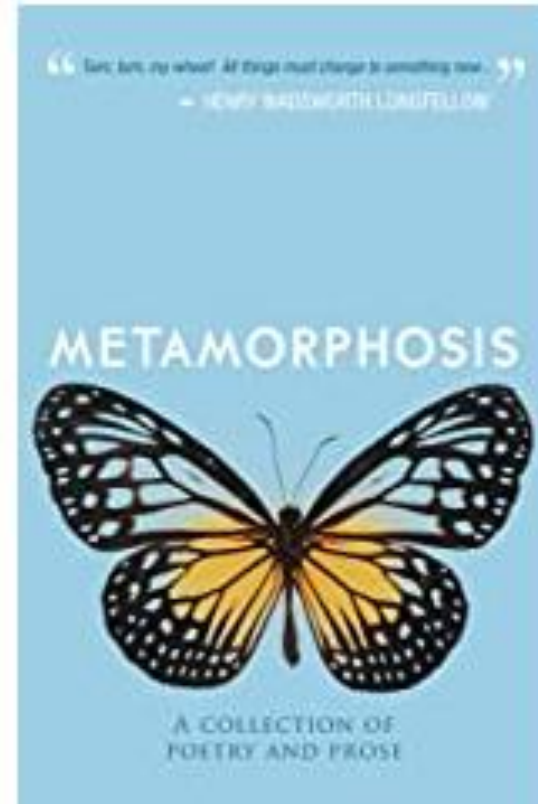
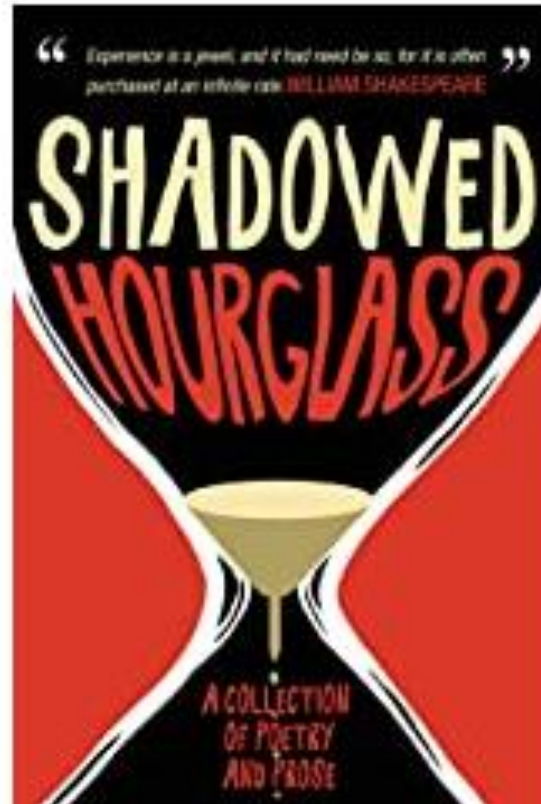


The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep navy blue. These shapes are primarily located on the left and right sides of the frame, creating a modern, dynamic feel. The central area is a plain white background where the text is placed.

Short Fiction

Who Should Write It - and When and Why and How

by David Rodeback - for Good AF Writers - June 2022



Published short stories in three anthologies (print & electronic)

Eight contest prizes for short fiction (five in LUW contests).

About 20 short stories published online at my website, and on Medium and Simily.

Preparing two collections ready to self-publish; each will have a novella and several short stories.

A novel-in-progress since 2014 (my laboratory), plus partial outlines and some scenes for at least four more novels I want to write.

Three contest prizes for first chapters of novels (two in LUW contests).



One assumption

My audience for this presentation consists mostly of writers who are writing longer fiction, i.e. novels and novellas.

(In other words, people like me.)

II. Why Write Short Fiction?

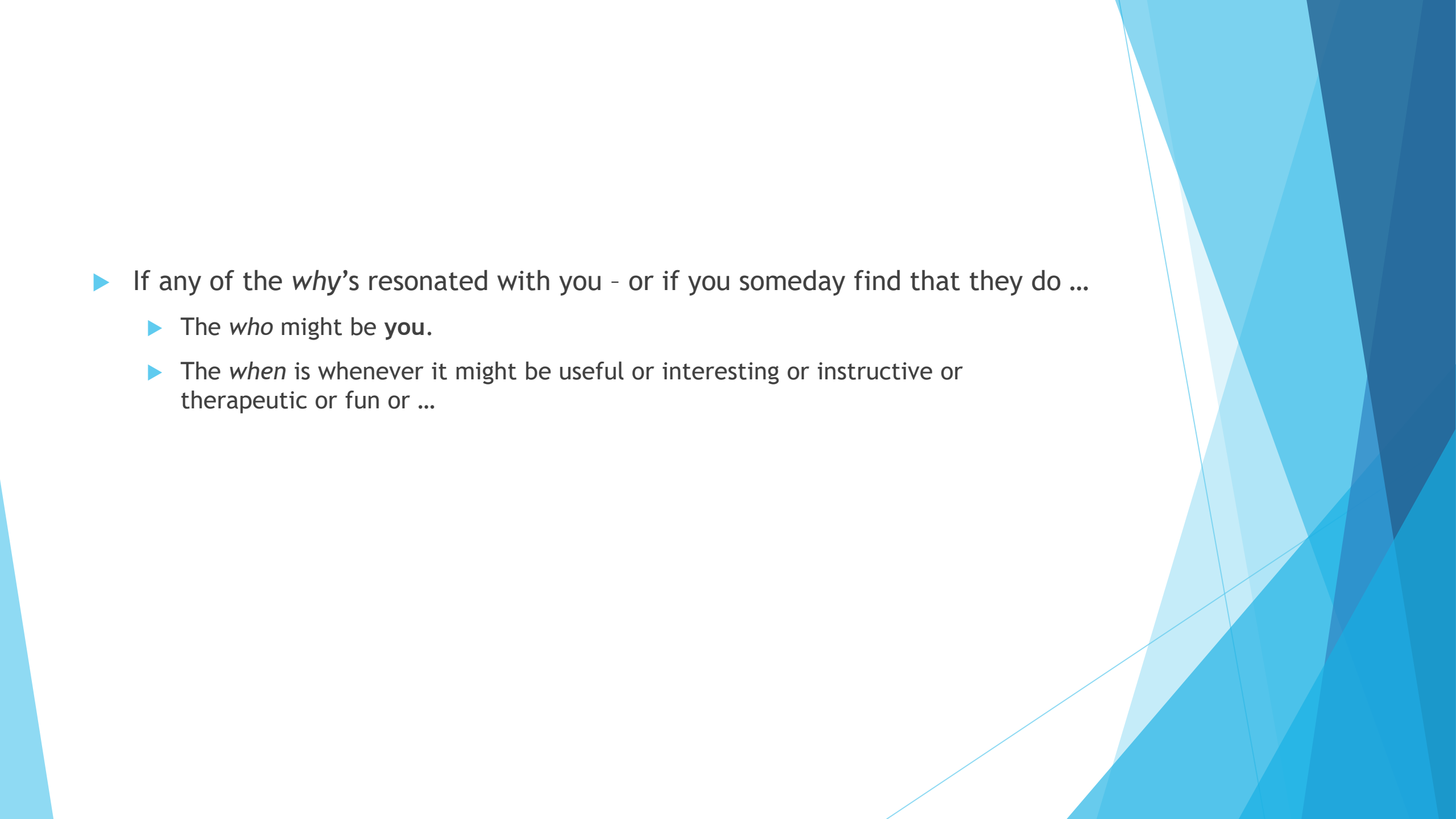
My Why's and Other Good Why's

- ▶ Explore simpler themes
- ▶ A laboratory
 - ▶ New genre/theme/trope/voice/character/relationship/narrative style/POV/etc.
 - ▶ Practice/polish specific bits of craft
- ▶ Contests, feedback, and the usual writing lessons, but with a fast turnaround
- ▶ Have a fun idea, play with it
- ▶ Extra ideas, scenes, minor characters, back story which don't fit in your novel
- ▶ Promotion/Reader Magnet
 - ▶ Newsletter / website / social media
 - ▶ Especially if same milieu/voice/style
- ▶ Publishing opportunities
- ▶ Easier to tell people "I'm a writer" (because you already finished/published something)
- ▶ Outlet, Therapy, Task Avoidance
- ▶ Keep writing/improving when you lack time or mental energy for a large project
- ▶ Work on daily habits/output

Bad Why's

- ▶ Get rich. (Good luck with that.)
- ▶ Take overt revenge on real people.
- ▶ Or otherwise destroy when you might build instead.

