

MOSTLY-BORROWED THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER WHEN A SHORT STORY IS NEARLY FINISHED (OR IS STRUGGLING)

(This is NOT a checklist or a formula. Please don't use it that way. It could kill your story.)

BEGINNING

- What does my main character want or care about?
 - How soon do we find out?
 - Is it something warm and human?
 - How soon do we understand why this moment (or series of moments) is critical in the protagonist's life?
 - Other major character(s): same questions.
- Do I give the reader something to care about in the beginning? (Character, theme, situation, humor, language, suspense – many possibilities.)
- Do I lure the reader into my world?
- Does my opening scene highlight something odd, curious, puzzling, paradoxical, etc.? (For tension.)
- How many senses do I engage in the first few lines or paragraphs?
- What tone/feeling does the beginning set for the story? What genre expectations?
- Do I jump right into the conflict (usually a good thing).
- Am I starting as close to the end as possible?
- What do I promise the reader at the beginning?

ENDING

- Is the conclusion clear (even if all the loose ends aren't tied)?
- Is the ending satisfying?
 - Not necessarily happy; could be disturbing, sad, tragic, etc.
 - Is there sufficient resolution to make a satisfying reading experience, even if not all tension is resolved? Even if the reader may wonder what happens next and how protagonist will react?
- Have I fulfilled the promises I made to the reader at the beginning?

THE WHOLE STORY

- Things must happen.
 - Is there at least one character the reader can root for?
 - The main character must cause things to happen – do things to tip balance, face/solve problems.
 - What are my main character's flaws, and how do they affect the story? (Same question about strengths.)
 - Someone must change: fixed to broken/broken to fixed, bent to buckled, deeper down in a state they've already entered, or coming out of it.
 - Do awful things happen to good characters, so the reader can see what they're made of?
 - Does the pace drag at any point?

- Does the story evoke experiences and a world beyond what's on the page? (So it's not superficial.)
 - Do I suggest back story without elaborating unduly?
 - Does the setting have texture and depth, without exhaustive description?
 - Not a contradiction: Is the story a self-contained world? Can the reader hold the whole in mind?
- How does the story feel?
 - Is the tone/feeling consistent through the story?
 - Do I build to the climax steadily and efficiently?
 - Poe: short story must have a single feeling, and every sentence must build toward it.
 - Am I telling something interesting about someone interesting?
- Is the structure clear and functioning?
 - Beginning/middle/end
 - Intro, Confrontation, Resolution (works, but not every story needs this structure)
- Economy
 - Are the character voices distinct? If not, should I combine characters?
 - If there are multiple settings, do I need them all? Could I combine settings and use my word count for better development of characters or theme?
 - Tight dialogue – and give characters something to do while they talk.
 - Does every sentence reveal character and/or advance the action?
 - Let the reader do some heavy lifting. (Appropriate to audience age.)
- Is something missing?
 - Do I appeal to all five senses?
 - Have I written complete scenes?
 - Does the reader know enough at every point?
 - Dialogue: besides what they're saying, do their desires and motivations seep through? Is conflict built into the dialogue?
- Do I have a meaningful theme, subtly and artfully presented?
 - Determine your message. What bothers you, intrigues you? What do you hold dear?
 - One main theme, one main point.
 - Hide your messages (to a degree which depends on message, story, and audience), but leave ample clues.

PROCESS

- Have I cut like my life depends on it?
- Look hard at the movement and logic of the story.
- Look for redundancies and overused words and phrases. Strip them out. (Can leave artful repetition, if it's there to work, not just look pretty.)
- Weave in another level of meaning.
- Add in clarifications and bridges.

Comments and suggestions are welcome!

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