Take a Picture, Write a Story: Flash Fiction
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“You are outside in the dark, just a star or two. Somewhere, there are the sounds of a party on the other side of the street. The beat of a disco. Heightened talk, shouts, laughter. It is easy to turn away, leave that behind. Go back to the house.

Then—a firework. A single crack splits the air, a sizzle, a pause. A burst of stars, shimmering, falling in a fountain against the sky. The stars spiral and fall, painting the sky with tails of light.

Then it is over. You blink. But no—it is not over. Imprinted on your retina is a fountain of fire.”

—Vanessa Gebbie, Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction

The author of *Fireworks and Burnt Toast: The Process of Opening Up Your Writing* Gebbie, says this firework experience embodies what good flash fiction does: catch the reader, hold the reader, and echo and resonate within the reader. Gebbie goes on to assure that “there is no secret about writing flash fiction. It is just a short story, but a short story that has been allowed by the writer to find its right shape and length” (55-56). Take for example a piece by Ernest Hemmingway: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” (55). Do you feel suspended in time? The passion, the heartbreak—a world of feeling wrapped precisely in one simple sentence.

Now, take a breath and flash back to middle school. You receive the daunting task of writing a personal experience essay. You think you have a strong experience only to find a foreign comment on the bottom of your draft: “Give more detail.” Bewilderment. Questions and concerns bombard your mind: What else does the teacher need to know? How do I add detail? What is missing?

At first, it is normal to sympathize with the bewildered student who is uncertain of where to explode the story. Next, there is cause to scrutinize the teacher who has abstained from teaching the student how to write the experience properly; instead of a day-by-day agenda story with little relevant meaning. Teachers need to present their students with a background on how to write a detailed experience—to focus on the details, zoom in on the moment, and recall the memories that made the
experience worthwhile. Using detail, concise word choice, and intense action, typical fact-oriented narratives can transform into worthwhile stories that are pleasurable to experience.

Aside from explaining this transformation from fiction to flash fiction in the Language Arts classroom, this article will outline the elastic definition of flash fiction. Through concrete examples, as well as descriptions backed by flash fiction authors in the field, the logistics of flash fiction will unfold. In addition to the theoretical, the article will provide practical prompts explaining how to use flash fiction in the classroom.

What is Flash Fiction?

Flash Fiction— in a nutshell— is short, sweet, and to the point; literature of extreme brevity. It focuses on elements of writing that student-writers often neglect because they do not know how to portray them. Within the 55-1000 word range that flash fiction requires, the writer needs to pack action and focus on “a singular moment, a slice of life, a sketch” (Leslie 8).

The following piece of flash fiction, *Inside Out*, will serve as a mentor text for this section. While reading it, acknowledge the elements of fiction in John C. Bassi’s selection, reading slowly to take in the essence of the piece.

![Figure 1](image-url)
The preceding story, as you may have noted, includes all five elements of fiction. The setting—though ambiguous—is present, establishing the premise of the characters relationship. Like most pieces of flash fiction, the confinement and reduction of words removes fluff by beginning a story in the middle, placing responsibility upon the reader to fill-in the gaps. Take for example the characters; initially he and she may have seemed flat, however, they become complex individuals in a matter of sentences. Aside from the physical descriptions, the realization that the male character could not settle altered the entirety of the piece. Hence the conflict and plot were established at the tail end of the piece—that one weekend was crucial, even without elaborating on the details it brought about a revolution of the male character. In closing, the theme is hinted at with irony—a common aspect of flash fiction—“After four months of dating, she became a stunning beauty.”

That is all they wrote. Regardless, the pocket-size story includes what Shouhua Qi defines as the essential elements of a good piece of flash fiction: “[It] not only captures the pulse of life of a given time and place but [it] also has something to say about the human condition, which should resonate with readers everywhere. Honest truth, big or small, emotional as well as intellectual, give life to each story and makes the minute’s one spends with it a delightful, illuminating experience” (Qi 20).

Length restrictions aside, Inside Out resembles other works of fiction. The craft elements are the same; it is merely the economy of words that separates the two genres. “Fast, precise, and over. And not over. The one-page fiction should hang in the air of the mind like an image made of smoke” (Phillips 38). Take out the quickness implied by “fast, precise, and over” and you have the hopes of any fiction writer, novelist or flash fictionist alike.

Of course, many may disagree on the grounds that flash fiction lacks the power to align with content standards, or flash fiction is too extreme, too contrary to the form and purpose of writing that students will miss out on valuable learning. If that is your plea, consider for a moment the benefits:
complete use of the elements of fiction, while playing up on the shortened attention span of students—provided in a creative manner that demonstrates concise writing in a new genre. Developing a story and making it unfold in a small space requires tremendous invention and imagination. Challenges aside, flash fiction plays into key elements that teachers yearn to derive from their students: cohesive, concise, creative writing. These three objectives may not be explicit standards, but they should be goals that teachers have for their students.

What is the Point?

