

Writing Flash Fiction

by G. W. Thomas

from <http://www.fictionfactor.com/guests/flashfiction.html>

With the advent of the Internet, editors are looking for shorter works, more easily read on a computer screen. The current term is "flash fiction", a tale between 300-1000 words long. Longer than micro-fiction (10-300 words) but shorter than traditional short stories (3000-5000 words preferred by most magazines), flash fiction is usually a story of a single act, sometimes the culmination of several unwritten events.

This article will offer several strategies for writing flash fiction. Used by themselves or in combination, the writer can focus their story to that brief, interesting event.

1) The small idea

Look for the smaller ideas in larger ones. To discuss the complex interrelationship of parents and children you'd need a novel. Go for a smaller piece of that complex issue. How kids feel when they aren't included in a conversation. What kids do when they are bored in the car. Middle child. Bad report card. Find a smaller topic and build on it.

2) Bury the preamble in the opening

When you write your story, don't take two pages to explain all the pre-story. Find a way to set it all in the first paragraph, then get on with the rest of the tale.

3) Start in the middle of the action

Similar to #2, start the story in the middle of the action. A man is running. A bomb is about to go off. A monster is in the house. Don't describe any more than you have to. The reader can fill in some of the blanks.

4) Focus on one powerful image

Find one powerful image to focus your story on. A war-torn street. An alien sunset. They say a picture worth a thousand words. Paint a picture with words. It doesn't hurt to have something happen inside that picture. It is a story after all.

5) Make the reader guess until the end

A little mystery goes a long way. Your reader may have no idea what is going on for the majority of the story. This will lure them on to the end. When they finish, there should be a good pay off or solution.

6) Use allusive references

By using references to a commonly known story you can save yourself all those unnecessary words. Refer to historical events. Use famous situations from literature. If the story takes place on the Titanic you won't have to explain what is going to happen, who is there, or much of anything. History and James Cameron have already done it for you. Beware of using material that is too obscure. Your reader should be able to make the inferences.

7) Use a twist

Like #5, the twist ending allows the writer to pack some punch at the end of the story. Flash fiction is often twist-ending fiction because you don't have enough time to build up sympathetic characters and show how a long, devastating plot has affected them. Like a good joke, flash fiction is often streamlined to the punch-line at the end.

Let's look at these techniques in my story "Road Test". I wanted to write a story about taking my driving exam. I didn't mention the pre-test or practicing. Just the test. (#1 THE SMALL IDEA) This narrows our subject down to a manageable scene.

I didn't have room to describe the driving examiner in detail. I set my main character in two sentences (#2 BURY THE PREAMBLE). "The man in the government-issued suit sat down without looking at the person across from him. We've established the main character and his chief flaws. (He's mediocre and probably hates his job.)

I started in the middle of the action by having the driver very quickly go from good driving to dangerous driving. Johnson, the driving examiner realizes the driver is not human but goat-headed (#3 START IN THE MIDDLE). "He had changed. The beard was longer, the skin darker and two large curved horns crowned his skull." This creates tension and has created an image: a man trapped in a speeding car with a monster (#4 A POWERFUL IMAGE). It pushes the reader on because they want to know what will happen next, maybe why is it happening? We won't tell them until the end (#5 KEEP THEM GUESSING).

The monster keeps yelling the same word, "Pooka!" Johnson begins to understand. He knows the old fairy stories about the Pooka, about how they pretended to be horses so they could drown their victims. (#6 ALLUSION)

Now is the time for resolution, our great twist ending that no one sees coming (#7 TWIST ENDING). As the monster crashes the car into a pond, Johnson realizes a modern-day Pooka wouldn't look like a horse, but would use a car. The car crashes and we finish with: "They would die, only Johnson would live long enough to feel those large goatish teeth chewing the flesh from his bones. The souped-up V8 hit the slick surface of the pond like a fist into jello. Windshield collapsed under tons of water, washing away the high, shrill laughter of the driver."

"Road Test" clocks in at 634 words. It is essentially a man gets killed by a monster story, but the crux of the idea is "How would mythological creatures adapt to the modern world?" This is really the small idea. The allusions to the Pooka will work for some, but I gave enough explanation to help those that don't know about the old stories.

