

Writing Short Fiction

COMPOSITION COMMONS CONSULTANT RESOURCE

WHAT IS A SHORT STORY?

A short story is a unique literary form, not a condensed novel. It gives the author ginormous creative liberty, however it is usually built around a single central moment or insight.

A short story:

- Concentrates on one crucial moment, feeling, or insight
- Uses compression — every word is important, and every sentence has a purpose
- Produces a single unified effect on the reader
- Can be written in any point of view or style
- Does not need a traditional plot arc or resolution

CONSULTANT NOTE

If a student's story feels unfocused or incomplete, ask whether they are treating it like a novel. This is the most common structural mistake. Redirect toward the central moment early.

WHAT IT IS NOT

- A chapter or excerpt from a longer work
- A scene that needs prior context to make sense
- A character sketch with no moment of tension
- A story that needs more to feel complete

KEY TERMS

- **Unified effect** — the single impression a story leaves; every choice serves it (Friedman)
- **Central moment** — the hinge the story turns on; rendered, not explained (May)
- **Compression** — deliberate reduction of scope so every word works (Hunter)
- **Pre-established design** — every word tends toward one governing intention (Poe)

HOW IT WORKS

Every structural choice must serve the central moment:

- **Point of view** — shapes the reader's relationship to the narrative
- **Scope** — one room over one hour operates differently than years of time
- **Character** — short fiction rarely needs more than one or two
- **Pacing** — compression creates intensity; neither fast nor slow is wrong
- **Detail** — description should do double duty, never just fill space

CONSULTANT NOTE

Short fiction is not one thing. A quiet internal character study and a fast plot-driven narrative are both valid forms. Understand what kind of story the student is trying to write before giving feedback.

QUESTIONS TO ASK IN A SESSION

- What is the central moment in this story — can you point to it?
- Is every scene and detail supporting that moment, or pulling away from it?
- What do you want the reader to feel at the end?
- Is anything here that could be cut without losing the story's core?
- Does your point of view serve the story you are trying to tell?

FURTHER READING

- Scofield — The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story
- Rohrberger — “The Short Story and the Reader,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (1987)
- Knight — *Creating Short Fiction*
- May — “The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction,” *Studies in Short Fiction* (1984)