

"A splash of motivation and a dash of craft sure to have the reader writing short, short stories in a flash!" — Nita Sweeney, writing coach

"Michael Wilson is a passionate and talented teacher, and his helpful and creative ideas for writing short fiction will get the words flowing in a flash."
— Shannon Jackson-Arnold, author of *Everybody Loves Ice Cream*

"I don't know of many other books that offer such specific, practical advice on writing flash fiction. With *Flash Writing*, Michael Wilson provides an entire course on flash fiction, packed with exercises and creative activities that ease newcomers into writing and will keep them writing for a long time to come.

— Debi Orton, editor of *flashquake*

Flash fiction is one of the hottest literary trends of the 21st century. Online magazines crave it, mainstream publications such as *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair* publish it, and many other markets and contests seek it.

Flash Writing is your guide to writing, revising and publishing stories fewer than 1,000 words long. Learn how to generate story ideas, create characters, develop conflict, and establish setting and point of view for flash fiction. Then discover how to research, format, and submit your work to flash fiction markets. Shorter is better, and *Flash Writing* helps you learn how to create entertaining, publishable flash fiction.

This book includes:

- Over 400 writing exercises to get you started
- Story examples to illustrate concepts
- Guidelines for coming up with topics for flash fiction

Author Profile

Michael Wilson has been teaching creative writing classes and facilitating writers' groups for over 8 years and was an award-winning Contributing Editor for The Writer's Block at Suite101.com. He has been a featured guest speaker at the Thurber House, the Maumee Valley Writer's Conference and the Columbus Writer's Conference. He is also the publisher and editor of *Grist for the Muse* a free monthly creative writing e-newsletter.

Flash Writing

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Stories Less Than 1000 Words Long



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Manufactured in the United States of America.

To Kristen, for all of your support
and love over the years

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Introduction

I'm the kind of guy who reads introductions. I always want to hear a little from the writer who created the book. I want to touch the magic that writing is about. I want to know the struggles the writer had. I want to know what he ate for breakfast when he wrote. I want to know what books inspired him. I want to know what he keeps on his desk for inspiration. What I do know now is that there is no magic in writing at all, just work. It doesn't matter what you eat, read, what is on your desk, or on your mind. Writing takes time away from TV, family, eating out with friends, and envelops any leisure time you have left. You write, polish, rewrite, edit and rewrite again. You write until you are sick of the project and feel as if you can't write another word, and then you do it again.

To tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure how I got started with flash fiction. Maybe the seed was planted when I read an article on the Web. Maybe when I was in the library one day and on a whim picked up *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka. I'm really not certain. But I needed to shape the content for a day-long class, and somehow flash fiction struck me as a good strategy. What I do know with certainty is that flash fiction has become one of my most popular classes. In 2004 alone, I've been asked to do presentations on flash fiction at the Maumee Valley Writers Conference, the Columbus Writers Conference, and the Thurber House. I've taught one flash fiction workshop and have delivered flash fiction presentations for two other writers' groups.

Flash fiction meets a need in today's reading audience. Sue O'Neill of *The Vestal Review* thinks that it is popular "in part because we're an ADD society—we want a lot in a small space and time. We want instant sizzle." And let's face it, writers have a lot of competition out there for the scarce leisure time available to our audience — hundreds of cable TV channels, millions of Websites, thousands of new books published each month, more time spent working just to keep one step ahead of the creditors. But if we don't have time to read a novel or a lengthy magazine article, we can find five minutes to read one good story. In fact, we can read two or three, or even more, flash fiction stories at the end of the day when we're too tired to concentrate on anything meatier. As writers, we can have the great satisfaction of creating a complete flash fiction story in 15 to 30 minutes a day, where novels and other fiction demand much, much more time.

So when I began teaching flash fiction and looked for books specifically about writing it, I didn't find any. I found a lot of articles and advice online about writing flash fiction, and as a topic in a few fiction writing books, but no books devoted solely to writing flash fiction. A light went on! I would write a book on this subject — a book that would help you get started writing your own flash fiction, teach you about what sets it apart from other fiction, and also cover elements of good fiction writing in general. I would pack the book with good writing exercises to help you learn and hone flash fiction techniques, and I would provide a few story examples to guide you along.

And now the book is finished. I hope you enjoy it and that it stimulates your creativity.