This example story was chosen because it illustrated all 7 methods. Using only one in a flash story can be enough. Writing flash fiction is a great way for writers to write every day, even when larger projects seem to daunting or they are pressed for time. Using these short cuts can have you writing in minutes.

G. W. Thomas has appeared in over 100 different books and magazines. His micro story "Nano-Hunk" won the Zine Guild Award for Best SF Micro Fiction 2000.

ROAD TEST
by G. W. Thomas

The man in the government-issued suit sat down without looking at the person across from him, the one in the driver's seat. "Please start the car and back into the parking lot."

The driving examiner was the epitome of his profession, the merest photocopy of some ideal "examiner", cold, detached, disinterested. He wore the tight, brown suit with the colorless tie, like a badge of authority, his heavy-rimmed glasses finishing off a perfect imitation of officialdom. In his lap, the clipboard with road evaluation form 5C3 - (fifty demerits allowed), and a pen attached with a bank-counter chain.

The car roared to life, backed quickly but proficiently out of the stall and sped off in the direction of the main street. "Turn left here," the examiner, who's name was Johnson, said.

The car, a souped-up V8 barreled on like Hell On Wheels.

"Please slow down," the rider commanded. "Speeding will cost you 10 points as will failing to make the turn." The driver made no comment on the loss of points.

"Turn here, if you will." The direction came with a renewed bored tone of voice. "Now, I want you to parallel park behind this car here."

The car shot passed, having nothing to do with the green Pinto, designated for parking practise.

"Son, I said --" Johnson turned, looked at the fool who would dare to disregard his commands. Didn't this young man know that he, Arnold Johnson, held all his hopes of driving a car? How could he even think --

"Pooka!"

Johnson boggled. The person sitting next to him was no zit-faced junior high school brat. He was an evil-looking, wide-grinned maniac. The driver had an evil scowl, thick eye brows that wriggled like caterpillars and a wiry goatee that reminded Johnson of bad Satanist films.

"Pooka!" The driver yowled again, as he pumped the V8 to seventy. The tires squealed like stuck pigs.

"Stop! Stop this MINUTE!" Johnson demanded, not sure if he still held any power. He didn't.

His hand reached over roughly, telegraphing his intentions of killing the engine by turning off the key. A fist leapt out, striking him just above the eye brow. The blow had behind it the power of an animal -- some brutal, instinctual being -- the kick of a billy goat.

"Pooka!" the driver bleated.

Why did he keep saying that? Outside, the city streets disappeared to be replaced by the weed-filled fringes of the rail-yards. Beyond that -- the highway.

Johnson went for the door. Perhaps a bluff --

"Pooka!" screamed the driver, jamming the pedal to the floor, taking the car up to a hundred and ten. Johnson closed the door.

Turning back to his captor, the examiner thought to beg for mercy. Before he could frame his plea, he peered at the driver. He had changed. The beard was longer, the skin darker and two large, curved horns crowned his skull.

"Pooka!"

Then it dawned on Johnson. He was of English extract after all. Pooka -- Pwca -- Puck -- the phantom that inhabited lonely roads disguised as a horse, carrying unsuspecting riders to their deaths --

Pooka!

But in this day and age --

The Highway curved.

Pooka!

-- no one rides horses anymore --

A pond filled one side of the road, deep and algaic.

Pooka!

-- they drive cars!

No! They were going off the road! One hundred and twenty. They would die --

Pooka!

They would die, only Johnson would live long enough to feel those large goatish teeth chewing the flesh from his bones.

The souped-up V8 hit the slick surface of the pond like a fist into jello. Windshield collapsed under tons of water, washing away the high, shrill laughter of the driver.

A TASTE OF FLASH FICTION

<http://www.wordjourneys.com/booksstories/flashfiction.htm>

<http://www.philgardner.net/Micro.html>

by © Phil Gardner 2007

Flash Fiction is a great way to practice the economy of story writing. You must take the reader immediately into the scene, and exit just as fast. In between, the narrative and/or dialogue must grip and hold on. There is no room for any excess verbiage. I find that writing flash fiction is a splendid exercise to undertake just before going into the editing process of books. Plus, it's great fun-the stories can be tremendous.

