

SHORT-STORY PROMPTS FOR YOUNG WRITERS

From one of our Writing Judges, Tilda Johnson

Short stories sometimes focus on a particular moment or happen within a very short space of time. These are often moments of change – whether that’s a change in the world around a character or an emotional change or realisation within them.

Starting with a blank page is hard, whatever you are writing! Most professional writers get their ideas from their own preoccupations and from things they come across in life which simply interest them or spark their imagination.

Always remember, you don’t have to share what you write with anyone, but you may want to look back over your writing and ask yourself questions: What do you like in your ideas, content-wise and in writing style? Are there elements which crop up more than once, or which you’d like to explore further?

Here are some ideas to start you off, so jump in and have some fun – you may be surprised what you come up with. Try writing for 10 minutes a day...

FOCUS ON A PARTICULAR MOMENT IN TIME

Can you write about a moment of change you experienced recently? It might be something external – i.e. the arrival of snow and the effect this had – or a more personal emotional change, or change involving someone close to you.

USING SENSORY STIMULATION TO WRITE

SEE: Use art and photography as inspiration for your characters, setting and stories. If you can, go to a gallery, otherwise you can easily use books or websites to find images that interest you. News photography can be a great place to start:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/categories/photos-of-the-week/>

Which person or character draws your attention in the picture you’ve chosen? What can you tell about them? Really look at the image, and refer back to it when you run out of ideas. What is happening in that moment? Can you write a story that includes it somehow? Your story might happen later that same day, after the image has been taken, or be building up to that moment. Or this image/action might be in the background of your story, it might even be something that your character sees on the news. If so, how does it affect them?

HEAR: Try writing to music. Pieces that are 5-10 minutes long work well, or you can set a timer, minimum 5 minutes. Begin with a blank page, start writing and don’t stop until your time is up. Music without lyrics can be the easiest to write to – so try some electronic music, a film soundtrack or even some orchestral music. Write about how it makes you feel. Does it conjure up images? Memories? Places?

SMELL: Write about your favourite smell. When was the last time you smelled it? What was happening, who was there, what time of day was it? How were you feeling?

TOUCH: Find an object from your bedroom – it could be a book, a speaker, an old toy, anything – and write about where you imagine it might be in 5, 10 or 50 years from now. What does it feel like? Rough? Furry? What is it made of? What will have changed about it over time? Whose bedroom will it be in then? Or might it be somewhere else entirely? If it's a useable object, is it still being used in the same way? If it's something you treasure, will you still treasure it as much then? If you've jumped forwards a number of years, what does the world look like now? Does your object have the same use? What has happened to it?

TASTE: Choose someone you know well and think about where they were or will be at lunchtime today. Write it as a scene, as if you're in the room with them but you can glimpse their thoughts and see through their eyes. What did they eat? What was on their mind? What is happening around them? What's their mood at the start of the scene and has it changed by the end, or does it change briefly?

MAKE IT REAL: Use your senses to prompt and aid your writing, but don't forget to use them in your description too – visceral description is important in short stories, to help bring the reader right into your world as quickly as possible.

IDEAS FOR FUN / PLAYING AROUND TO FIND INSPIRATION FOR YOUR STORY

FIRST LINES FROM BOOKS to start you off or find your own:

'Some stories are hard to tell. Even to your best friend.'

'Welcome to the beautiful Sinclair family.'

'I always thought the moment you met the great love of your life would be more like the movies.'

CHAT UP LINES Write down the worst pick-up line you know, or choose from one of the below.

"Get your coat; you've pulled."

"Hi, I'm Mr Right – somebody said you were looking for me?"

"Do you have a map? I keep getting lost in your eyes."

Now use it either to kick off a new piece of writing or start one of your own and use one of these lines at some point during the story. Even at the end!

A LIST OF WORDS Close your eyes and quickly write down **four random adjectives** (words to describe a thing or object – i.e. red, prickly).

Now do the same and write down **three nouns** (things or objects, i.e. banana, windshield).

Now write **two verbs** ('doing' words, i.e. scratch, stretch)

Lastly, **one adverb** (a word which describes how you do the verb – i.e. grumpily, formally).

You have to use all **ten words** in your next piece.

ADVERTS Write a short advert for a year-old bear cub. Below this, write a story explaining why the owners are selling it. You can find adverts in newspapers, magazines, online.

RANDOM WRITING PROMPTS: Worst outfit ever. What is in the box? 'There's no smoke without fire.' 'Are you really eating that?'

MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT

Short stories are like poetry in that, because of the length, everything you include has to really earn its place. Every word, description, action, character, object or place has to have meaning. Everything you choose to include must have a reason to be there.

For example: Think about what **clothes** a character might be wearing – are they comfortable, hot/cold, appropriate? What the **weather** is like, what effect does this have? You can use everything in the story to help build the right emotion and atmosphere – whether that is awkward, hopeful, irritating . . . Is it **relevant** to let the reader know what they have just been doing, or what they are anticipating or about to do next?

i.e. Think about a waiting room at the doctor's. Everyone may be sitting quietly, but are they nervous, uncomfortable, bored? How does this show itself? Why are they there? What's running through their head? What can they see/hear/smell/taste/touch?

The clue's in the name – **SHORT STORY!** They're short, so be selective about what you show the reader. Be ruthless.

Where to Cut: If you want to cut a scene off and jump into another moment elsewhere in time or space, go for it!

Try Switching: You could also stay in the same scene and switch perspective – i.e. show us a scene from two different perspectives, like in PEEP SHOW.

DON'T HIDE, BE YOU: Use your voice and unique perspective on the world. Let your humour out, even if the story you're writing isn't a comedy. Let's see your view on your world.

Tilda Johnson worked at David Fickling Books and Penguin Random House Children's before joining Hot Key Books and Piccadilly Press as Senior Commissioning Editor where she acquired, edited and published a range of children's and YA fiction. Since relocating to Manchester in 2017, Tilda has been working as a freelance editor and has launched Golden Egg Academy North, which offers courses and editorial support to children's and YA writers.