, was correct to use, for example, “had come as a surprise,” as it worked better within the broader narrative of the story by not over emphasizing what was intended as a mere introduction. But in the context of short fiction, the story must start almost immediately, and active voice is thus preferable.

2) *Breaking of larger sentences up into smaller ones.* I definitely have an affinity for longer sentences, but if you are trying to make more of an impact in less words, shorter sentences are usually more helpful. To say “the city glittered in the distance and the sound of car horns braying rose across the valley” will naturally be longer than simply removing the connectors and separating them into separate sentences altogether. Because, without connectors, less words will be used and more emphasis put on the descriptions themselves.

3) *Reversing sentences.* I was hesitant at first to include this example, because as I have learned the hard way, you can overuse reversed sentences. But it is a useful trick, especially when trying to edit down a writing piece, to take a longer sentence such as “He stood up and puffed out his chest,” and turn it into “Standing up, he puffed out his chest.” Although it does not reduce the overall word count significantly, by placing the gerund of the verb at the front of the sentence, you make it somewhat easier to the eyes.

4) And finally, *removal of add-ons that, although add a certain aspect to the scene, are not necessary to the focal point.* For example, I removed “as they wandered by” because, though it conjured a nice image of the onlookers, it was somewhat superfluous insofar as noting that “people threw bread in her direction” probably sufficed.

There are of course more ways to reduce word count and increase efficiency, but these are the most common, at least for people just getting introduced to the art of short fiction. The original piece is 110 words and the redacted form, contrastingly, is comprised of only 82. A drop from 110 words to 82 may not seem significant, but when the effect is multiplied across a larger work it could make the difference between writing a novelette and a novel.

We have now discussed how to reduce word count while increasing efficiency and the importance of doing so, but, beyond that—beyond ensuring that your *short fiction* is in fact *short fiction*—how can one make it “good?” Because that’s another conundrum of short fiction: it can in some ways be harder to judge. Why? Because, once again, that wretched *limitation*. In a novel there is simply more substance to judge, more experimentation that can be done—especially for the writer, who can wind up becoming more absorbed than any readers of the book ever will. You can feel it out and adapt accordingly. In short fiction by the time the writer understands the story, the words “*the end*” are already tauntingly reposed on the last page, juxtaposed against the retina-hurting glare of the white document.

Before continuing, I must make one fact clear: good short fiction is not much different from a good novel. After all, they are both works of literature. And unfortunately, your English teacher’s countless writing maxims (active voice, diversified vocabulary, show don’t tell, etc.) were generally correct.

Writing is an art, and as such subjectivity is a natural precondition. That said, there are some objective critiques that can be leveled. Take this introduction to a short story that could be considered well-written:

As Ewan climbed down the ladder leading to the hub in the centre of the rotational module of the Perseus, he realized the imposter syndrome feelings had nearly left him altogether. For almost two months he had been second-guessing himself at every turn, even feeling afraid to go certain sections of the ship, despite being fully authorized to do so, simply out of a feeling of self-conscious inferiority. The fact that things were getting busier, and he was distracted by tasks more important than just eating, sleeping and working out probably helped him to shed the self-doubt.²

This is generally a good introduction to a short story: there is no beating around the bush, presenting us at once the theme that the rest of the story will centre around. And although it is less common in more contemporary literature, the author’s addition of “he realized” allows us an insight of the character, acting sort of as a dialogue tag for Ewan’s inner thoughts. Does this align perfectly with the well-known “show don’t tell” maxim? No, it is more on the side of telling, but it sets the scene to come. As long as you connect the character’s inner world to the surrounding environment, that is, the reasons that cause those thoughts and/or the consequences of the character’s having those thoughts on his actions and environment, it is generally fine. (E.g., because of the imposter syndrome, Ewan was “afraid to go to certain sections of the ship, despite being fully authorized to do so...”)

2. Jeffery Hopkins, *Do No Harm* (Victoria, B.C., 2021), 1.

To address the elephant in the room, the author probably could have reworded certain sentences to fully maximize efficiency, but overall, the author was relatively efficient (especially for an introduction) and not many criticisms can be leveled in that regard. The only place where the author could have improved would have perhaps been to end on a short sentence. Short sentences, after all, can be impactful. At that point, however, it is entirely a matter of taste.

Now take this excerpt of dialogue:

“Ok, going to CRISPR to finish off that one protist so we can prepare it for release to Europa.”

“Good luck, Ewan.”

Strange, Ewan never remembered TANDI wishing him luck before. Usually, TANDI was strait-laced and all business. Maybe the AI thought that it might be psychologically helpful to be more human to those still adjusting to their first space mission.³

This is also strong dialogue. The spoken language is written in short sentences, which is more reflective of how people speak, and even the prose discussing Ewan’s inner life is concisely written in such a way that it reflects the surrounding environment.

(It is worth noting that I know the writer in question personally as he is my principle and English teacher, and at the time of writing this piece he was in the process of reading and rereading much of Robert K. Dick’s corpus of work, which is expressed in the writing style. See, what you read matters!)

