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Editors' tips for getting your short stories published

Knowing what editors are looking for can increase your chances of getting your stories published.

By Kerrie Flanagan | Published: August 29, 2016



Write short. Write tight. That's the mantra for getting published in anthologies, literary journals and magazines – and it's a fantastic way to strengthen writing skills and build publishing credentials. Many publications are on the lookout for well-written short pieces, and knowing what they are specifically looking for can increase your chances of landing an assignment.

Make your story stand out

Short personal stories are the mainstay for publications such as *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and *Brevity*. With more than 250 titles, the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series has sold more than 110 million copies in the U.S. and Canada and more than 500 million worldwide, making it the best-selling trade paperback series of all time.

Amy Newmark, publisher and editor-in-chief, believes the books are still so popular because storytelling has always been a favorite way to share wisdom. "We all turn to people who have already 'been there, done that' when we need support, encouragement or tips," she says.

To make your story stand out, pretend you are telling it to a good friend, sharing your best advice and explaining how you felt during the experience, suggests Newmark. Forget what your teachers told you in seventh grade. "Don't start with an introductory paragraph about what you're going to tell us and conclude with a paragraph telling us what you told us," she says. "Just tell us. Start in the action, keep it interesting – even suspenseful."

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Make every word count

Brevity, the online journal, publishes shorter narrative essays, no more than 750 words in length. How can you best incorporate the mission? Don't underestimate the challenges with shorter pieces. "It can be more difficult to write a flash essay than to write a 3,000 word piece," says Dinty W. Moore, founder and editor of the publication. "It takes rigorous, disciplined editing, and a sort of 'engineering,' to fit as much as possible, as much as needed, into such a small frame."

Regardless of the length, key elements increase the chance of an acceptance letter. Use strong nouns, verbs and sensory details. "There is no room for throat-clearing or wandering around in search of a point," says Moore. "You need each sentence to do more than one thing; maybe provide setting, forward the action and give insight into character, all at once."

Personal narratives must resonate with a larger audience by offering a new view of the world or of some very small part of the world. "If you are writing about the loneliness of losing a loved one," Moore says, "take us deeper than the last essay we read on this subject. If you are writing about the pain of teenage awkwardness, assume we know, and give us fresh eyes on the subject."

All about voice

Started by sisters Susan Burmeister-Brown and Linda B. Swanson-Davies, *Glimmer Train* has published high-quality short stories for more than two decades. For this publication, the most important element in a short story is a strong and unique narrative voice. To develop this, Burmeister-Brown suggests unplugging from the hurly-burly of life on a regular basis so your subconscious has time to make some good compost. "Writing does not just occur when you're at the keyboard or with pen in hand," she says. "It brews in the mind. I believe narrative voice benefits greatly from this productive mulling."

For Steven Schwartz, fiction editor with the literary journal *Colorado Review*, the sweet spot is the nexus of voice, character and plot. "Voice is basic style plus the author's special touch with language that creates a unique sensibility," he says. "Character and plot are reciprocal in that each contributes to the other without one element dominating or eclipsing the other. A memorable piece of fiction allows for a complex integration of these three aspects."

Add character

Burmeister-Brown says strong characters are essential to a memorable short story but that sometimes people don't spend quite enough time with their characters to make them come alive for a reader. "Adding specific meaningful detail to a character is critical," she says. "It makes the character real and engaging. To form a believable character, you need to seriously wonder about people, and you need to care about them, and you need to take the time to fully bring your character to the page."

Since *Colorado Review* takes longer fiction (15-25 manuscript pages), Schwartz likes to see stories that unfold and do more than illustrate a predicament, no matter how compelling that predicament may be. He likes to see authors push each of the characters as far as possible into their respective roles. He explains, "Often what is holding back a story is the lack of development of the minor characters and their contribution to the overall conflict."

Revise until perfect

Both Moore and Schwartz warn about sending work out too soon. "Nothing is done so easily," says Moore. "I've been at this for almost 30 years, and I never submit anything that I have not gone over, and seriously revised, 10 to 20 times."

Schwartz says that stories can sometimes take years to write, and they need to gestate for a while. "The making of them requires a dedication to revision: learning what to take out, what to add, an eye for selection and emphasis. They're a result of the careful layering on of attentive detail, effective insight and right event, like sheets of delicate rice paper until, in the end, they're sturdy creations."

The takeaway is, whether you're writing flash fiction, essays, short fiction or personal stories, editors are looking for your work. Susan Burmeister-Brown sums it up best, "Believe in your writing. Keep sending it out into the world."

Kerrie Flanagan is the author of Write Away: A Year of Musings and Motivations for Writers, the director of Northern Colorado Writers and the founder of Hot Chocolate Press.

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