According to James Thomas and Robert Shapard, editors of the collective flash fiction novel—Flash Fiction Forward—flash fiction has enveloped society. Not only is its demographic widening, so is its accessibility. To analyze the relevance of flash fiction the editors discuss the Information Age, agreeing that our society is not turning to flash fiction because our brains can no longer engage in the stamina it takes to read a novel; rather, we turn to flash fiction because human instinct wants speed. Technology has wrangled us into believing that waiting is unnecessary. As a result, when busy people want a fiction fix they are drawn to flash fiction, not a J.R.R Tolken novel.

Flash fiction fulfills the reader because it includes the same, essential elements found in standard fiction. Editors Thomas and Shapard conclude their argument with this statement: “The essence of the story exists not in the amount of ink on the page—the length—but in the writer’s mind, and subsequently the reader’s” (13). The literature is identical; except now fiction can be a part of the everyday persons, everyday routine (Hazuka 31-35). Not only can flash fiction become a part of life, it can become a part of the classroom. Recall back to the opening firework analogy. Fireworks, no matter how meticulously designed, will have no impact on the audience if they are not brilliant and captivating in color and sound. Likewise, flash fiction will falter if two core elements are absent: expressive language and vivid image.
What to Teach?

Introducing the topic of flash fiction to student-writers begins by creating a relaxing environment. Eliminate unwanted stressors: grammar, format, etc., and stress the rawness and reality of flash fiction, allowing the pen to simply flow creatively over the paper and witness the unfolding. Nevertheless, emphasize to the student-writer the minimal time and the words available to express the story. Student-writers have no time for drawn out encounters; flash fiction needs to be decisive, turning the plot line dramatically to a conclusion.

Theory is essential; at the same time, concrete examples are often more beneficial. Although there are numerous ways to engage the student-writer in flash fiction I assembled a few suggestions to lead you in the right direction:

**Picture Product:** a compelling flash fiction opener uses elements of a picture to write a correlating story. Take the picture below,

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Figure 2</th>
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What words come to mind about the characters, the setting, the action? To get ideas flowing, place a picture (like figure 2) on a screen. Encourage students to write words, phrases, and/or trains of thought on paper for 30 seconds. Remove the picture and collaborate. What did the students come up with, what did you come up with, what thoughts will inspire a riveting piece of flash fiction? The diversity of stories stemming from one picture will likely be inspirational. An alternative activity requires magazines,
allowing students to choose their own picture and study it in a similar manner to create a story. Creativity is essential and will be developed through this activity (Phillips 38).

**Clothing Article**: another intriguing prompt for inspiring flash fiction asks students to write a story that revolves around an article of clothing. The article does not need to be the primary focus, but it will hopefully act as a flare—signaling attention to an aspect of the story with greater meaning.

> “Cinderella. She didn’t ponder over her shoes; her knight in shining armor simply slid them gracefully onto her expectant foot. I am no Cinderella; however, I just may find my knight in shining armor with this pair of shoes.”

This excerpt above opens a piece entitled *The Shoes*, and outlines the events leading up to a blind date. As it articulates, the shoes highlight the life of Cinderella and point to the expectancy of the characters’ “knight in shining armor,” but they are not the main focus (Leslie 11).

**Word Looping**: the third strategy to engage students in flash fiction adds uniqueness—puts an edge on the writing. To write a word loop the following elements are required:

1. The first word in the story must also be the last.
2. The last word of each sentence must also be the first word of the following sentence.

When word looping, both student-writers and teacher-writers need to think abstractly. In order to add unconventional creativity, writers must play around with the meaning of words, sentence structures, and grammar in general. Depending on the grade level and cognitive development of your students, word looping may not be advised. Remember, flash fiction is intended to expand student-writers enthusiasm and self-esteem when writing, not hinder it (Rogers 147).

**Cut ‘er Down**: the final approach can be used separately or in conjunction with the above three strategies. This method encases the essence of flash fiction: brevity. After years of writing—adding
fluff, adding side notes — student-writers might find it challenging to define one moment in time and omit bulk. Caution, do not force students to dismiss their writing habits; instead, encourage them to downsize their fiction in half two, three, or four times if necessary. While cutting the story down, in terms of word count, stress the importance of retaining the initial tenacity of the piece so the resounding theme remains intact (Budman 126).

Flash fiction is not a slack job for weak writers it requires perseverance and attentiveness; it is a “slop-free zone” (Leslie 7). Teachers must ensure that despite the ambiguous nature of flash fiction students will not be driven to eliminate the purpose of plot and characters; rather, students will economize their wording—pointing back to a single moment in time.

What is next?

With this moderately new genre at your fingertips, how do you know that flash fiction is worthwhile—not simply another genre that the teacher needs to teach and the students need to learn—a constructive use of class time? The answer is simple. Break free from your preconceived notion of fiction, and expand the definition so it includes flash fiction. Flash fiction at its core reduces the span of writing to one key action, one key idea from which to write about—bringing meaning and purpose back into writing—creating a beautiful display of fireworks for all to enjoy.
References:


