

Teaching Flash Fiction

By Hollie Park

Purpose: To introduce students to the idea of “flash fiction” and to have students experiment with writing their own flash fiction.

Intended Grade Level/Class: High school, either 10th or 11th grade, most appropriately in a creative writing class.

Introduction/Rationale: Flash Fiction can be very fun not only to read, but to write as well. This unit would fit perfectly into a creative writing class. However, it could also be incorporated into a different type of writing class. For example, it could be used in another writing class to encourage students to form tightly constructed essays or other genres. I got the idea for this unit from actually seeing a similar unit taught at University High School. The samples of flash fiction as well as the descriptions of what exactly flash fiction is came from various web-sites. There are tons of printed books with flash fiction as well that could be used. This unit will encourage students to produce their best possible work and to put a lot of effort into it, as they will be expected to publish their flash fiction.

Objectives/Learning Standards:

1. Students will use proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in their final drafts. *Illinois Learning Standard 3.A.4 Use standard English to edit documents for clarity, subject/verb agreement, adverb and adjective agreement and verb tense; proofread for spelling, capitalization and punctuation; and ensure that documents are formatted in final form for submission and/or publication.*
2. Students will use technology (if it is available to the school/classroom) to revise and edit their drafts. *Illinois Learning Standard 3.B.4b Produce, edit, revise and format work for submission and/or publication (e.g., manuscript form, appropriate citation of sources) using contemporary technology.*
3. Students will participate in peer-editing workshops. *Illinois Learning Standard 3.B.4c Evaluate written work for its effectiveness and make recommendations for its improvement.*
4. Students will write their own original flash fiction, which must be _____ words or less (this will be a class wide decision), which will be revised, edited, and published.

Day 1: All of day one will be spent on reading the article and samples of flash fiction. Once the packet is finished, books will be passed around so that students can read independently for the remainder of the class period.

A) Read article by Pamela Casto (see handout—pages 3-4 of document)

B) Reading samples of Flash Fiction (see packet—pages 5-10 of document)

Day 2: Brainstorming/Writing Activity

This activity is merely to get the students thinking about writing, and does not necessarily have to develop into their published piece of flash fiction.

Materials (to be provided by teacher): several magazine ads with pictures only. For example, a picture of a model standing on a beach, with as few words on the page as possible, preferably none. The students will (ideally) each have their own picture. If they have to double up it's ok. From the picture, the students should make as many assumptions as possible about the person or people in them. They should make up a concise story about who that person is, where they come from in life, their background, what they are doing in this particular picture, or anything else. They should feel free to be as creative as they want, and make up as much as possible. Once this is done, the stories will be shared.

If there should be extra time at the end of the period, the flash fiction books will be passed around and the students can read more examples of flash fiction until the end of the hour.

Day 3: Writing Flash Fiction.

A) Read Writing Flash Fiction Article (see handout—pages 10-12 of document)

B) Begin writing: Students will be writing for the remainder of the period. They can write as many separate pieces of fiction as they like, as long as they are writing for the whole period.

C) Homework: Students need to have a “polished” piece by the next day. This can still be a pretty rough draft, but as we'll be workshopping it with peer respondents, it needs to be somewhat polished.

Day 4 and 5: Writing Workshop (All workshopping ideas are adapted from Atwell)

A) Students will be given the Expectations for Writing sheet. (see handout—page 12 of document)

B) Students will be given the Rules for Writing Workshop (see handout—page 13 of document)

C) Students will be given the Peer Writing Conference Record (see handout—page 14 of document)

D) Students will be given the Editing Checksheet (see handout—page 15 of document)

Day 6: Publishing Your Work

Students must find a website that is offering to publish flash fiction. They must provide proof that they have actually done this. (Such as an e-mail confirmation, or having the teacher mail the finished piece for them.)

Pamela Casto Article:

<http://www.heelstone.com/meridian/meansarticle1.html>

Lately there are brilliant flashes of fiction almost everywhere you look. You see them in print journals, magazines, anthologies, and collections. You will also find dazzling examples of flash fiction on the Internet, in all its many forms, guises, and under all its many names. Is flash fiction something new? Or is this art form presently enjoying yet another period of popularity? I would answer that it is something old, something new, and even something borrowed too. It is a wedding of sorts--a wedding of styles, traditions, and genres.