There are two schools of thought about the length of flash fiction: One sets a 500-word maximum, and the other 100 words-which one of my mentors, Harvey Stanbrough, teaches. The challenge of a 100-word story is very appealing; it's like taking on the ultimate mind-jumbling puzzle. You are required to set a scene, and include all four parts of a story in it: Plot, character, conflict and resolution.

These are short stories. *Very* short stories. First there was 'flash fiction' - the idea of writing a complete story in just a few hundred words. 'Micro fiction' takes the concept one stage further. The challenge here is to write a piece containing all the elements of a traditional short story - a setting, one or more characters, conflict, resolution - **all in 100 words or less.**

And to think some people write novels. The fools.

Here are a few of my flash fiction examples, all of which have been previously published: © Phil Gardner 2007

THE LIFE OF A FLICKERED CANDLE

They looked past each other's shoulders. A candle flickered; steam rose from half-eaten dinners.

She clenched her eyes. "Why are you so dispassionate? Why can't you kiss me like these other men in here kiss?"

He stared into space. The waitress appeared. "More wine?"

The waitress poured, then leaned over and kissed the man flush on the lips. She turned and walked away.

He looked across the table, smiled, and leaned forward, his lips puckered. Her face froze. "Oh no you don't, you wretched man!"

ENCHANTMENT

How do we get out?

We're surrounded by thousand-year-old stone walls, a cliff-top, the midnight moon. I search for back routes and pull on the oak door. "It's the 21st century, and we're locked in a castle," she says.

We stand in an ancient courtyard and yell for help. Clouds eclipse the moon; a gnarled oak moans, chasing a white owl away. A dragon spits fire from a second-floor flat. "Let's go," she pleads.

Two young women come outside. "You live here?" I ask.

"Oh, we are bored and are lighting hair spray on fire," one says.

They lead us out.

MOUNTAIN'S CHOICE

"Just four steps and you've summited!"

Martin's voice was a distant echo. Jansen tried to lift his boot over a clump of ice; no luck. His leg ignored his mind.

"C'mon, man! Four steps! The view up here is great!"

"I can't. Leg hurts." Jansen's eyes soaked in the panorama of ridges, peaks and tilted snowfields. He soared. "Why kill myself?"

"To reach the top—the reason why you're here."

Jansen smiled and sat on the ice clump. "I am here."

The wind gusted. The mountain groaned. Martin slipped and tumbled into Jansen. They careened over the edge.

Two years on from my last foray into the world of micro fiction (I've been busy, ok?), I was prompted to pick up my pen again by a short story competition on BBC Radio 4's Front Row programme. Rules stated that each story must be exactly one hundred words (no more and, somewhat significantly, no less), and should contain the following six words, chosen at random by, of all people, film director David Lynch:

Bacon, Bodies, Experiments, Fire, Paper & Organic

Which left only 94 to write myself. Meaning I had time to enter twice. I didn't win, probably due to the BBC's fear of my revolutionary ideas on Shakespeare, and the fact that I couldn't spell papier mâché.

All Work & No Play

by Phil Gardner 11th March 2007

His study was nearing completion. His findings would undoubtedly stoke the fire of controversy, but no matter. Finally he would prove that Francis Bacon wrote the plays, not Shakespeare.

It was his life's work. Financial backing from the governing bodies of Britain's leading research institutes had allowed him to carry out experiments on organic matter taken from the original manuscripts.

Data had been processed; results cross referenced. Four centuries on, technology would solve the riddle. The computer would give him the author's name.

A beep. Paper spewed out of the printer. He grabbed it and read the result...

"Dan Brown??"

Another Planet

by Phil Gardner 10th March 2007

The craft flew through space at warp speed, its destination: Mars.

Alien experiments had resulted in an army of cyborgs: robotic bodies with organic brains, each hellbent on the destruction of Earth.

Mankind's salvation lay in the hands of just one man: Captain Ben, the Space Corp's finest. But time was running out.

Impatiently, he armed the defensive shields and ordered the crew to fire up the thrusters.

An urgent voice came from below decks.

"Benjy, your bacon and eggs are ready!"

Benjy dropped the paper maché spaceship, swept the robots into the toy box, and ran downstairs for breakfast.