

Flash Fiction



ELV©



Flash fiction

- Flash fiction is a favored genre among the English-speaking world's most celebrated writers for its ability to convey deep truths and universal human emotions in just a few short paragraphs.
- When done well, flash fiction can convey deep truths and resonate with readers from all walks of life.
- short, self-contained stories that take only a few minutes to read

Flash fiction stories



- genre of fiction, defined as a very short story
- there is no set word count that separates flash fiction from more traditional short stories,
- can be as short as a few words (while short stories typically run for several pages)
- also known as sudden fiction, short-short stories, microfiction, or microstories.

Flash fiction

- a fictional work of extreme brevity that still offers character and plot development. Identified varieties, many of them defined by word count, include the **six-word story**;
- the 280-character story (also known as "**twitterature**");
- the "**dribble**" (also known as the "**minisaga**," 50 words);
- the "**drabble**" (also known as "**microfiction**," 100 words);
- "**sudden fiction**" (750 words);
- "**flash fiction**" (1,000 words); and "**microstory**".
- Some commentators have suggested that flash fiction possesses a unique literary quality in its ability to hint at or imply a larger story.

Flash fiction



- *unique in its brevity*—and though there is no official word count that separates it from other short forms of literature, the briefest of works are typically classed as flash fiction. A few of the most popular forms include:
- *The Six-Word Story*: a story told in just six words (the most famous example of this format, said to be written by Ernest Hemingway, is a tragically brief one-line story: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”)
- *Twitterature*: a story told in 280 characters or less
- *Dribble*: a story of 50 words or less (also sometimes called a minisaga)
- *Drabble*: a story of 100 words or less (also sometimes called microfiction)
- *Sudden Fiction*: a story of no more than 750 words
- *Flash Fiction*: a story comprised of about 1,000-1,500 words

Flash fiction



Flash fiction should always stand on its own and act as a complete story rather than a vignette or scene. However, it is also unique in that it sometimes only tells the sparsest version of a story—merely hinting at something that is clearly much more layered and complex. Though it may appear deceptively simple, crafting an effective piece of flash fiction is actually quite challenging, as each word and sentence must serve the purpose of propelling the story forward.

3 Characteristics of flash fiction stories

Brevity

- compresses an entire story into the space of a few paragraphs.
- no defined word count for flash fiction, but some commonly used word limits in flash fiction range from just six words on the short end to around 1,000 words on the longer end.
- **A complete plot.** A flash fiction story is indeed a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. This sets it apart from a prose poem or vignette, which can explore an emotion, memory, or thought without a plot.
- **Surprise.** Great flash fiction often incorporates surprise, usually in the form of a twist ending or an unexpected last line. This is not a gimmick: the aim is to prompt the reader to think deeply about the true meaning of the story.

Origins of Flash Fiction

- *dates back to the time of fables and parables. The form was popularized in the nineteenth century by writers like Walt Whitman, Kate Chopin, and Ambrose Bierce. Perhaps the best-known flash fiction story is from this time (although frequently misattributed to Ernest Hemingway). The entire story is six words long:*

“For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

- *The amount of emotion packed into these words inspired many writers to try their hand at the genre.*
- *In the 1980s, Robert Shepard and James Thomas published a set of anthologies of flash fiction called Sudden Fiction, which spurred another resurgence of the form. Another highly influential anthology was Flash Fiction, published in 1992 by W. W. Norton. It features 72 flash fiction stories and was edited by Tom Hazuka, Denise Thomas, and James Thomas.*
- *Well known contemporary flash fiction writers include Lydia Davis, George Saunders, Jamaica Kincaid, Joy Williams, and Stuart Dybek.*
- *The literary magazine SmokeLong Quarterly, founded in 2003, is a dedicated flash fiction magazine, publishing stories of 1,000 words or less.*

6 steps to writing flash fiction

Imagery

Use strong imagery. Make every single word count. Help your readers visualize as much as possible.