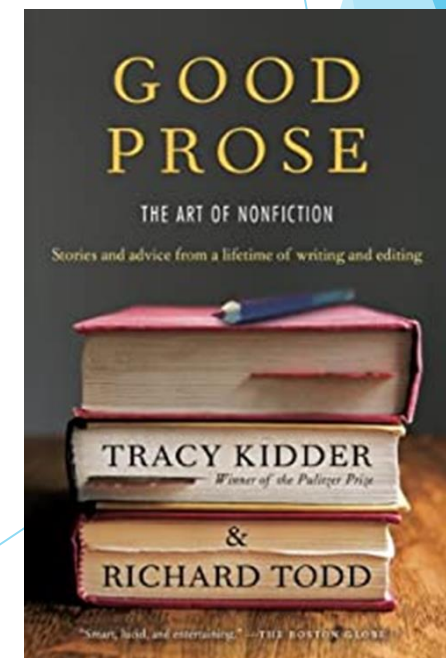
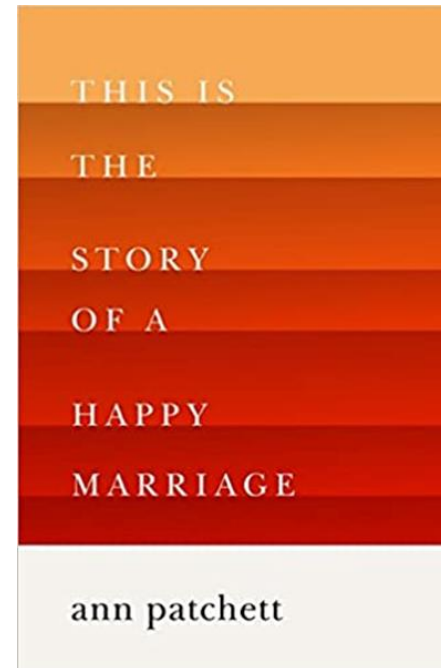
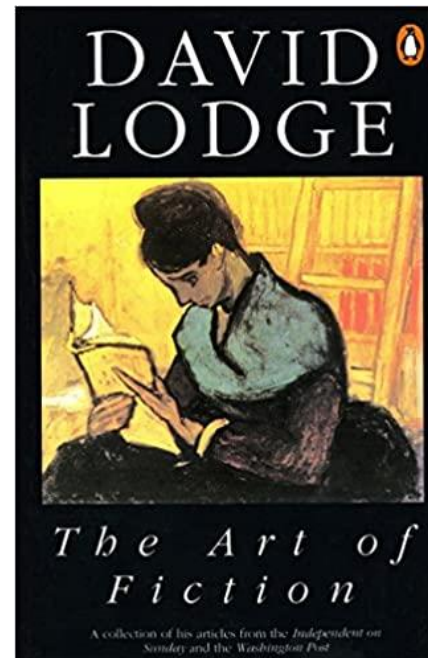
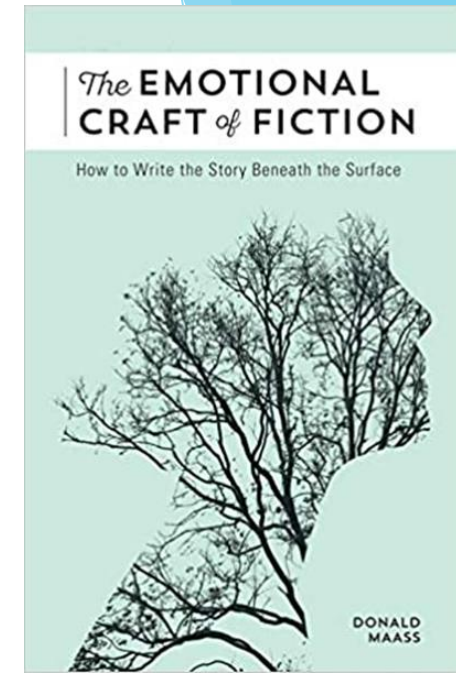
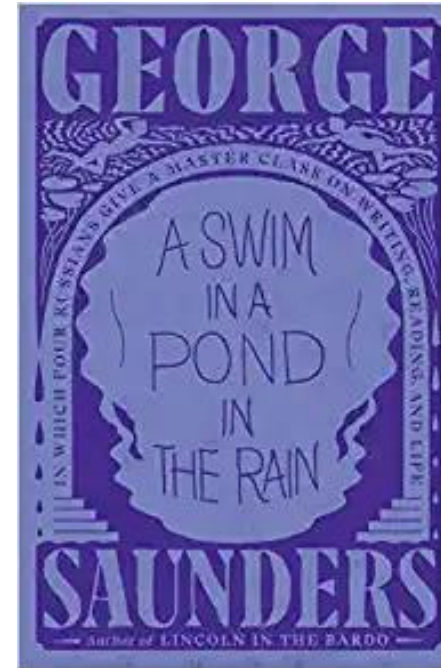
III. Who and When

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- ▶ If any of the *why*'s resonated with you - or if you someday find that they do ...
 - ▶ The *who* might be **you**.
 - ▶ The *when* is whenever it might be useful or interesting or instructive or therapeutic or fun or ...

IV. How to Write Short Fiction

Some folks I'll be quoting

- ▶ George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*
- ▶ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*
- ▶ Ann Patchett, *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*
- ▶ Donald Maass, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*
- ▶ Tracy Kidder, *Good Prose*




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It's Short Fiction, So Obviously ...

You get ...

- ▶ Fewer major characters
- ▶ Fewer minor characters
- ▶ Fewer settings
 - ▶ Each new character or setting may require 500-1,000 words to develop.
- ▶ Fewer themes
- ▶ Fewer plot threads, few if any subplots
- ▶ Often: a short time span
- ▶ Fewer words - so every word counts. (Use your title to do some work.)

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Don't Let Rules, Tips, Secrets,
Quotas, etc., Paralyze You

They're often useful as guidelines. They're not the laws of physics.

- ▶ A few examples among hundreds:
 - ▶ You should use all five senses every 1,000 words.
 - ▶ You can't have more than 3 characters with dialogue and development.
 - ▶ You're only allowed one POV - or at most two, but only with good reason.
 - ▶ You have about three lines to establish who, where, and the genre
 - ▶ You must establish the conflict within the first three paragraphs
 - ▶ Or the first paragraph, in flash fiction.
 - ▶ 12 (or 10 or 3 or 5 or 8 or 15) Easy Steps to Writing Great Short Stories

USE THEM WHEN THEY'RE USEFUL. IGNORE THEM WHEN THEY'RE NOT.

Therefore, a crucial inoculation ...

Don't let rules and tips and how-to presentations paralyze you.
Put your heart in charge of your brain for a while and just write!

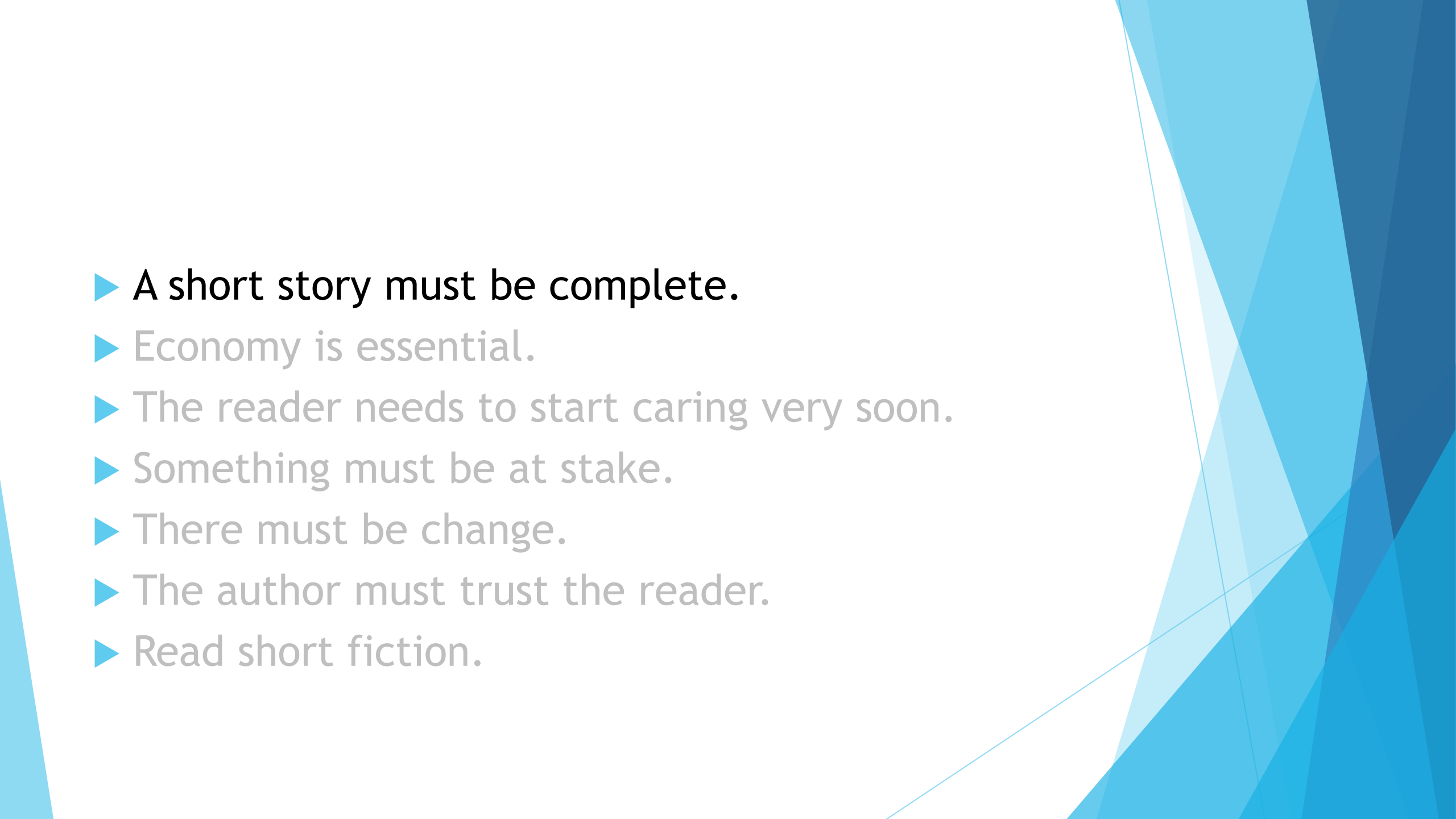
... and an important booster

“Short stories can take one tool from the fictional toolkit – voice, character, dialogue, structure, point of view, idea – and major on that, almost to the exclusion of all others. They can talk of boring or obvious topics in fresh ways, or they can deliver great weirdnesses and wild thought experiments. In short, they can do whatever they like. They just have to be true to themselves, and make us believe in them, and not go on too long.”

