

## **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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