One moment

Stick to one moment. Focus on one particular moment in time. Don't try to cram in more than one scene into a piece of flash fiction.

1 or 2 characters

Work with just one or two characters. Don't spread your story too thin. If you find yourself needing more than two characters or two scenes, your story may be better suited to the short story format.

First person

Try first person point of view. This will create an instant connection to the reader and allow you to express more in fewer words.

Surprise

Surprise your reader. Make sure to end your story on a different emotional note than the one you started on. Creating surprise is what flash fiction is all about; take the reader on a journey, no matter how short.

Punching title

Make good use of your title. When you have so few words to work with, your title can pack a punch. Take Joyce Carol Oates's flash fiction story *Widow's First Year*. The story reads, simply: "I kept myself alive."

Six-word stories

Painfully, he changed "is" to "was."

Born a twin; Graduated only child.

Dot in the sky. Dead pixel.

"Male?" "It's an older driver's license."

Paramedics finished her text, "...love you."

Sorry soldier, shoes sold in pairs.

"You're not a good artist, Adolf."

What makes a great example of a six-word story?

1. can be dark, light, funny or tragic. Much like life. For a six word story to really stand out there are a few elements that must be in place.
2. The story makes sense to the reader.
3. It's okay for the reader to work a little harder than usual to understand the meaning of a six worder. In fact, that can be part of the fun. But there must be a meaning in their somewhere.
4. The story takes the reader on a journey.

What makes a great example of a six-word story?

5. By definition, you want to tell some kind of a story. But a six word story is really more about taking readers from one place to another. That could be a beginning to an end. But it also might be an expectation to a surprise or punch-line, similar to a joke. Or it could be from feeling nothing to feeling something. It could even be rhetorical question that the reader answers in their head.

6. The story leaves the reader with an emotion.

7. All story telling is about emotion. A six word story might be clever for its own sake, like wordplay. That should give a reader satisfaction from recognising the skill of the words. Or it might tear at the heart strings or tickle your tummy. Six words can make you feel.

Famous examples

Marley was dead. To begin with.

Charles Dickens

For Sale: Baby Shoes. Never Worn.

Attributed to Ernest Hemmingway

To be, or not to be?

William Shakespeare

Found true love. Married someone else.

David Eggers

It was dark inside the wolf.

Margaret Atwood

Flash fiction example



“When you're having an asthma attack, you don't have any breath. When you don't have any breath, it's hard to speak. You're limited by the amount of air you can spend from your lungs. That's not much, something between three to six words. It gives the word a meaning. You're searching through the piles of words in your head, picking the most important ones. And they have a cost. It's not like the healthy people that take out every word that has accumulated in their head like garbage. When someone, while having an asthma attack, says "I love you" or "I really love you", there's a difference. A word difference. And a word is a lot, because that word could have been "sit", "Ventolin" or even "ambulance".”

– Etgar Keret, צנורות

100-word story

'Tarot' by Wen Qi Li (Holland Park School, London)

I am antique wisdom. I analyse the past; give directions; tell the future. Etcetera.

Now, I rest in a cupboard, close to my user; peaceful, without disruption. Three years ago this careless girl forgot to sort me into my pack. Now I am missing 2 of my 78 body parts – ehurgh. I wasn't given the ability to fix myself but, sometimes, in the middle of the night, in my sleep, I can sense them. As though the two are still there, connected to my pumping heart.

Just as before, I coordinate them to stir sugar in my afternoon tea.

100-word story

'Fireworks' by Finlay Stoker (Beckfoot Oakbank school, Keighley)

I told myself that they were fireworks. Every night, every time another gunshot echoed through my neighbourhood, I told myself they were fireworks. I thought that perhaps if I told myself a lie long enough then one day, I'd truly believe it. That one day it may just be true. It never was.

Maybe someday, I'll move somewhere, to a new neighbourhood, where there really are fireworks. Where I don't have to keep up this façade in my head. That's never how it seems to work here, though. People either die here, or they become the ones lighting the fireworks.

