

## FLASH FICTION HINTS AND TIPS

The great joy of flash fiction is, because there is no room for world building, the stories must be character led. This means you can set your characters anywhere you like in time or space. The only thing you're watching is the word count, which has to be a maximum of 1000 words.

Beyond that you are into short story territory. The good news with flash fiction is you can select from a wide range up to that upper limit - 25 words, 50, 75, 100, 250 etc. There are competitions and markets to suit the different ranges too.

Flash fiction must be a story complete in and of itself with a proper beginning, middle, and end. (It isn't chopped prose!). It encourages the reader to think for themselves and fill in those gaps you as the writer simply didn't have space for. Inference is important.



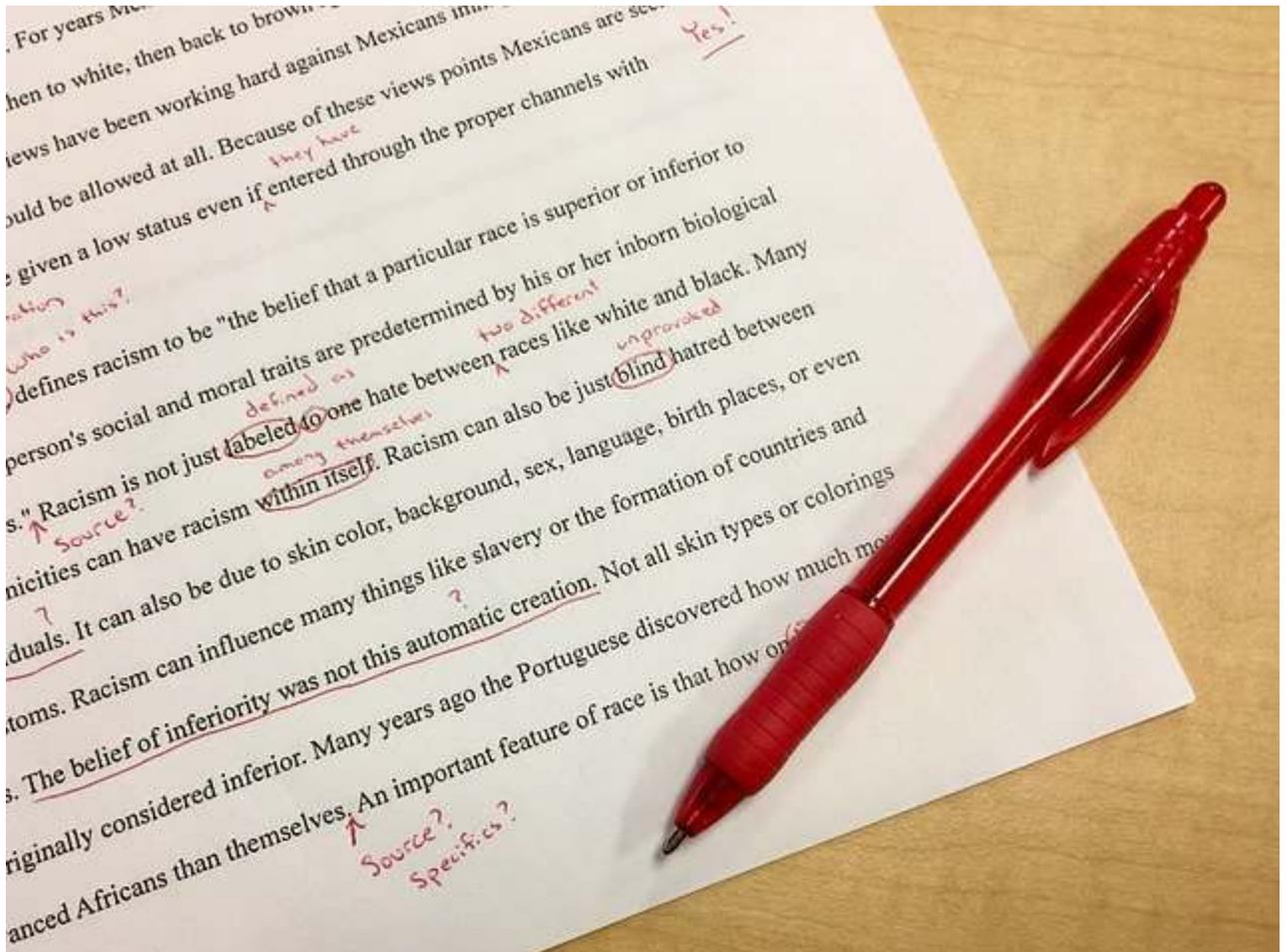
**Flash fiction should have a powerful impact despite its restricted word count.**

The hints and tips I've found most useful for writing flash fiction include:-

1. **Impact.** Think of the impact your story will have on your reader. Every word must punch its weight and help you achieve that.