“Go with the idea that tingles.”

Dan Brotzel, “How to Write a Short Story” - on [Medium](#)

A Few Near-Absolutes

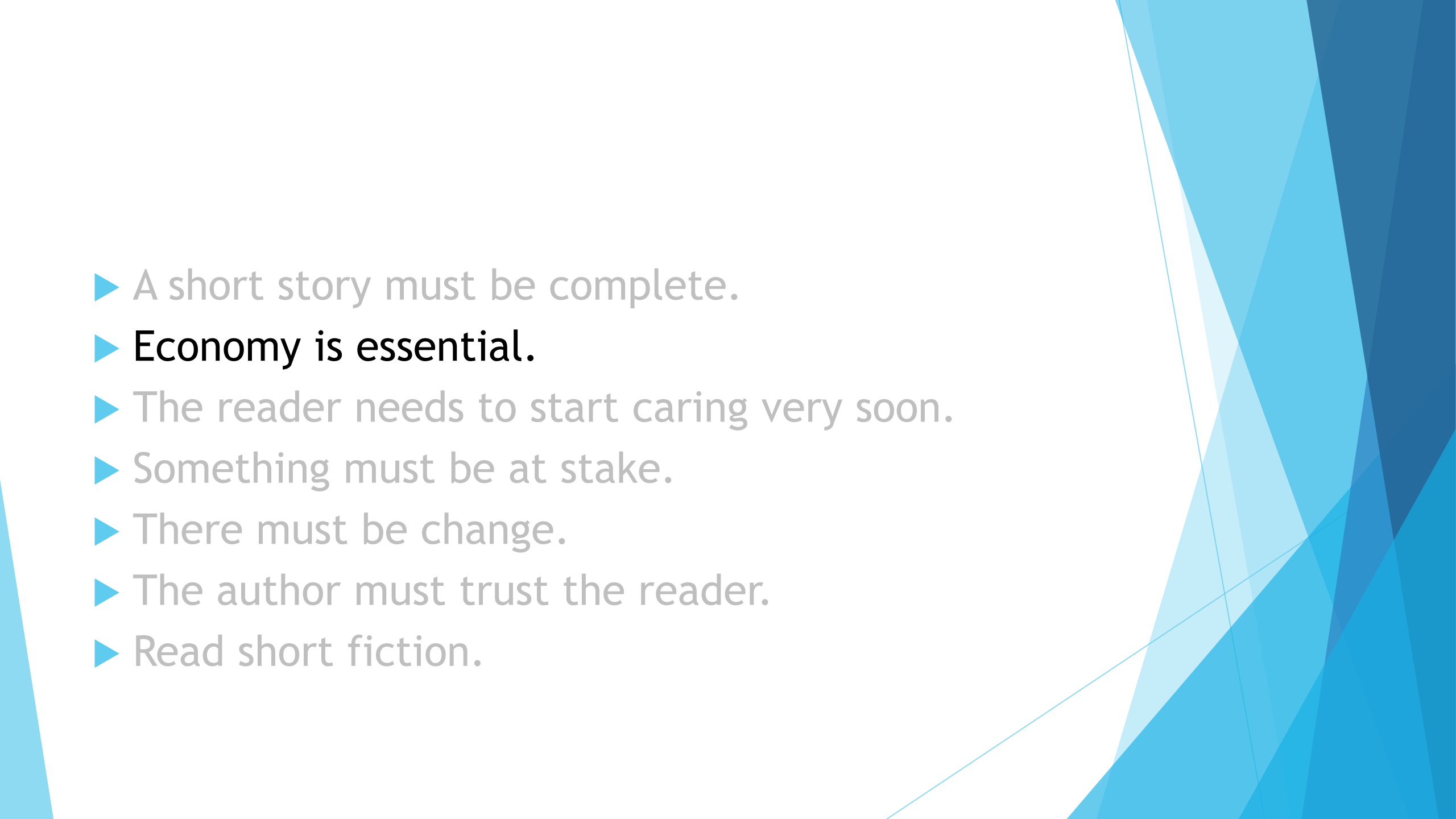
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- The background of the slide features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep navy blue. These shapes are primarily located on the right side of the slide, creating a modern, dynamic feel.
- ▶ A short story must be complete.
 - ▶ Economy is essential.
 - ▶ The reader needs to start caring very soon.
 - ▶ Something must be at stake.
 - ▶ There must be change.
 - ▶ The author must trust the reader.
 - ▶ Read short fiction.

A Short Story Must Be a Complete Reading Experience

- ▶ Target: a single sitting
 - ▶ David Lodge: “We tend to read a short story in a single sitting, drawn along by the magnetic power of its anticipated conclusion; whereas we pick up and put down a novel at irregular intervals, and may be positively sorry to come to the end of it.”
- ▶ Don't have to tie up all loose ends
 - ▶ George Saunders: “One feature of a beautifully ended story is that we can imagine the lives of the characters continuing on beyond it.”
 - ▶ George Saunders: “[Anton] Chekhov once said, ‘Art doesn’t have to solve problems, it only has to formulate them correctly.’ ‘Formulate them correctly’ might be taken to mean: ‘make us feel the problem fully, without denying any part of it.’”
- ▶ Aristotle:
 - ▶ A beginning is that which requires nothing to precede it.
 - ▶ An ending is that which requires nothing to follow it.
 - ▶ A middle needs something before and after it.

Completeness, cont.

- ▶ This suggests a useful technique: Lop off a piece at the end and see if you miss it. Lop off a piece from the beginning and see if you miss it.
 - ▶ (This can help you discover what your story's about, too.)
- ▶ George Saunders: “Experimentally truncate a good story before the point where its creator actually ended it. Just cut it off and observe your reaction to that imposed ending. The resulting feeling will tell us something about what's missing. Or, conversely, about what the remaining text does supply, once we read it, that completes the transformation from “narrative” to “story.”

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Economy (à la George Saunders)

When reading or writing ...

"Everything in it is there for a reason (for the story to make use of) - even a brief description of a road."

"Ruthless Efficiency Principle ... What is the purpose of this town? Why this town, and not another?"

"Our evolving, rather hard-ass model of a story says that every part of it should be there for a reason. ... Every part of the story should be able to withstand this level of scrutiny, **a scrutiny that, we should note, is to be administered generously**, lest our story become too neat and mathematical."

Economy (à la David Lodge)

[Novels and short fiction too ...]

“In a novel names are never neutral. They always signify, if it is only ordinariness.”

“Description in a good novel is never just description.”

“All description in fiction is highly selective; its basic rhetorical technique is synecdoche, the part standing for the whole.”

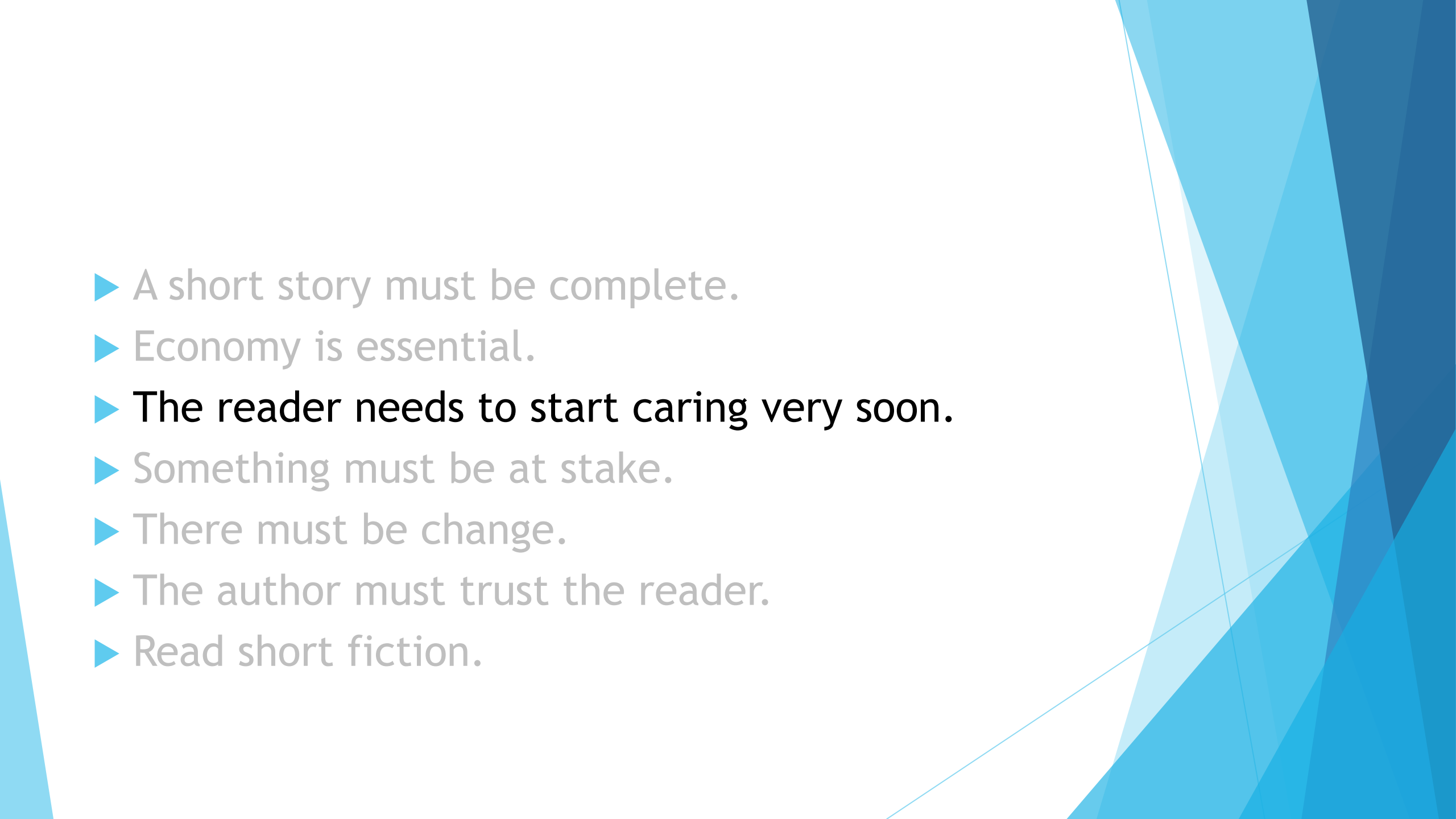
Again: Avoid paralysis

Dan Brotzel:

“You could just start writing — and see what shape starts to emerge. Often voice or idea is far more important than structure in a short story, and you can often retro-fix the shape once you’ve nailed those essential components first.”

