A Quick Guide to Short Stories

1. Purpose: Why write a short story?
   - Why is the story that you are telling suited to this form?
     - Why not write a play or a poem instead?
     - What advantages does the form of a short story give you?
   - Your short story, like all good narratives, should have conflict and resolution.
     - What is the problem? How do your characters’ desires clash with the desires of other characters?
     - Good resolutions typically take one of two forms. Either the character/reader realizes that everything will change or the character/reader realizes that nothing will change.

2. Central Idea/Question
   - What is the idea or question that you are addressing in your story?
     - What question do you want the reader to ask? What do you want the reader to realize?
   - What is your short story really about?
     - Harry Potter is about a boy who goes to wizard school and has lots of adventures. But Harry Potter is really about the difference between good and evil.
   - This central idea/question should inform all the choices that you make while writing and revising your story.

3. Points of View and Tenses
   - We choose to tell a story from a particular perspective because it will further the ideas or questions we are addressing in our piece.
   - Points of View:
     - 1st person (I): usually seen as very personal, but frequently these narrators can be unreliable, or they offer a very limited perspective on a larger story (which the reader then has to work out from the given narrative)
     - 2nd person (you): hard to do well, not recommended unless it actually works thematically with the content of the piece
     - 3rd person limited (he/she/they but from the perspective of the character(s)): probably the most common storytelling voice (ex: Harry Potter), can flip between different characters, allows for greater narrative agency while still maintaining a limited perspective
     - 3rd person omniscient (he/she/they from the perspective of the all-knowing narrator): hard to do well and maintain any kind of narrative suspense, quite uncommon
   - Tenses:
     - past (very common): suggests reflection, a fixedness of events
     - present (becoming more common): suggests immediacy, unpredictability
     - future (very unusual)

4. Setting: Where are we? Why?
   - Every narrative is set somewhere, and this setting informs your overarching story, its larger ideas, and how characters act within that space.
   - How can your setting further the ideas or questions you are trying to put forward?
     - What kind of story would you set in an apartment building in downtown? What kind of story would you set on a deserted mountain road? What would these stories really be about?
5. Character: Who are these people?
- What does each character want? What lies underneath all their actions – consciously or unconsciously?
- How do these underlying desires affect the character’s behavior? What are they going to think is important? What will they comment on? What will interest or worry them?
  o You ask three different people to describe a painting. The first describes the way the painting was created—the paint, the colors, the use of light and dark. The second describes the content of the painting—the story being shown or how it makes them feel. The third takes one look at the painting, turns to you, and says, “It’s crooked.”
  o Different people see different things based on their personality and what they think is most important.
- Is each character supposed to be sympathetic? Unsympathetic? A mixture of the two?

6. Voice: How does each person sound?
- The first rule of dialogue is that people rarely say exactly what they mean.
  o As Futurama puts it: “You can’t just have your characters announce how they feel! That makes me feel angry!”
  o Don’t have your character tell us how they are feeling. Rather, have them show us through their actions, how they speak, what they speak about.
  o Usually we are only entirely truthful with ourselves during moments of crisis or disillusionment – and those moments will be all the more powerful because of that honesty.
- Make sure the voice fits its setting (time period and location). Keep in mind the influences of things like gender and class on the way that people speak.
- Try reading it out loud to make sure it sounds like real speech. If you stumble or if it feels false, try to make it feel more natural, more conversational.
- Remember that dialogue isn’t just what we say, but also what we do while we say things.
  o “Good morning!” she said, smiling and kissing him on the cheek.
  o “Good morning!” she said, slamming the bowl of pancake batter onto the counter.

7. Punctuating Dialogue
- Basic Rule: Keep your punctuation inside the quotation marks. If you’re unsure of what to do, open a book.
- Dialogue tag preceding: He said, “I think I might buy this incredibly overpriced Batman costume.”
- Dialogue tag following, with additional dialogue after: “Wow,” she said. “I think you’re making the right decision there.”
- Dialogue tag sandwich (interrupting the full sentence): “Well,” he said, “there’s no reason to get sarcastic about it.”
- Dialogue with ellipses: “I mean… if you really think so…”

8. Condensation
- Short stories are short for a reason! Make sure everything in them is there for a purpose.
- Sometimes a strong story is obscured by unnecessary additions that distract from its core ideas. Are there any unnecessary characters or scenes that you could cut?