Primary Short Story Writing Guide

This manual is designed to help guide students and teachers through the short story writing process. It includes some tips on crafting a story, an editing checklist, a page of suggested written or visual prompts to stimulate creative thinking and a marking criteria. Start early enough to produce your most polished writing. You'll be surprised at how much you can improve your work by drafting, editing and refining.

What makes a good story?

A **hook** that attracts attention, e.g. *I could feel Arthur's clammy breath on the back of my neck as we crept along the dark hallway. Bang! A door slammed shut.*

A **compelling storyline** that moves your readers along. They will want to know what is going to happen and they won't want to put your story down.

A **believable plot**. Make your story interesting without being too unbelievable. Avoid overused coincidences or clichés. e.g. I woke up and realised it was all just a dream…

Interesting, believable characters. The reader needs to feel like they know the main characters and can build a good picture of them in their mind. They also need to care what happens to them.

Action. You can achieve this by choosing interesting verbs e.g. pouncing, stalking, whacking, grinning.

Description. Clever use of adjectives and nouns e.g. don't just say *"The lorikeets were in the tree again."* when you can say "*The screeching cloud of rainbow feathers loudly announced the daily arrival of the lorikeets".* This gives us a better picture and helps to set the scene.

Dialogue – real, not forced. Listen to the way people speak at school, in the playground, in the supermarket, at home. Some characters might use formal language, whilst others might use more slang.

Showing not telling. This is one of the most important points. Don't tell us what happened – show us! You can do this by giving lots of detail. Include dialogue. Imagine you are there and show us what you can see, hear, smell, touch or taste. Instead of: *The grumpy old man went to the shop,* try, *The old man's walking stick angrily whacked the concrete as he limped aggressively toward the corner shop.* You now have some atmosphere, mood and a character that we care about.

A **satisfying ending**. The end of your story should bring a sense of closure. The reader should feel satisfied that whatever problem you set up during the story has been dealt with in some way.

Editing checklist

You've finished your first draft. Congratulations!

Now put your story down for at least 24 hours (or even a whole week if you have time) to let it "settle". Come back with a fresh view. Have someone else read your story and note any parts that don't make sense, or where the story doesn't flow well. Read over your story again. Be honest and be prepared to delete words, sentences and even paragraphs. If you are using a computer, the best way to do this is to save a copy before you begin deleting, then it won't feel like you are throwing your work away permanently. It's still there it you decide to add it back in. You'll be surprised at how much you don't need.

Now read it again and consider these points:

- ❏ Is the story engaging? Does it make me feel excited, sad, amused…?
- ❏ Does the plot make sense? Do I need to explain anything more clearly? (Did I rush to get to the end?)
- ❏ Does the opening of my story hook the reader? Does my story provide enough details so my reader won't get lost or confused? Does my story end with closure? Will the reader be satisfied?
- ❏ Have I "shown" the reader what's happening – instead of "telling" them, using different senses and clues to make the reader think?
- ❏ Are my characters interesting and believable? Will the reader feel like they know my characters (even if they don't like them)?
- ❏ Are all the characters necessary to support the plot? (There's no need to list multiple characters who don't have a part in the story. Get rid of extras).
- ❏ Will the reader feel as though they are part of the story? Have I created a realistic setting that readers can relate to?
- ❏ Do I have enough dialogue? Does the dialogue make the story move along? Have I used a new line for each speaker? Does the character's language and voice help the reader to know them better?
- ❏ Did I stick with the same tense throughout my story? (past, present or future?)
- ❏ Is the point of view consistent throughout the story (have I used first person or third person? e.g. is the narrator telling their own story or someone else's?)
- ❏ Have I used paragraphs and punctuation to structure my story effectively? Have I used capital letters for names and proper nouns?
- ❏ Have I checked my spelling?

Ideas and suggestions to get you started

This year, our theme is '*Playing with Story*'. You may find some of the ideas below useful for getting you started, or you may use your own. Remember, sometimes stories don't turn out the way we expect…

Story starters

- One night I went sleepwalking and woke up at the dam wall!...
- The time I thought running away to join the circus was a good idea…
- I went to the skate park with my friend and found out that I have a hidden talent...
- I was crossing the road, minding my own business when I suddenly got caught up in a massive fun run!
- I was fishing in my canoe when suddenly…

Visual Prompts

Primary Marking Criteria

The criteria assessed in the writing task are:

Criteria	1	2	3
1. **Reader Engagement** – The writer's capacity to engage and affect the reader.			
2. **Structure** – Effective structure that supports a cohesive storyline.			
3. **Expression** - Construction of grammatically correct sentences and paragraphs appropriate spelling and punctuation.			
4. **Characterisation** – The portrayal and development of character.			
5. **Setting** - The development of a sense of place and context.			
6. **Vocabulary** – The range and precision of the language used.			
7. **Techniques** - The use of effective structural and language techniques. May include: – plot twist/circular plot/in media res etc. – figurative language: personification, simile, metaphor, allegory etc. – alliteration, onomatopoeia etc. – effective use of dialogue – evoking an emotional response – building tension – subject/verb agreement – tense consistency – showing, not telling			