



## Writing the Short Story: Points to Ponder

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Focus on Short Fiction/Nonfiction Stories

### **Idea, Concept and Premise:**

Larry Brooks of *Writers Digest* has offered helpful definitions of these three terms, for which I'm providing examples from my short story, "Commanding the Stones."

The typical **initial idea** for a story isn't yet well developed. Laurel's example of a story idea: **I want to write a story, inspired by a Russian fairy tale, about a stolen magical malachite brooch in Paris.**

A **concept** is an idea that has evolved to the point where a story becomes possible. A concept becomes a platform, a stage, upon which a story may unfold. A concept, it could be said, is something that asks a question. The answer to the question is the story. Laurel's example of a story concept: **What if a woman in Paris embarks upon a mission to return a stolen magical malachite brooch to its rightful owner—a character in a Russian fairy tale?**

A **premise** is a concept that really brings *character* into the mix. In Laurel's following example, the premise defines the hero's quest in "Commanding the Stones." **What if a character from a Russian fairy tale commands a middle-aged woman in Paris to retrieve a stolen magical malachite brooch? What if the woman must embark on this dangerous mission to save her troubled marriage—even the life of her sometimes unworthy husband, who she still loves?**

### **Theme:**

**Theme** is the essence of what a story *means*, rather than a descriptor of plot or character. Theme is especially important in a short story because theme and plot are more intertwined in a well-written short story than in a novel.

In Laurel's short story, "Commanding the Stones," **the theme relates to the power of love, worthiness and honor.**

## LAUREL'S CHECKLIST FOR SHORT FICTION OR NONFICTION STORIES

The story, story arc, and theme you want on the page are there. Your story starts and ends in the right place. For example, the opening shouldn't wander or drag. You shouldn't explain the entire future of any character at the end.

The first 100 words or so should establish the main character, the problem, some sort of setting and include a hook. Be sure to follow up on that hook.

The end should be a natural consequence of the story, inform the beginning, and the reader won't see it coming.

Check for a well-developed plot and characters. Per Lawrence Rust Hills, former fiction editor of *Esquire Magazine*, a short story tells of something that happened to somebody. Per Laurel Anne Hill, a short story should NOT tell of everything that happened to somebody or everything that happened to everybody. A short story is NOT a short novel.

Author and editor Diana Bocco offers the following ideas about distinguishing a short story from a novel. A short story is a window into a larger story the reader doesn't get to see. A "flash" goes off and the reader can observe a small part of a character's life. You might not get a big insight into the character's background, how he/she got there and who he/she is—you just get to see them in that moment in time, in that particular situation.

One of the most prevalent characteristics of a short story is a concentrated time frame, such as: A few hours, a day, or a week.

When too many events in a character's life are crammed into a short story, none are brought to life.

Short stories usually have no subplots.

You have a forward-moving story and the right character tells it.

Forward momentum is driven by tension, character and/or a mystery/puzzle.

Only one point-of-view character for a short story is best.

Maintain closeness to the point-of-view character. (Hint: Showing—rather than telling about—what a p.o.v. character experiences helps develop closeness. Let the reader see the story world through the eyes of the p.o.v. character.)

In a well-written short story, the theme—THE MEANING—is embedded in the action taken by the characters, in all aspects of the story.

A point-of-view character does things. He/she takes action and risks.

A point-of-view character wants things and you thwart him/her.

Also, a short story—like any story—is dynamic rather than static, which means it is not a mere character sketch (an example of behavior) in which the character doesn't change. The main character should change or decide not to change.

Create realistic characters who use realistic dialogue.

Use the five senses, to the extent appropriate for your p.o.v. character.

Remove anything that is not part of the story, or detracts/distracts from it.

Use description and back story like seasoning in a stew. (Description and back story should not be your story's "meat and potatoes.")

Plenty of active verbs. Use "was" on purpose—not by default.

No information dumps.

No talking heads (long sections of dialogue without narrative from p.o.v. character).

Adverb use avoided/kept to a minimum (unless you're writing a "typical" romance).

Dialogue not buried in narrative paragraphs, at least most of the time.

Clichés and word echoes avoided.

Nothing confusing (e.g., Time shifts should be clear. Watch out for too many characters or similar characters. Watch out for subject changes in sentences with leading dependent clauses. Be sure that the reader won't have to struggle to connect pronouns with their corresponding nouns.)

Metaphors and similes work.

Language flows. (Words, sentences and paragraphs lead to the next ones without the reader stumbling. Variations in sentence structure and length can contribute to the flow. Evaluate the order in which sentences and paragraphs are placed.)

Grammar and spelling errors corrected.

Use complete sentences in action scenes whenever possible. (Fragments speed up the reader and the excitement ends too soon. Long, complex sentences invite the reader to skim to find out what happens. Short, complete and clear sentences invite the reader to experience and savor all of the fast-paced action.)