Michael L. Wilson

Lancaster, Ohio

September 30, 2004

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Chapter 1

What is Flash Fiction?

Flash fiction is exactly what it sounds like — fiction that can be read in a flash. But here are some other names, according to Pamelyn Casto's article *Flashes on the Meridian: Dazzled by Flash Fiction*:

Other names for it include short-short stories, sudden, postcard, minute, furious, fast, quick, skinny, and micro fiction. ... In China this type of writing has several interesting names: little short story, pocket-size story, minute-long story, palm-sized story, and my personal favorite, the smoke-long story (just long enough to read while smoking a cigarette).

Flash fiction has been here for centuries under a variety of aliases: myths, fables, parables, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, tall tales, and legends. It also appears in the modern age under names such as: ghost stories, urban legends, rumors, and jokes.

The length of flash fiction is between 250 and 2,500 words, but most publications set the limit at 1,000.

Despite their brevity, these stories are complete stories. They have a definite beginning, middle, and end. They have character, conflict, and all of the other elements that define a short story, except that they are intensely compressed.

Resurging popularity

Flash fiction is well-suited for 21st century readers. With hectic schedules, long hours at the office, and shuffling the kids to soccer practice, there is a demand for stories that can be read quickly and yet still satisfy the reader.

The Internet has also changed the way we read, by stressing short, engaging writing that gets right to the point, without requiring us to scroll down the page to read it.

Online e-zines and literary journals love sponsoring contests for the best flash fiction. It is a wonderful, low-risk method for finding new writing talent. Even mainstream publications such as *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair* publish flash fiction.

Whatever you call it, flash fiction is here to stay.

Flash Fiction is Good for Writers

Many best-selling authors such as David Foster Wallace, Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood, and John Updike have recently produced fiction in this format. But writers have always embraced the short-short story form. Writers like Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and Anton Chekhov have all written flash fiction.

So why should you write flash fiction?

Low risk, little time investment

If you spend two years of your life writing the Great American Novel that sucks, well, you wasted two years of your life.

Flash fiction is low-risk. If you write a terrible flash fiction story, you might have invested a few hours in it. You can move on to the next story and try again.

It does not involve as much of a commitment as writing a lengthy short story or a novel does. It provides instant gratification. In less than a day, you can have a completed (and possibly publishable) story to show for your efforts.

Great way to improve your writing skills

Writing flash fiction makes you aware of every word you choose. You learn to write well using as few words as possible. In flash fiction, you need to know the elements of good fiction and how they work together.

It is far easier to write a long story, wasting words, wandering off on tangents, introducing interesting characters that have nothing to do with the main story. But flash fiction is coiled like a spring. There is no wasted energy in flash fiction. Every word in your story counts and drives you toward the conclusion.

It is fun!

You probably won't get rich writing flash fiction, but you may gain some recognition and respect from well-written stories. But most of all, writing flash fiction is fun. My students are always amazed at what they produce during a flash fiction writing session. They can't believe that their imaginations can create such beautiful works in such a short time.

Elements of Powerful Flash Fiction

Flash fiction contains most of the following elements in every single story:

- **Brevity** — Flash fiction tells a complete story in 1,000 words or fewer.
- **Character** — All fiction requires characters, or at least some sort of presence through which the story is told. The reader identifies with the characters in the story.
- **Surprise Endings** — Flash fiction is famous for its twist endings which often shock the reader.
- **Rich Language** — Flash fiction exists somewhere between the realms of poetry and short story and uses poetic language to weave the tale efficiently.
- **Action** — Even though flash fiction doesn't have a lot of words, a lot of action is packed into each story. Something has to happen during the course of the story.

Do It!

These activities support the concepts of this chapter.

1. Read all of the story examples in Appendix A. (If you don't, I'll be ruining the surprise for you because I use them to illustrate points throughout the book.)
2. Borrow or buy one of the story collections listed in Appendix B, Suggested Reading.

Writing Exercises

Use these exercises to practice your timed writing skills. Write for 10 minutes about each of the following topics:

1. A man-made disaster
2. A sinister thing hidden in your closet
3. A mythical creature living in the modern world
4. A letter you receive from someone after he/she dies
5. A buried treasure

First Lines

1. Where did your mother go?
2. What am I supposed to do about it now?
3. How long have you been spying on us?
4. He was the geekiest boy in the entire 8th grade...
5. At that moment she knew that something was terribly wrong...