Defining or stating exactly what flash fiction is would be comparable to defining or stating exactly what a poem or novel is. It just cannot be done to anyone's satisfaction. The main thing about flash fiction, however, is that it is short. Randall Jarrell once pointed out that a story could be as short as a sentence. And there are some fine flash fiction examples where stories, one or two pages long, are comprised of just one or two (sometimes quite long) sentences. But the number of sentences such work contains will not get us very far in defining or describing it.

Nor will trying to determine the number of words in such pieces be particularly helpful. That is because editors, critics, and writers will also differ on just how short (or long) it is. In general, flash fiction runs from as few as 100 words up to 1,000 or even 1,500 words (some more and some even much less). Flash fiction, of course, goes far beyond a mere word count.

To complicate matters even further, flash fiction also carries many names. Other names for it include short-short stories, sudden, postcard, minute, furious, fast, quick, skinny, and micro fiction. In France such works are called novellas. 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). What's in a name? That which we call flash fiction, by any other name would read as bright.

There is yet another complication in trying to produce a satisfactory definition or description. The term 'flash fiction' can be used to describe several genres or modes of writing. Such writing can include traditional or mainstream short-short stories as well as various other types such as ghost stories, monologues, epistles, mysteries, myths, tall tales, fables, anti-fables, parables, romance, fairy tales, horror, suspense, science fiction, prose, poetry, and more. Charles Baxter notes that these short-short stories occupy many thresholds--"they are between poetry and fiction, the story and the sketch, prophecy and reminiscence, the personal and the crowd."

Flash fiction can also embrace highly experimental writing that pushes the boundaries of traditional reader expectations. For instance, some flash fiction stories are told through such seemingly mundane methods as a magazine quiz, a survey questionnaire, and acknowledgments to a scholarly biography. Such stories can be created from bulletin board messages, classified ads, or telephone answering machine messages. Some are written using only one or two sentences; others have dialogue only, while yet others use the rare second person point of view. **These small flashes are also often identified by the surprising twists that take place; twists**

throughout the story, or stories that have a twist at the end which turns what came before on its head. The writers of flash fiction also have a hand in helping to refine it, define it, and extend it, and such writing is constantly reconfiguring and metamorphosing before our very eyes. Works falling under the rubric of flash fiction are like Daedaluses who refuse to stay put.

By whatever name you might prefer, flash or short-short fiction covers a large range of forms and styles. It runs the gamut: it can be clever, whimsical, and entertaining or can be literary, ironic, satirical, or sublime. It is sometimes funny, and sometimes controversial or unconventional. It can be troubling, unsettling, and unpredictable. Sometimes it is enigmatic, elusive, ambiguous, and is quite often paradoxical. This type of story is often rich in implication and is tight and precise, compressed and highly charged. The best stories often speak to us obliquely, and speak of the human condition in a profound way--in truths that cannot be seen as clearly in other ways. The best flash fiction lingers in the mind long after the story has been read--the way of all great literary works of art.

Some claim that the proliferation of the short-short story is due to modern readers' attenuated attention spans, our shortened sound-byte, text-byte mentality. Others think it is because of the "asthmatic" conditions under which we live--our fiction is reflecting the out-of-breathness of modern life. Some suggest that it is due to increased printing costs and the way in which editors can include more variety and less length in their publications. And some think it is because so many have lost faith in the traditional way of telling stories at great length. Such readers and writers realize that "truth" comes only infrequently and only in flashes.

The writing and reading of flash fiction is presently a worldwide phenomenon. It is rapidly increasing in popularity in the United States and Canada where it is offered in more and more fine literary journals. Further, translations are pouring in to English speaking journals from all around the world. In Latin America, where such work has a long tradition, it continues to thrive. It is also flourishing in China where it appears in magazines, journals, and daily newspapers. In Italy it is enjoying renewed life under the influence of futurism and prose poetry. I find it especially exciting that in Cyprus it comes in just behind poetry as the predominant mode of published literary writing.

Flash fiction is clearly a worldwide phenomenon, a mode of writing, which seems particularly well suited to our current fast-paced, often breathless lives, in which we still crave the insights good literature can bring. Further, flash fiction is particularly well suited to Internet publications, and the Internet will have a large part to play in the proliferation of this exciting type of writing. Flash fiction is not only fascinating reading in its own right, but its size is also perfect for computer screen reading. Short works are so much easier to read on screen, and many people no longer bother with long unbroken chunks of text. I predict that soon we will also be seeing a lot more of what the multi-media artists can do with flash fiction on the Internet.