100-word story

'The Path' by Michael Anyanwu (Appleton Academy, Bradford)

Ali woke up startled, as sunlight flooded his eyes, temporarily blinding him. He rose from a field of luscious green grass and watched as the sun's rays enlightened each blade. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief. He'd never seen grass before, not in Shanara at least and now he was swimming in an ocean of emeralds. Ali was taking it all in when the ground started to shake, violently. As he was forced to the ground giant balls of fire blazed down from the heavens. Suddenly, a path illuminated in front of him. A path leading to refuge or complete disaster?

100-word story

'Anonymous' by Bethany Leek (Appleton Academy, Bradford)

Maybe you're destined for something more. Or maybe I am. Or maybe the sky is red, or the rain is dry, or we're all just little fake plastic promises. Illusions of a perfect life that has never even existed. I expected you'd want to write a song about that. About the meaninglessness. You could never just 'be'. You still can't. You're still obsessed with sticking a label onto every emotion you've ever had. Your smile is like stars, mine is like nothing and until you get your head out of the clouds, I cannot keep writing your metaphors for you.

A pencil is positioned vertically, pointing downwards towards a notepad. The notepad has a list of four items labeled 'IDEAS 1', 'IDEAS 2', 'IDEAS 3', and 'IDEAS 4'. The background is a dark grey surface with faint, hand-drawn icons of various objects like a notepad, a pencil, a lightbulb, and a dollar sign. The word 'idea' is written in cursive at the bottom of the page.

Give it a go!

Have a better understanding of what flash fiction is? If you're ready to try your hand at this creative art form, use our list of 42 prompts to get started!

1. Write a six-word story about a memory that is fundamental to a character.
2. Write a six-word story about someone going through a hard time.
3. Write a six-word story about friendship.
4. Write a six-word story about the best feeling a person could have.
5. Write a six-word story about childhood.
6. Write a six-word story about someone injuring themselves.
7. Write a six-word story about someone winning something important to them.
8. Write a piece of twitterature about an actress trying out for a role.
9. Write a piece of twitterature from the point of view of a cat.
10. Write a piece of twitterature with a surprise ending about a mundane everyday object.

Prompts to get started...

11. Write a piece of twitterature about what a character who works as a chef might have done yesterday.
12. Write a piece of twitterature about two people having an argument.
13. Write a piece of twitterature about something humorous and unexpected.
14. Write a piece of twitterature about your favorite thing in the world.
15. Write a dribble about a dream you once had.
16. Write a dribble about someone giving a speech.
17. Write a dribble about a storm.
18. Write a dribble about two people reuniting after many years.
19. Write a dribble about a football game.
20. Write a dribble about a young boy with a dream.
21. Write a dribble about someone who is almost out of time.
22. Write a drabble about a color.

Prompts to get started...

23. Write a drabble about a child's first day of school.
24. Write a drabble about an old man reflecting on something that happened to him.
25. Write a drabble that is only made up of dialogue.
26. Write a drabble about a broken lamp.
27. Write a drabble about an argument a character is having with their parents.
28. Write a drabble about a teenage girl who is facing a big challenge.
29. Write a piece of sudden fiction about a transformation.
30. Write a piece of sudden fiction about a missing item.
31. Write a piece of sudden fiction about the revelation of a major secret.
32. Write a piece of sudden fiction that is set in a library.
33. Write a piece of sudden fiction about a beach.
34. Write a piece of sudden fiction about someone who gets lost in an area they aren't familiar with.
35. Write a piece of sudden fiction about someone who gets their dream job and immediately regrets it.
36. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction that examines one character during three events in his or her life.

Prompts to get started...

37. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction about someone who is nervous about taking a trip.
38. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction about a surprise that no one saw coming.
39. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction about the power going out.
40. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction about a week that changes everything.
41. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction about someone who is living a lie.
42. Write a 1,000-1,500 word piece of flash fiction about a character who is visiting another country.