To illustrate the importance of everything hitherto discussed, let us make an example of these pieces. Here are the excerpts, purposefully made worse:

- 1) As Ewan climbed down the ladder that led him to the hub in the centre of the rotational module of the Perseus spaceship, he realized the imposter syndrome feelings had finally nearly left him altogether. For almost two months he had been second-guessing himself at every turn, even afraid to go to certain parts of the ship, despite his being fully authorized to do so, simply out of a feeling of self-conscious inferiority. The fact that things were getting ever more busy, and he was distracted by tasks more important than just eating, sleeping and working out probably helped him to shed self-doubt.
- 2) “Ok, going to use CRISPR to finish off that one protist so that we can prepare it for release on Planet Europa.”
“Good luck, Ewan.”

3. Hopkins, 1.

Strange, Ewan had never remembered TANDI to wish him luck before. Usually, TANDI was strait-laced and all business-like. Maybe the AI had thought that it might be psychologically more helpful to be more human to those still adjusting to their first space mission.

Yuck! By essentially ignoring all the aforementioned recommendations, I managed to muddy the language, in turn dulling its impact and reducing the overall quality of thought. This creates a repetitive, poorly written piece that most people would not want to read. It is thus evident that, although style and taste matter, there is a certain level of objectivity involved in the judging writing, which can be boiled down to ease of reading and clarity of thought.

So, what does this all mean simply? Here it is put bluntly:

1) *Style is not everything.* There are certain aspects of writing that are *objective*, and they must be contended with and understood by any prospective writer.

2) *Strive for clarity of thought and ease of reading.* Your readers will tend to have short attention spans, so grab them in immediately, and don't let them from your grip. In most cases clarity of thought will naturally entail ease of reading for your audience.

3) *Only add what is pertinent unless the style demands it.* This statement is pretty much self-explanatory. If a certain aspect does not pertain in the least to the focal point of any given scene, cut it, unless it works stylistically.

4) *Enfin, your English teacher was mostly right, but in any case, writing is an art.* The hackneyed proverbs of writing that your English teacher throughout high school, and then later your English professor in University, proselytized to you are for the most part correct. "Show don't tell" is a good example of this—and the one I used for the purposes of this essay. Too much showing and not enough telling can create an imbalance—it leaves the reader questioning the very purpose of the story—and the same goes for all the other "rules."

Ask ten writers "how they approach writing" and you will receive approximately twenty answers. And that is quite the conservative estimate.

This is a highly personalized endeavor and there are no wrong answers per se; but to leave it at that would be insufficient and unhelpful, and therefore it is imperative to find some objective basis, preferably one built on the tenants of good story telling and writing. That is after all why I started off trying to define (loosely) the basis of good writing.

I am admittedly not the most qualified person to educate others about writer's block or how to plot point because I have little experience with either: I start every

project with an exceedingly loose notion of what I want to write (sometimes just a title) then write whatever makes the most sense in any given moment, only later stopping to edit my work to ensure its logical consistency. I am what the writing community would call a “gardener” or (the term I prefer) a “pantzer.” I therefore will not discuss this matter in the traditional sense, nor lecture you.

Most writers—and to be fair, this is said anecdotally—do not really know how they got to where they are; how, in one word, they *became writers*. In part that may have to do with how broad a term “writer” is. You could write almost anything, from essays to fiction, from private journal entries to public blog posts. It may also have something to do with the fact that writing is an art, and therefore the path towards becoming a writer is varied. To reconcile both factors, you must understand the logic underpinning your own personal writing journey and what exactly you enjoy writing.

But the question then arises: how does this translate into an approach to writing? If you are methodical and the reason you decided to start writing was to write in academic journals, then you need to approach every piece with all your facts and information already in hand and a layout planned in advance, either scribbled onto a piece of paper or beautifully laid out on a computer document. If you enjoy fiction and creative nonfiction and are methodical, then you require a well-thought-out story arc and well-developed characters. Contrastingly, a writer in the same position who is less methodical will require only a notion of his characters and story arc and can work outwards from there.

(For example, my writing journey began with a remark from a teacher that “my writing had a far way to go,” and so I, out of an inexhaustible will to improve, dedicated myself one hundred percent. By understanding that my original intent was to gain a competency I lacked and then later coming to realize I loved writing fiction and creative nonfiction, I have an idea of what I want to write. And, further knowing that I am rather impulsive in my style of thinking, I can think through any possible writing piece in a way that is useful to *me*, thereby developing my own process.)

I have been careful not to prescribe a method thus far and will continue to walk this tightrope. When I was an unexperienced writer, I read many articles on different methods of planning a story to no avail. I had to develop my own process. As long as the language in your piece is clear, not overflowing with useless verbiage, and not totally trite in its turn of phrases, the way you approached your piece was successful by every means.

Here is what has been said, broken down:

1) *Writing is—or at least should be—a unique, personal experience.* It will probably be to no avail to try to use methods developed by other people. (That said, drawing from them may be useful.)