George Saunders again:

“[The short story] is not a documentary or rigorous accounting of the passage of time or a fair-minded attempt to show life as it is really lived; it’s a radically shaped ... little machine that thrills us with the extremity of its decisiveness.”

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The Reader Needs to Start Caring About Something Very Soon

- ▶ The reader could care about ...
 - ▶ the main character.
 - ▶ whatever the main character cares about. (Helps to show this early.)
 - ▶ what the author is saying.
 - ▶ the reader herself, in a way or situation which somehow connects to the story.
 - ▶ language, humor, or suspense.
- ▶ Questions to ask when reading or writing a beginning:
 - ▶ What does the reader care about (to keep reading)?
 - ▶ What does the character care about, and how soon do we know?
 - ▶ On the first page, if not sooner - has the character earned what she purports to be? (Pious, awesome, despairing, etc.) It helps the reader care - and keep reading.

(This applies to short fiction too:)

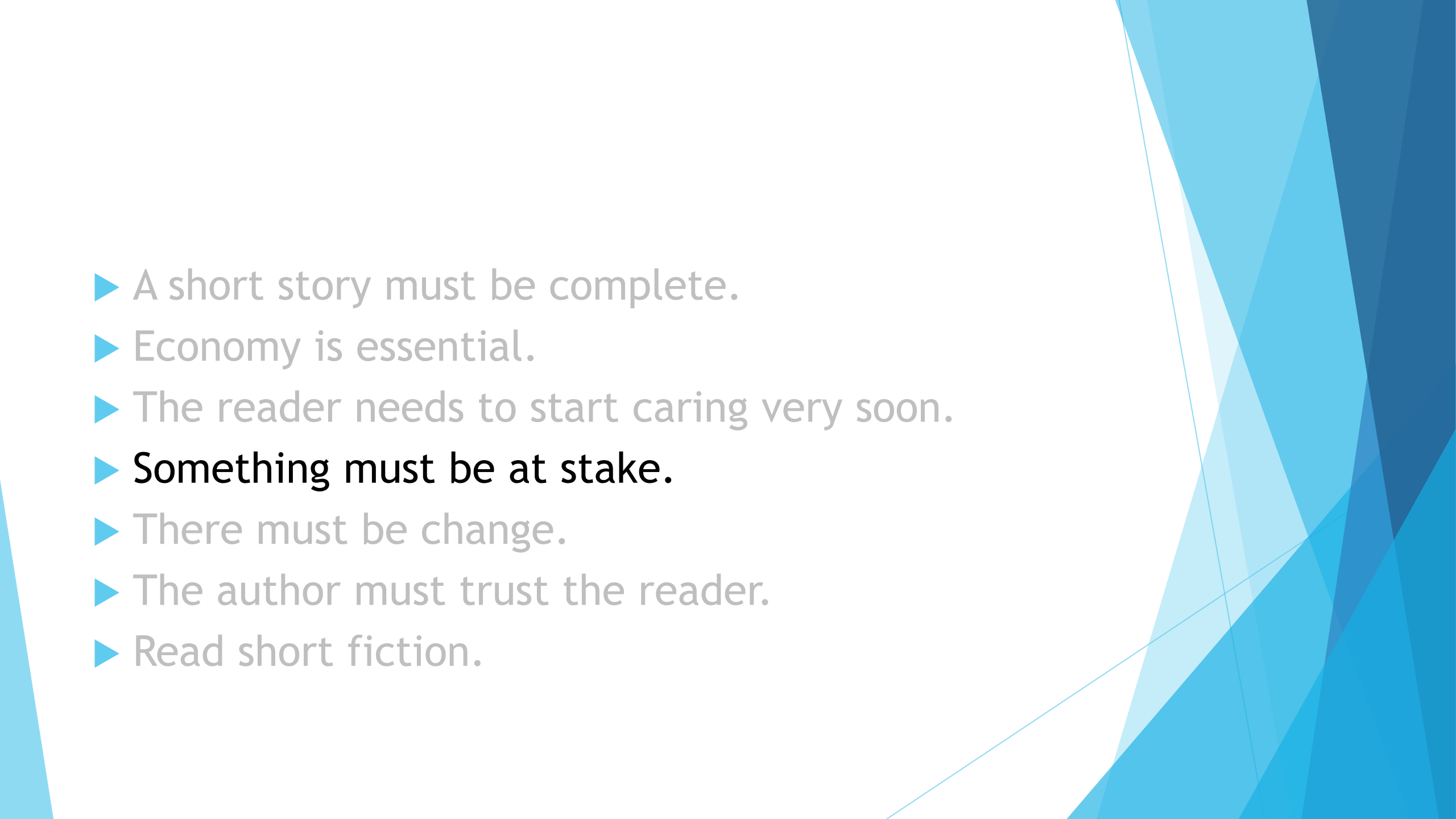
As your novel opens, find something warm and human that your main character cares about. If your story is exotic, choose something we would care about in the here and now. If your story has an ordinary setting, find something about which your protagonist is passionate. Open with this feeling.

Now find in your opening situation something different, odd, curious, puzzling, weird, contradictory, a paradox, hard to explain. Highlight it. Don't pile on more or explain too much too soon. Let the mystery posed or question raised work on your reader for a bit. There's tension in the unknown.

Donald Maass, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, p. 90

Whether flat or multidimensional, minor or central, characters need settings in order to live. A setting can be an actual place, but it is always more than that. Above all, a setting tells what is at issue—what a character is trying to do, what a character fears or is trying to hide, hopes to gain or stands to lose, what a character is up against. Depicting such circumstances and feelings is one way you can get the reader imaginatively involved; something matters to this person on the page, and we can imagine its mattering to us.

Tracy Kidder, *Good Prose*

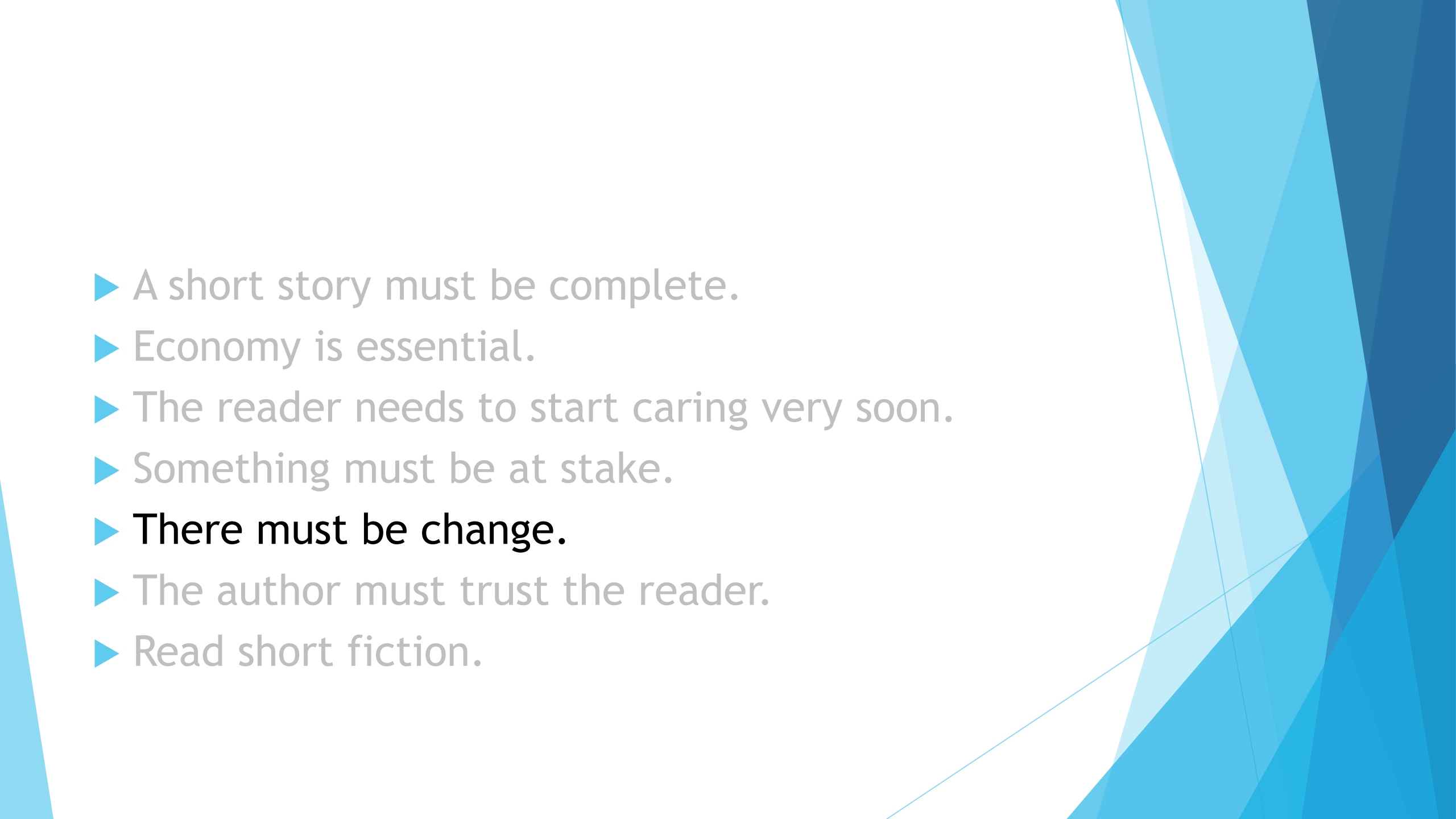
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Something Must Be at Stake