2. **Editing.** Flash fiction pieces need honing, every bit as much as longer fiction does. Take your time and always put work aside for a while before re-reading it. I've picked things up on a piece of work whenever I've come back to it after a break. Look for wasted words such as "very", "actually" and "that". Words like that actually contribute very little to your story so they can be the first to be cut!

3. **Using Thoughts.** This is a great way to get right inside your lead character's head. From there you can show your readers their world and their attitude too. Showing attitude can be a good shortcut to revealing more about what that character is like. A stropy attitude, for example, tells you a lot in itself!



**A familiar sight to us all! Flash may be short but it still needs good editing.**

4. **Characters.** How many you have in a piece of flash fiction depends on whether you are writing a 50-story or a 500-word one, but a good general principle is have 1-2 characters in the story and no more. You can imply the existence of others though. That helps give a sense of the world you've created, even though you and your reader won't be in it for long.

5. **Kill the Adverbs.** Forget "he ran quickly". What you want is "he sped" or "he raced". Stronger images and one less word too. Dropping words like that will soon make a huge difference to your word count. You will find doing this tightens up the pace of your tale as well.

6. **Only put in what your reader absolutely has to know.** Sounds obvious I know but it is so easy to put in extra material, which is lovely to read, but does nothing to move the story forward. Particularly

in flash fiction, there is no room for that. Look at this material separately. Can you get another story out of it perhaps?



**Focus on what your readers need to know. (The Hollywood dream can come later!).**

**7. Don't go for the first idea, especially if writing to a set theme.** Why? Because 99% of other writers will think of that same idea, or close to it. I find using things like spider diagrams can help me work out what ideas can come out of the theme, helps me to think outside the box, and instead of opting for Obvious Choice A, I end up with less obvious choice B, which still meets the needs of the theme. It is worth taking time to work out different ideas and do go for the one you like best. You will love writing it. That will show in your writing. You are trying to reach out to your readers via your stories. The sense of enjoyment by the writer is contagious!

**8. Read your work out loud.** This applies for any fiction but reading your work out loud is a great way to double check if your narrative flows as smoothly as you think. It is also a great check for dialogue. If you trip over words, so will your reader, and that will break their enjoyment of your story. I sometimes record myself reading work out and play it back. Coming to the work as a listener can help give the necessary distance to be able to assess your work before submitting it anywhere.

9. **Ending with a punch.** Flash fiction is ideal for twist in the tale endings as they bring the story to a definite conclusion and leave your reader on a high note, hopefully looking forward to reading your next piece.



Well, **DOES** your story have the impact you want it to have?

10. **Have fun with the form.** Experiment. Flash can be written in the form of poems as well as “straight prose”.

11. **Competitions and Markets.** The great news is there are so many competitions and markets out there now for flash fiction. The Bridport Prize, for example, now has flash fiction as a specific competition entry. *Writing Magazine* has an annual 750 word story (still counts as flash!). There are online magazines such as Cafelit and Paragraph Planet. (Many of these sites put new stories up daily so they are always hungry for new material. You won’t get paid but you do get your name out there and build up your profile, which is always worth bearing in mind).

12. **Writing Exercise.** Even if you never plan to write flash fiction and submit it anywhere, I think it still pays to try it. Given the word count restriction, it can make a great writing exercise before you settle down to write your main work. It also means on those days when you have not had time to write much, you still write *something*. If you’re a fan of free writing, then flash fiction gives you the

chance to take what you've written here and turn it into something that can go to a paying market! Waste nothing...



**Whatever you write, try flash fiction. It helps with all sorts of writing given it teaches you so much about editing and we all need that.**

13. **Rewards.** The problem with writing novels is they obviously take a long time to produce and get out there. What you can do is work on shorter fiction such as flash and get work submitted there, as you tackle your main work too. You can build up publishing credits while you are getting your novel ready for submission to publishers/agents. A thought worth bearing in mind I think.

14. **Titles.** I find it useful to have a working title from the outset as a “peg” for my story but I will change it should a better title come up as I’m writing (and it does sometimes). Nothing is set in stone here. Be open to playing with titles. Proverbs, well known sayings etc, can be a good starting point but they’re even more fun if you put your own twist on them. For example, I turned a phrase punish the guilty into a story called *Punish the Innocent*. (The idea here of course is to hook the reader into wanting to find out more. Why would you punish someone innocent? Are they as innocent as all that? Etc etc).

As with all forms of writing, practice makes well not exactly perfect, we’ll never achieve that (who decides what is perfect in writing anyway?) but you will get better!

**Ends.**

**Allison Symes - April 2020**