2) *Understand yourself and why you write.* By understanding your own personality

and what you enjoy writing, and why, in fact, you are writing, you can better approach any writing piece.

3) Finally, *as long as your approach to writing leads to objectively desirable end results, it is a “good” method*. This one may seem self-evident, but in a world where education is based on a prescription of systems as if it were no different than heart medication, the message is worth mentioning.

Hitherto this essay has concentrated almost solely on literary style and, to a lesser extent, the philosophy that undergirds literature in the context of short fiction. One thing must now be clarified, lest an inaccurate impression be made: style *cannot* drown out the voice of the author himself; aesthetics may *never* take precedence.

And I will probably find myself yelling this from the rooftops my entire life, microphone in hand, as people go about their lives quite peacefully below:

“Don’t let your writer’s voice be drowned out by the aesthetics of literature!”

Many good writers have fallen prey to this, and in turn never amounted to much. In his *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell said, “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting ink.”⁴

Let that sink in.

Written as it was in the context of political writing, Orwell’s argument is still relevant to literature as a whole. The cuttlefish writer comes in many shapes and forms, lurking in every genre, in every corner of the globe. In fiction the ink of choice is to focus so heavily on aesthetics of the piece as to ignore or completely omit a personal voice, any uniqueness to the piece. In nonfiction the ink of choice is to muddy facts, implement misguiding graphs and statistics, and to engage in jiggery-pokery in general.

If you cover the essence of your short story or novelette under mountains of descriptors, gerunds, long sentences, em-dashes, adverbs, etc., you completely negate yourself, and thus the entire story will be boring at best as it will be nothing but a synthesis of everything you have read theretofore. Reading is perhaps the most important thing a writer can do. You will learn new techniques, new ways to approach writing. But at any rate, it is necessary to find your *own* style, take your *own* path, if you wish to produce great works.

Here is one last list for old time sakes (and to contextualize this last lesson relative to short fiction):

1) *Cuttle fish writing infringes on efficiency*. Efficiency is everything in short

4. George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (1949), 3.

fiction. The ability to compact complex descriptions and ideas into short, concise, clear writing is imperative. Defensively spewing ink attacks the very spirit of literary efficiency.

2) *Be genuine*. The easiest way to achieve clarity of thought is to be genuine (and this goes for non-fiction as well).

3) And finally, *don't be in it for aesthetic enthusiasm*. This overlaps with the first point somewhat, but it is worth addressing separately—and head on. Orwell in another essay, *Why I Write*, aptly remarked that “aesthetic enthusiasm” is one of four major reasons writers write.⁵ He is correct; we are all self-absorbed after all, writers included, something Orwell also notes in the same essay.⁶ Orwell does not go as far as to make the categorical claim that that aesthetic enthusiasm is bad; in fact, he posits that had he not been born in “a revolutionary age,” he would have been an aesthetic writer of sorts.⁷ Given the circumstances, however, that was the last of his concerns.⁸ And in all seriousness aren't we infinitely lucky for that? If Orwell had gone down the path of “aesthetic enthusiasm,” he most likely would have ended up an unhappy, disgruntled writer (since nothing can be truly aesthetically pleasing, not entirely) forgotten by everyone, including his own contemporaries.

We have reached the end. Perhaps you learned something, perhaps you haven't. In the perfect world this essay has given you a new perspective on writing, a new perspective indeed on what constitutes a short story—and how to ensure it is well-written. But, if anything from this essay is to imprint on you, I hope above all that it is the almost pathological desire for “efficiency,” the necessity of coming to terms with the limitations of writing (especially in the context of short fiction), and, perhaps most importantly, the image of me (however you envisage me), yelling at the top of my lungs:

“Don't let your writers voice be drowned out...” The ending, “by the aesthetics of literature,” isn't even that necessary.

5. George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume 1 An Age Like This 1920-1949*, Sonia Orwell, Ian Angus (England: Penguin Books, 1970), 26.

6. *Ibid*, 25.

7. *Ibid*, 26

8. *Ibid*, 26

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1. Although I tried to follow the Chicago NB (17th edition) citation style, I did diverge where it made the most sense. The citations should still be sufficient to direct you to the source material.
 2. If you want to read the rest of Jeff Hopkins's short story, please refer to our website, specifically the "Essays, Stories, and Educational Materials" section: <https://psiiliterarycontest.learningstorm.org/essays-stories-and-educational-material/>
 3. I read this essay as part of a University Course as an online PDF which is why I do not have exact publisher information and/or why some the page number information may be inaccurate for you. It is a particularly good essay and I do recommend you try to find it in either a collection of essays by George Orwell or online.
Moreover, this essay has proven to be extremely influential on how I view literature's role in Western philosophy and political discourse. If you extrapolate (as I attempted to do in this essay), you can additionally learn much about writing itself as an art, and in many ways this essay is a continuation on Orwell's. I highly recommend that all writers—prospective or otherwise—read *Politics and the English Language*.