- ▶ At least for the main character
- ▶ Ideally, for the reader

"For a story to have a chance to live, it is essential only that there be something important at stake, a problem that confronts the characters or confronts the reader in trying to understand them. The unfolding of the problem and its resolution are the real payoff. A car chase is not required."

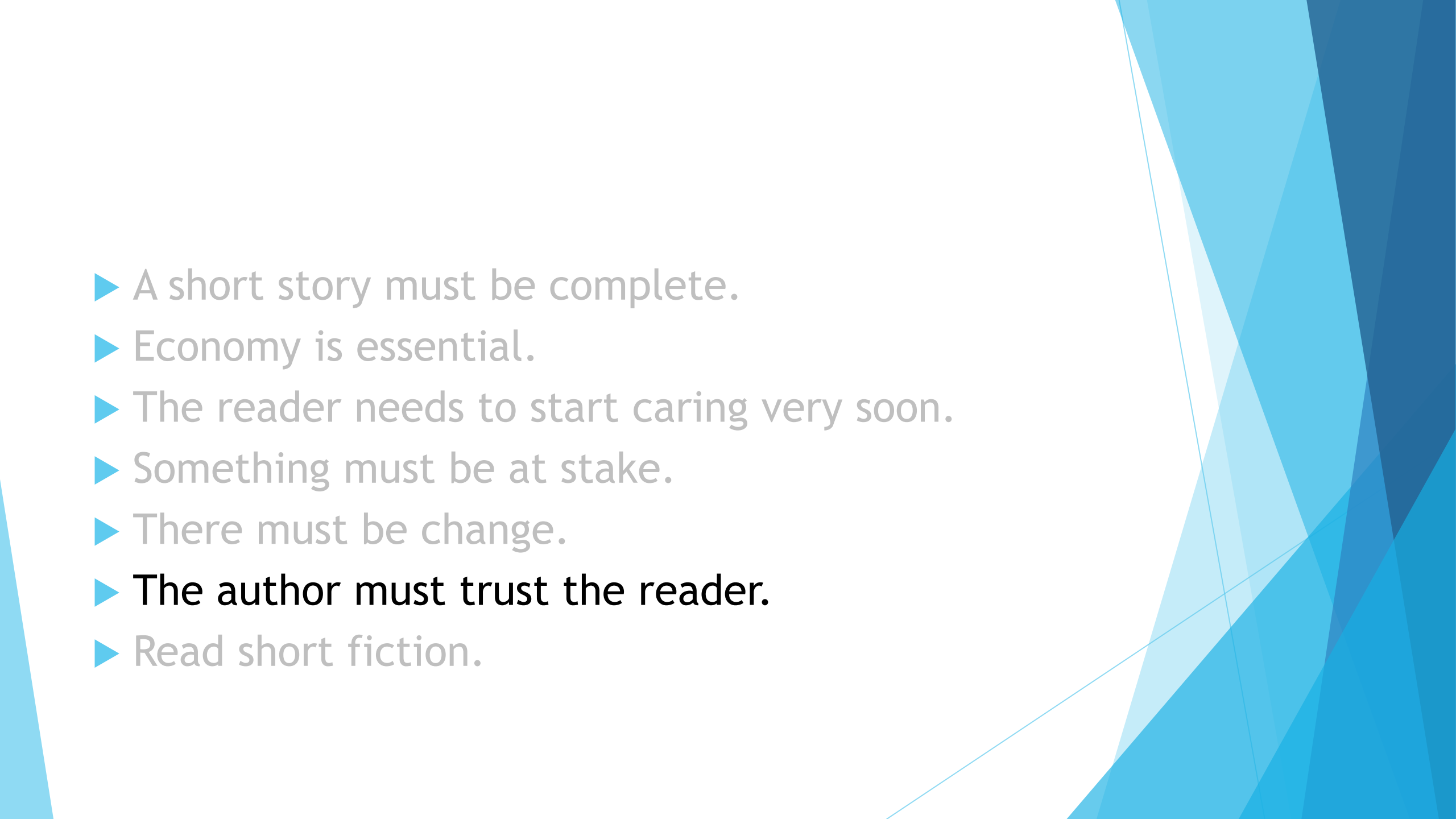
Tracy Kidder

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There Must Be Change

- ▶ There must be a change (not just a slice of life)
 - ▶ Character's circumstances or attitude
 - ▶ If you're a genius writing a masterpiece, it might work to have the only change be in the reader.
- ▶ Patterns are powerful - but there must be change, progress, or at least slight alteration when a pattern recurs.
- ▶ If things finally end where they began, there must be enough promise of change along the way that we're disappointed.

Tracy Kidder: "The heart of the story is usually a place to arrive at, not a place to begin. Of course the reader needs a reason to continue, but the best reason is simply confidence that the writer is going someplace interesting."

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Trust the Reader

- ▶ not to read your mind, but to have a mind and a heart, and to use both.
- ▶ to connect some of the dots
- ▶ to read between the lines
- ▶ to see what you're showing but not saying

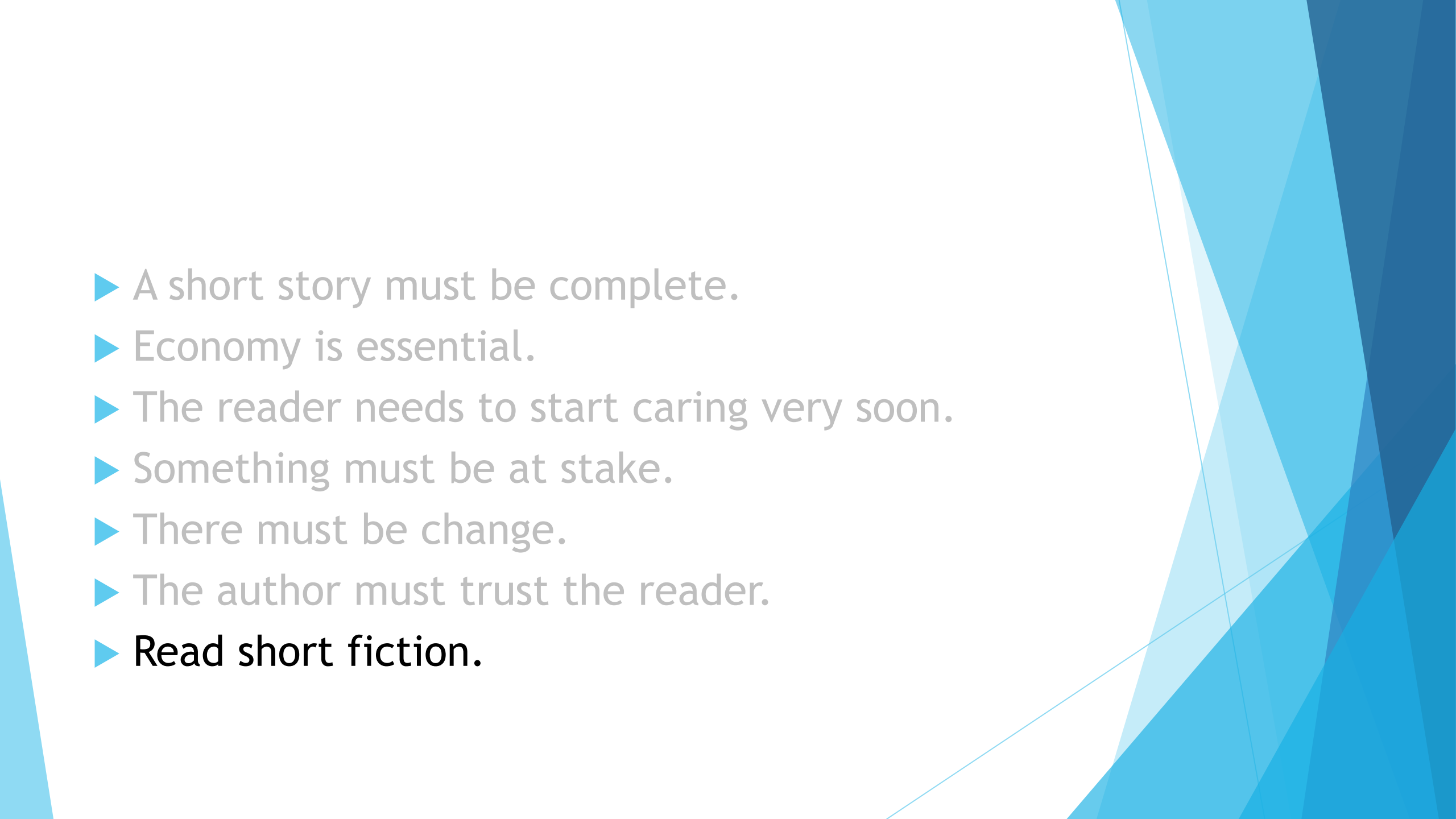
Tracy Kidder: “To write is to talk to strangers. You want them to trust you. You might well begin by trusting them—by imagining for the reader an intelligence at least equal to the intelligence you imagine for yourself.”

