

A Bare-Bones Guide to Flash Fiction

By Rod Baird

What makes Ernest Hemingway's stories so amazing is not so much what he includes in them as what he doesn't include. The great American writer believed that the power of writing comes from a few true sentences. Whereas normally a short story can run many thousands words long, his famous "Hills Like Elephants" and "A Clean Well Lighted Place" are just over 1000 words and his "A Very Short Story" is only 750 words. Even though his stories are extremely short and only take a few minutes to read, after we read them, we feel as if we've spent months living with the characters.

This art of very short fiction is known today as flash fiction. It is also called skinny, sudden, minute, furious, and micro fiction. It is a form of story telling that uses fewer than 1,000 words. Most flash fiction is under 500 words. Often it involves one event that results from other unseen events. It is compressed, intense, and loaded with innuendo. Every word counts. And it strangely reveal truths that somehow aren't as sharply revealed in longer stories—this surge of truth stays with us the same way the light of a flash bulb shines in our mind even after it has burned out.

Flash fiction is enormously popular these days, maybe because of

how compressed and intense our own lives seem, with our instantaneous access to everything via the Internet, ten-second commercials, and micro-second short attention spans. Maybe life is so frantic that we insist that even our fiction keep up. Maybe truth has become so elusive that our only chance of seeing it comes in sudden glimpses.

Want to try writing flash fiction?

Tips for Flash Fiction

- Tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end.
- Provide your character with a conflict.
- Suggest a setting.
- Let a small idea reach out to a larger one.
- Don't explain.
- Start suddenly.
- Rely on images.
- Keep the reader wondering.
- Be allusive but help your reader make the right inferences.
- End with a punch or a twist.

Here are some guidelines:

1. Start SMALL. Flash fiction is not about sweeping narratives spanning years of time with hosts of characters. Write about some-

thing that maybe might take five or ten minutes in real life. Here are some ideas:

- A boy and girl holding hands for the first time.
- A boyfriend and girlfriend breaking up.
- A conversation between a mother and father that a young boy or girl overhears.

2. Write the story. Don't worry how long it is.

3. Take a look what you've written and start cutting. (This is the fun part!) Cut adverbs and all but the most crucial adjectives. Let your nouns and verbs do the work. Flash fiction is the one genre in which description can be an enemy. If there is dialogue, keep it essential. Read it back. Does make sense? Is there a story? (Remember that like an iceberg, most of it will be hidden). Cut some more, and here is where the FLASH happens. You are no longer cutting simply to make it shorter. You are cutting to pare the story down to its radiant essence, peeling it back layer by layer until the truth is revealed, until it becomes a new story inside the older longer one. Does it shine? Will the reader feel as if he's been struck hard by something? Think about the crack of thunder that follows a streak of lightning.

Black Velvet Dress

Trip cruises the strip of new stores with their snapping red, white and blue flags, then pulls up to the bank's drive-through window. When a scratchy voice crackles over the loudspeaker he places his passbook into the hydraulic drawer and talks back through the microphone. The drawer disappears. When it reopens he removes his passbook along with a twenty-dollar bill, hoping that buying her a present might cheer her up.

At least those little white lithium pills she's now taking seem to have slowed down her crazy spells. He hates himself when she has one because he feels so helpless. He prays she won't have to go into that hospital again.

He parks his mother's Corvair next to a red VW van plastered with peace signs. Walking among the stores unable to decide what to buy when he stops before a mannequin posed in one of the display windows. It's a female mannequin with a pointy nose and crooked glass eyes with exaggerated lashes. It is so fake that Trip wants to punch it, but it is wearing the most beautiful dress he has ever seen. The dress looks like midnight, deep and shiny and stark against the dummy's pasty gray skin. A hand wearing about a million bracelets reaches into the window and places a sign against the mannequin's plastic leg that reads SALE.

"Can I help you?" asks a saleslady wearing Mama Cass tunic.

"How much is the dress in the window?"

The black velvets are twenty four dollars, marked down to twenty for today only."

"Can I see it?"

"Follow me," the saleslady says.

Trip is surprised when she leads him away from the window towards the back of the store. She shows him a rack jammed with the same black velvet dresses.

"What size?"

"Size?"

"What size is the one in the window?"

"What difference does that make?"

"That's the size."

The saleslady rolls her eyes. "And how do you know that?"

"I just know."

"The fives are here. You had better be sure though. There are no refunds on sale items." She yanks one off the rack, spilling some other dresses onto the shag carpet. She looks at him as if it's his fault.

Trip studies it, looks at all the other dresses crowded onto the rack.

"I'll take the one in the window."

The saleslady re-hangs the dresses. "Young man, do you want to this dress or not?"

"I want the one in the window."

"This is the dress in the window."

"No, it isn't."

"We are not allowed to sell displays."

"I want the one in the window and if you don't get it for me I will take."

The saleslady steps back away from him. A short bald man appears, looking up from his clipboard.

"We have a hundred of these dresses. Just sell him what he wants," he says.