Quick Topics

- Brown bag
- Bucket
- Shack
- Big idea
- Legs
- Dry cleaner
- Raid
- Oh boy
- Carbon monoxide
- Festival

Chapter 2

The Flash Fiction Writing Process

The flash fiction writing process goes through the same steps that all other writing projects do. The stages of the writing process are:

- Idea Gathering
- First Draft
- Shaping
- Second Draft
- Polishing
- Publishing

Each stage requires different skills and strategies. Many writers try to write one perfect story at the very beginning of this process, quickly find themselves frustrated or blocked, and stop writing altogether. Each phase of the writing process calls for specific combinations of skills that should be applied in the right sequence to be most effective. For example, if you try to edit your work before you've even completed a first draft, the results can be dreadful.

Let's review the stages of the writing process and the skills needed for each.

Idea Gathering

Skills required: Discipline; strong desire to write; research techniques; creativity; observation; awareness.

The idea gathering stage is where you open the floodgates of your mind and allow everything to rush out. You allow yourself to believe that anything is a good topic for writing.

Your objective is to generate as many ideas as possible and tap into your imagination for originality. Once you have generated these ideas, store them for later use.

First Draft

Skills required: Discipline; speed; ability to turn off the critical mind; passion; bravery; honesty.

This is where you are often tempted to re-write sentences, change word choices, and otherwise water down your words. The conflict between your natural creativity and your Inner Critic is at its peak.

The goal of this stage is simple: Get the draft down. Get the words on paper before you even think about fixing them up. Do not rewrite. Do not pause for inspiration. Do not think too much about your words. Just write.

Shaping

Skills required: Objectivity; knowledge of the flash fiction form; intuition.

Here you begin reviewing what you have written with an open mind, not necessarily to polish it and correct all of the technical errors that you have

made, but to review it with compassion and sensitivity. What is working about this piece? What don't you like? What feels fake? What seems totally believable?

Is it a story? Does it have an ending? Does it have interesting characters? What happens in the story? What is it missing?

Shaping may involve further flash writing drafts to create additional information or detail for your stories.

Second Draft

Skills required: Objectivity; ability to elicit and process feedback from others; eye for detail.

Use what you have learned from writing the first draft and shaping stages to rewrite your story, making changes as you identify them. This is where you could share your work with others to get feedback and improve it.

Polishing

Skills required: Knowledge of (or the ability to look up) grammar, parts of speech, usage, spelling, punctuation, and other polishing tools; detachment; ability to apply knowledge of the flash fiction form to revise the story.

As a flash fiction writer, you will spend a lot of time in the polishing stage. This is where you make the difficult choices about your work. You must hack words and ideas from the story mercilessly if they do not work within the flash fiction form. You release your Inner Critic to correct those grammar, spelling, and usage mistakes that are present within

your work, and apply your knowledge of the flash fiction format to polish the story with gleaming insight and energy.

Publishing

***Skills required:** Market knowledge; sales ability; ability to follow instructions precisely; electronic and paper manuscript formatting.*

Publication is not as hard as many people would have you believe. Writers who make intelligent decisions about their work follow the writer's guidelines that every publisher makes available to them. They must be read and followed. If you know your market and follow instructions, you are already ahead of 90% of the other writers out there.

Summary

In upcoming chapters, this book will cover these stages in greater detail, as well as give you specific advice on how to apply this knowledge for writing flash fiction.

Do It!

These activities support the concepts of this chapter.

1. Go online and check out websites about mythology, ghost stories or urban legends, and spend time reading the ones that interest you.
2. Go online and read stories from the flash fiction sites listed in the Online Resources section in the back of this book.

Writing Exercises

Use these exercises to practice your timed writing skills. Write for 10 minutes about each of the following topics:

1. A hot day
2. An unusual day at the mall
3. An ice cream truck accident
4. A high school reunion
5. Someone who can no longer fit into his/her clothes

First Lines

1. There were worse things that could have happened, but I couldn't think of any at this time...
2. He lost it. I could tell by the look in his eyes...
3. Where are you going with that thing?
4. She brought the dog home and hid it in the garage...
5. You are crazy if you think that you're going to get away with this...

Quick Topics

- Peanut butter
- Taco
- Barefoot
- Flattering
- Spam
- Renaissance
- Vertigo
- Pump up
- Serendipity
- Bad advice