George Saunders: “A story is a frank, intimate conversation between equals. We keep reading because we continue to feel respected by the writer. ...The reader is out there, and she's real. She's interested in life and, by picking up our work, has given us the benefit of the doubt. All we have to do is engage her. To engage her, all we have to do is value her.”

Trust the Reader's Imagination (Imagine the Reader's Imagination)

Tracy Kidder:

- ▶ "The goal is to get characters off the page and into the reader's imagination."
- ▶ "One sure way to lose the reader is trying to get down everything you know about a person. What the imaginative reader wants is telling details."
- ▶ "Whether it is brief or lengthy, mere description won't vivify a statue. What we want are essences, woven into a story in moments large and small. A character has a wart. You could describe it in detail, but the reader would probably see it more clearly if you described not the wart but how the character covers it when he's nervous."
- ▶ "Wait for the moment when we need to know her age in order to understand an event in the story. Or, if her age has no narrative importance, slip us the number quietly at the moment when, if you were reading, you would need it for the picture of the woman that is forming in your mind."

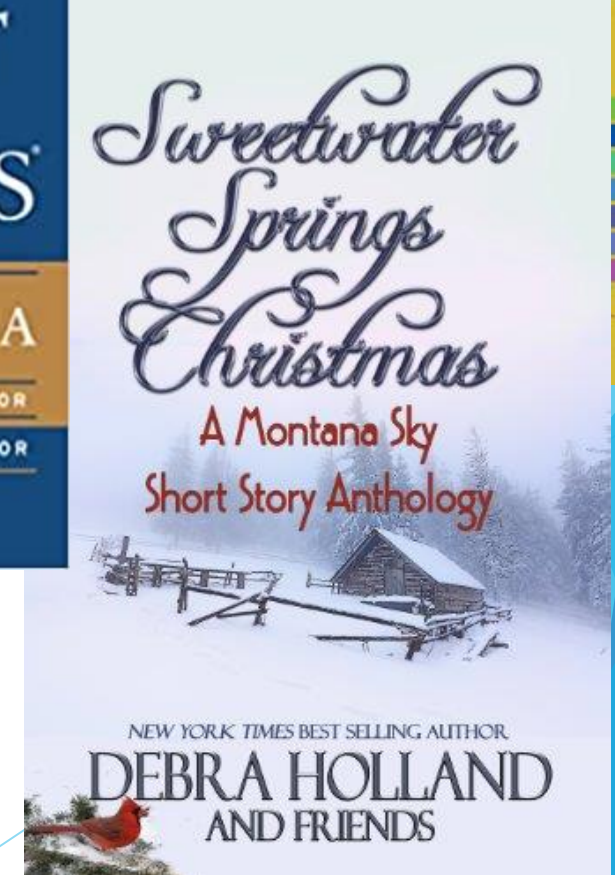
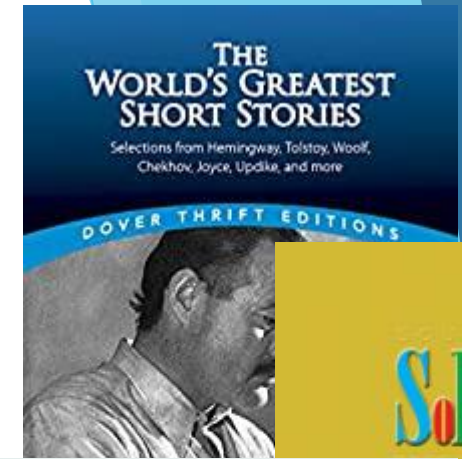
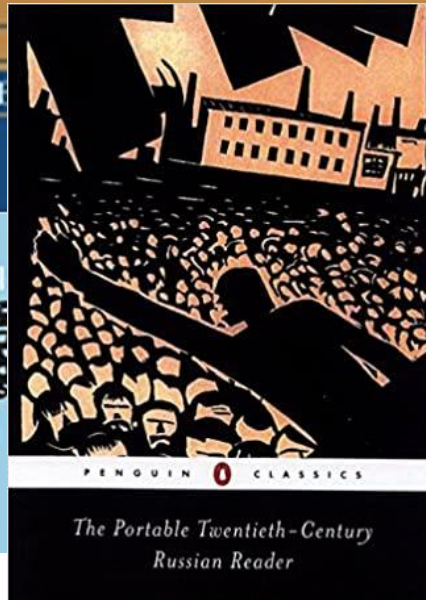
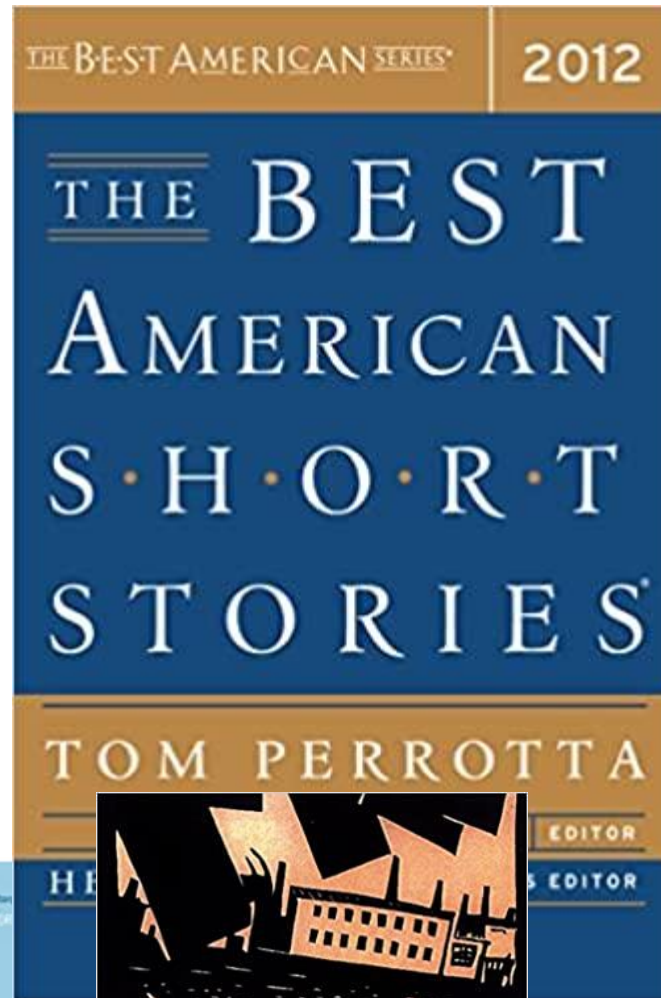
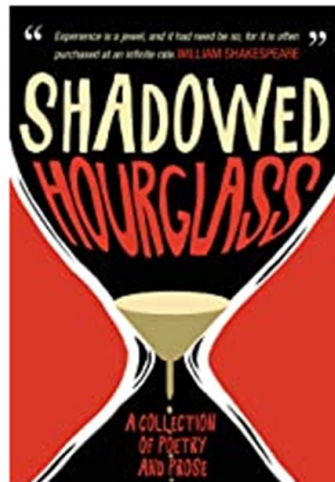
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- ▶ A short story must be complete.
 - ▶ Economy is essential.
 - ▶ The reader needs to start caring very soon.
 - ▶ Something must be at stake.
 - ▶ There must be change.
 - ▶ The author must trust the reader.
 - ▶ **Read short fiction.**

If you're a writer, read a short story at least twice.

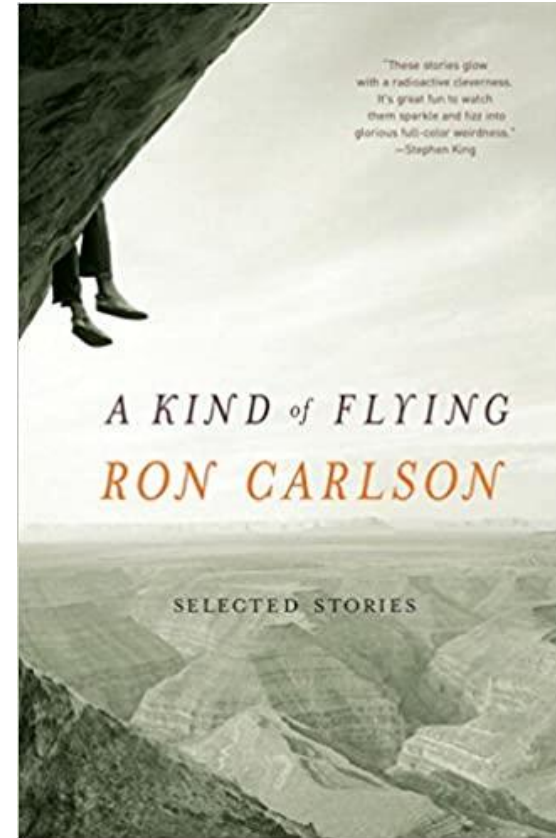
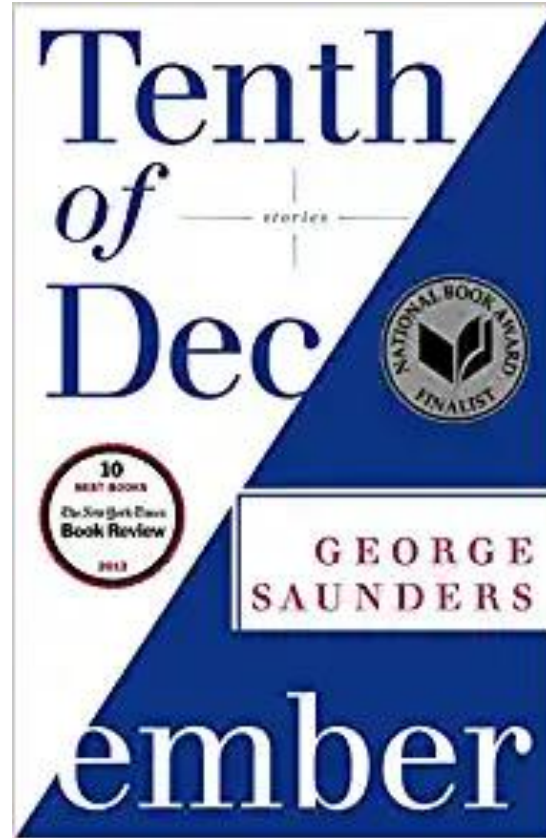
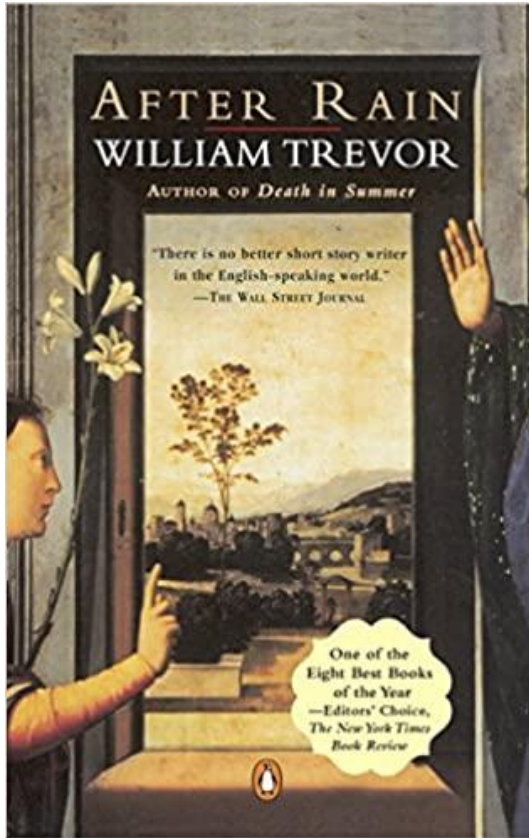
- ▶ At least once to enjoy the story. (Reading as a reader.)
- ▶ At least once more to study the story. (Reading as a writer, or at least a student.)
 - ▶ How does it do what it does to you?
 - ▶ Where, if anywhere, does it fail?
 - ▶ Why does it begin where it begins and end where it ends?
 - ▶ Why does it happen in a train car? Why *that* car? Why *that* train? Why a train on *that* route on *that* day?

Anthologies and Literary Journals

- ▶ By year
- ▶ By genre
- ▶ By theme
- ▶ By setting or author location
- ▶ By ...



Collections (by author)



On the Web

- ▶ Author websites
 - ▶ And newsletters
- ▶ Social platforms like Simily, Medium
 - ▶ Haven't seen a lot of short fiction on WattPad.
- ▶ Publisher websites
 - ▶ Tor.com Original Fiction
- ▶ Classic print magazine websites, e.g. *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, free if you read sparingly, or you can subscribe
- ▶ Online collections
 - ▶ ClassicShorts.com (Classic Short Stories)
 - ▶ Project Gutenberg
- ▶ Podcasts, e.g. LevarBurtonPodcast.com (Levar Burton reads)
- ▶ Many, many more



Recap: The Near-Absolutes

- ▶ A short story must be complete.
- ▶ Economy is essential.
- ▶ The reader needs to start caring very soon.
- ▶ Something must be at stake.
- ▶ There must be change.
- ▶ The author must trust the reader.
- ▶ Read short fiction **(at least twice)**.

V. Some Beginnings (mostly)

“ We want to feel instantly that we are in an interesting place, where interesting things may happen, and that we can trust and enjoy the person who is telling us about them. Ambiguity, cliché, long-windedness, unnecessary cleverness — these can all spell death to a good intro. ”

Dan Brotzel, “How to Write a Short Story”

<https://medium.com/the-book-mechanic/how-to-write-a-short-story-546ddd12ce1d>

“We Must All Hate the Puppy Stomper (A Parable of the Public Square)” (2,000 words)

I, Amanda Louisa Winchell, being of sound mind, pretty good body, and only two weeks from sixth grade graduation, hereby declare that I hate Tobin Balmforth Jones.

I know his full name because I heard him say it once in class, and the trauma of hearing it that day glued it permanently into my brain forever.

Grandma’s Name and Her So-Called Cookies

I have to tell you that Louisa is not my favorite name. My parents got it from my delusional grandmother, who always makes oatmeal cookies when other grandmas make chocolate chip cookies, snickerdoodles, or gingersnaps, which, as everyone knows, is sick and wrong. As far as I’m concerned, she could have kept her name to herself. I only used it just now because sometimes you use your full-full name when you’re incredibly serious, which I am.

- ▶ Character
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?

“Falling off My Shoes” (1,000 words)

When Mr. Bingham asked, “Why did Nixon go to China?” I kept a straight face and raised my hand.

He nodded to me. “Ms. Morgenstern?”

“To make American Chinese food great again?”

Others laughed, but he didn’t. “After class, please. Now, serious answer, anyone?”

I raised my hand. When no one else did, he nodded to me again.

“Why am I in trouble, but Mark isn’t? His jokes haven’t even been funny lately.” I knew the reason. Mark Williams was the teacher’s pet.

Morons hooted behind me. Bingham pursed his lips. “Everyone, Monday will now feature a quiz. Fifty words on the significance of Nixon in China.”

The class groaned. A nearby jock said, “Thanks a lot, S&M.” That was their nasty nickname for me, Sandra Morgenstern – because, obviously, initials.

- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“Clipped” (1,000 words)

One barber chair, occupied (by me). One spare, empty. Mirrors everywhere. A damp hair smell, but not hair products; this isn't a salon. Freshly cut hair on the floor in several hues, mostly white and gray.

Three old guys in padded chairs, waiting. Three identical chairs, empty. No news or sports playing; the four-foot thinscreen on the wall is broken. Its replacement is in the corner, still rolled up in its long, thin Featherwrap™ shipping tube after more than a month.

A fake fireplace, turned off. Fake wood fires seem pointless, when people scarcely remember real ones. A coat rack by the door: two jackets, no hats, one umbrella.

Main Street in the window. Countless e-cars, humming softly as they zoom past, beyond the well-worn sidewalk. A pothole repair robot-truck along the opposite curb, groaning, thumping, gasping, steaming.

A table with magazines, mostly *Time: Heritage Edition*. Nearly everything else went out of print, what, thirty years ago?

- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What's at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“Clipped” (cont.)

The shop is a comfortable place to hear low-grade gossip and escape the grind. It's a dubious setting for making major life decisions, even if this haircut will serve fresh goals and new purposes. And even if you and the barber are both divorced, about the same age, and she's cute.

It's a particularly awful place for learning that major life decisions have been made for you. That should happen someplace harsh and sterile. A hospital room. A supervisor's office. The dining room table, when the kids are upstairs with their VR, and your wife sits down with a sigh – but too little emotion – and says it's not working for her. Hasn't for a long time. And it's over.

- ▶ Audience
- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What's at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“I Made Muffins” (2,000 words)

What would you say if you were standing at the front door of a nice guy you just met, and it was 6 a.m. and still dark, and you were delivering fresh baked goods he wasn't expecting, but you hadn't rung his doorbell yet because you hadn't figured out what to say, and he opened the door and found you there?

- ▶ Audience
- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What's at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“Rhonda VII” (9,800 words)

What I wanted to say was, “I’m a football player, not a popsicle.” What I said was, “This is what you want us to wear to the Homecoming dance?”

School had been out for half an hour, when Haylee pulled me into a short, dead-end hallway to talk about formal wear. I stared at her phone in my hand. The disaster she was planning filled the screen.

- ▶ Audience
- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“Wildfire” (5,000 words)

Getting to Maylee’s going-away party at all was a thing. My cousin Jaxson and I took a state highway into the country and turned onto a small road, then a smaller road, then one that rattled my teeth and wasn’t even paved. I didn’t complain. Jaxson was a nice guy, but he’d just call me a city girl again.

Just past a farmhouse and a dark cluster of outbuildings, we turned onto a trail around the edge of a field. We were eight miles from town, he said. It felt like fifty.

The bumps on the trail were bigger but fewer than on the road. Jaxson drove cautiously, except where a leaking irrigation line had flooded the trail. We sailed through that swamp at reckless speed, so we wouldn’t get stuck.

“I love doing that,” he said.

I considered prying my white-knuckled hands from the center armrest and the handle above my door. Maybe not yet.

- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
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“Wildfire” (cont.)

The trail cut away from the field, and the headlights probed an unearthly scene – broken, jagged, black lava, with scattered, stunted brush and forlorn tufts of grass that wasn’t green.

Jackrabbits scampered across our path, then a fatter, lumbering thing. A groundhog, maybe. I didn’t ask.

Miles later, or maybe a hundred yards, another field opened before us, nestled among the lava. It looked like grass – green, this time – but he guessed it was wheat or barley. The headlights didn’t reach across it.

We parked with other muddy vehicles in a sort of grassy cove, with no lava but no grain planted either. We’d walk along the edge of the field, he said, to another cove with a fire and some old logs for seating. He’d been here before.

Thick clouds hid the stars, and there was no moon. Darkness was never this black in the city.

- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
- ▶ What senses are engaged?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“Wildfire” (cont.)

[toward the middle]

What made me a heathen – but Jaxson didn’t know, or he’d try endlessly to talk me out of it – was that I no longer believed in any deity or other mystical force (including karma and true love) that hid itself from science, demanded faith in unknowable mysteries, and required obedience based merely on a feeling. I believed in what I could see or at least measure.

Mom and Dad had said I could make decisions like that for myself, once I finished high school. So I’d gone to Sunday Mass with them once more, before graduating last week. Now, as far as I was concerned, I wasn’t Catholic or any other kind of superstitious anymore.

- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

“There Might Be Another Way” (5,000 words)

Pia had slept as late as she dared on a Sunday. She slipped into a pew halfway up the right side of the chapel just as the bishop stepped to the pulpit to begin the weekly sacrament meeting. She’d looked almost human in the mirror before leaving home, which was pretty good, considering.

She listened conscientiously to the announcements, which had little to do with her, then sang the opening hymn, “Jehovah, Lord of Heaven and Earth,” with as much of her usual fervor as she could muster. Her focus drifted during the brief invocation by one of her neighbors. It drifted further during some quick items of congregation business. But she managed to keep trying, at least, to ponder the Savior and his sacrifice, as the deacons passed the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to the congregation. Everyone at church called the bread and water simply “the sacrament,” but in the privacy of her own thoughts she preferred the more solemn and evocative phrase.

The bishop announced the first speakers, a girl of about fourteen and an old man she’d seen on Sundays but didn’t know, and she drifted away again. She flipped to the Notes app on her smart phone, where she’d composed a sort of letter in the wee, desperate hours – a letter full of things she could never say or send to Doug, her back fence neighbor.

- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
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“There Might Be Another Way” (cont.)

She saw him in his usual place, across the chapel, sitting alone, one row further back, in a heather gray suit (her favorite) and a gorgeous green necktie. She tried to envision him sitting with a wife, when he had one, but she didn't know him then, and she'd never seen his ex.

She should have entered the chapel from the other side, even if it took half a minute longer to get to the other door. She could have asked to share his pew. He'd have agreed, of course – and she'd have been no more distracted than now. She should have left for church a minute earlier.

Doug's posture was attentive, but she recognized the expression of a man who was somewhere else. He often looked like that, though not when he was teaching the adult Sunday school class or chatting with her afterward, and usually not in their occasional conversations over their common fence.

What she'd written overnight, as if to him, was unthinkable, but she couldn't resist reading it again.

- ▶ Genre
- ▶ Character
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What's at stake?
- ▶ Does the reader have anything to care about or enjoy yet?
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“There Might Be Another Way” (later)

Her internal organs quaked, but she spoke the words that came to her mind.

“There might be another way.” Her voice quaked too, and he looked concerned. “There is another way you could approach this.”

“Better than advertising myself at Please-God-Help-Me-I-Am-So-Lonely-dot-com?”

She liked gallows humor, but she couldn’t laugh. “I think it’s better.” She hesitated. “You may not agree.”

“Tell me,” he said. “Please.”

She nodded slightly. “Since you said ‘please’ ...” Her pulse pounded in her ears. She pushed the crucial words out quickly, before she could falter. “You could just forget all this online stuff and fall in love with me instead.”

EDITOR: She’s already putting herself out there – I think using the “I” word would be putting herself out there too much. More than most women would do.

... “You could just forget all this online stuff and date me instead.”

AUTHOR: I tried it. I liked it.

- ▶ Character
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ What does the character want or care about?
- ▶ What’s at stake?
- ▶ Are we trusting the reader?

VI. Q and A

VII. Beef-Barley Soup for the Writer's Tortured Soul

If it's difficult, you're probably
doing it right.

Ann Patchett



I reach up and pluck the butterfly from the air. I take it from the region of my head and I press it down against my desk, and there, with my own hand, I kill it. It's not that I want to kill it, but it's the only way I can get something that is so three-dimensional onto the flat page. Just to make sure the job is done I stick it into place with a pin.

Imagine running over a butterfly with an SUV. Everything that was beautiful about this living thing — all the color, the light and movement — is gone. What I'm left with is the dry husk of my friend, the broken body chipped, dismantled, and poorly reassembled. Dead. That's my book.

Still Ann Patchett

We all have ideas, sometimes good ones, not to mention the gift of emotional turmoil that every childhood provides. In short, the story is in us, and all we have to do is sit there and write it down.

But it's right about there, right about when we sit down to write that story, that things fall apart.

Writing must not be compartmentalized. You don't step out of the stream of your life to do your work. Work was the life, and who you were as a mother, teacher, friend, citizen, activist, and artist was all the same person. People like to ask me if writing can be taught, and I say yes. I can teach you how to write a better sentence, how to write dialogue, maybe even how to construct a plot. But I can't teach you how to have something to say.

From Ann Patchett's "The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir about Writing and Life," in This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage (New York: Harper, 2013, pp. 19-60)

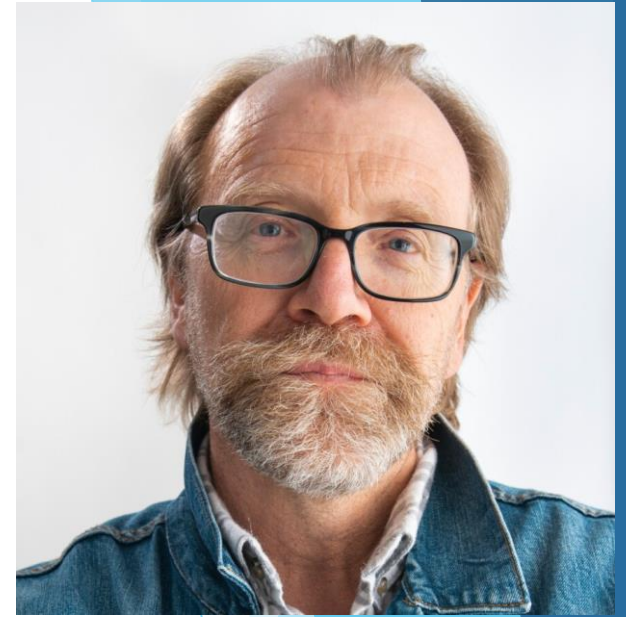
George Saunders

To write a story that works, that moves the reader, is difficult, and most of us can't do it. Even among those who have done it, it mostly can't be done. And it can't be done from a position of total control, of flawless mastery, of simply having an intention and then knowingly executing it. There's intuition involved, and stretching - trying things that are at the limit of our abilities, that may cause mistakes. ... The writer has to risk a crackling voice and surrender to his actual power, his doubts notwithstanding. ...

It's hard to get any beauty at all into a story. If and when we do, it might not be the type of beauty we've always dreamed of making. But we have to take whatever beauty we can get, however we can get it.

[Analyzing Tolstoy's "Master and Man" ...] That's the kind of story I want to write, the kind that stops being writing and starts being life.

But, Lord, it's harder than it looks.



Still George Saunders

This is a big moment for any artist (this moment of combined triumph and disappointment), when we have to decide whether to accept a work of art that we have to admit we weren't in control of as we made it and which we're not entirely sure we approve. It is less, less than we wanted it to be, and yet it's more, too - it's small and a bit pathetic, judged against the work of the great masters, but there it is, all ours.

As Bob Wylie learned, Baby Steps



George Saunders again, on incremental improvement

The difference between a sentence that is pleasing (that feels vivid and truthful and undeniable) and compels the reader to read the next, and one that displeases her and shoots her out of the story is - well, I find I can't complete that sentence, not in any general way. And I don't need to. To be a writer, I only need to read a specific sentence of mine, in its particular context, on a given day, pencil in hand, changing the sentence as it occurs to me to do so.

Then do that again, over and over, until I'm pleased.

Still George Saunders

[After Chekhov “denied himself the obvious, expected source of resolution” in a particular short story ...]

This is an important storytelling move we might call “ritual banality avoidance.” If we deny ourselves the crappo version of our story, a better version will (we aspirationally assume) present itself. To refuse to do the crappo thing is to strike a de facto blow for quality. (If nothing else, at least we haven’t done *that*.)

One more George Saunders slide

(“You” = the reader. “I” = the author. “There” is a story.)

“What’s going to happen to me in there?” you ask.

“I really don’t know,” I say, “but I promise I’ve done my best to make it thrilling and non-trivial.”

“Will there be any joy in there?” you ask.

“Well, I hope so,” I say. “I mean that’s what I was trying to feel as I made it, so ...”



VII. This Guy Thanks You!

Everything-but-politics blog/website (my fiction, newsletter sign-up):

<https://www.bendablelight.com/david-rodeback-fiction/>

Facebook author page (like or follow):

<https://www.facebook.com/authorDavidRodeback/>

Medium (follow, read fiction):

<https://medium.com/@davidrodeback>

Simily (follow, read fiction):

<https://simily.co/members/davidrodeback/>

Amazon Author Page (follow, buy stuff):

<https://www.amazon.com/David-Rodeback/e/B09MY5CM7M/>

E-mail: author@davidrodeback.com

Handout, etc.: <https://www.bendablelight.com/writing-resources>