The wedding of flash fiction and the Internet seems to have all the ingredients for a happy and prosperous relationship. In print, or on the web, the future of this art form seems assured. There will always be a need for good, tightly written flash fiction pieces-- miniature condensations that open out the world for and with us. They can show us, as Keats said of poetry, "infinite riches in a small room."

Flash Fiction Packet

1. "Blessed Silence" by Mary Ann Smythe

<http://www.pifmagazine.com/vol13/smyt.htm>

The man really loved his wife. If only she would stop talking. She never shut up. Never said anything he wanted to hear. She began to talk non-stop about inanimate objects. Then she started to talk to the objects. Especially her miniatures!

She started building miniatures with a glass fronted wooden box filled with a diminutive hat shop. Tiny hats trimmed in minuscule feathers, flowers and bows. Little figures and hat stands. She didn't talk so much then. He held real conversations with her. Somewhere along the way, verbal diarrhea started. He couldn't remember when. Maybe when their last child went off to college. She said the house seemed so quiet.

Every room became cluttered with her words. The walls vibrated with syllables, unfinished sentences, partial words, disjointed phrases, thoughts that never made sense.

Her talking deteriorated into just words, as though read from a dictionary. In singsong cadence she shouted or whispered. Never a normal tone of voice. She saved that to ask a question or make a declarative statement.

Her shouting hurt his ears. The whispers made it seem as though a malevolent being occupied his home.

He couldn't stand it.

She started a miniature of their home in the Philadelphia suburbs. With shouts and whispers, she constructed the framework. The wiring included the same lighting and wall fixtures as their house. A miniature doorbell rang the same chimes as their own.

He listened as she constructed and filled the interior of the house with duplicates of their own furnishings.

Completing each room, she drew up a diminutive floor plan for the next. As she worked on the kitchen, a small doll joined the ivory appliances. It wore clothes that matched his wife's, its long auburn hair styled exactly like its creator. The doll duplicated her movements in the miniature house.

He hurried past this budding masterpiece after listening to his wife mumble and shout her way through a meal. A small voice replicated the exact words he fled. He listened in horror as the doll stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes, its mouth working in an endless stream of meaningless words!

A whisper insinuated its way into his consciousness. His wife, mouth moving in an endless litany of whispered words, climbed onto a chair in the kitchen to re-hang a curtain. As she stretched to hang the rod she held in her hand, he

watched in revulsion. The tiny doll did the same thing, whispers curling from her mouth to fill the minute kitchen.

A slight nudge from the tip of his finger and the doll, with a tiny high-pitched scream, plunged off the chair to land on the floor. The end of the curtain rod protruded from its throat.

A short explosive scream from the full-sized kitchen split the air, punctuated by a loud thud as a body hit the floor. Gurgling sounds replaced words as his wife tried and failed to draw air into her injured throat.

Blessed silence descended.

If only she had stopped talking.

2. Writings of John Cage

<http://www.lcdf.org/indeterminacy/s.cgi?36>

Generally speaking,
suicide
is considered a
sin.
So
all the disciples
were very interested
to hear
what Ramakrishna would
say about
the fact that a
four-year-old child had
just then committed
suicide.

Ramakrishna said
that the child
had not sinned,

he had simply
corrected an error;

he had been
born by mistake.

<http://www.lcdf.org/indeterminacy/s.cgi>

Once
Bill de
Kooning
gave
a lecture in
Philadelphia.

Afterward,
he was asked
what painters of the
past had
influenced him the
most.

He
said,

"The past does
not influence me.

I influence it."

3. Flash Fiction from http://www.newtimeslo.com/55_fiction/55_story.html
(Maximum of 55 words each)

a. AT THE AUTOPSY

"Victim's blood is completely drained, apparently through two small puncture wounds in the neck," said the coroner.

"Hey ... you don't suppose it's, you know, the real deal?" asked his assistant.

"No, just some psycho."

"You sure?"

They stared at each other for a moment, then burst out laughing—but stopped when the corpse laughed, too.

Ross Lesko
Lakewood, OH

b. DEATH TRAP

The growing hatred between Mary and Robert was such that a killing was inevitable.

Mary had a plan, baiting Robert incessantly in the hope that he would kill her. The note he found after he shot her read, "Thank you, Robert. Doctors had given me only two months. I hope you rot in prison forever."

Ernie Glenesk
Santa Maria

c. WE'LL BE BACK, RIGHT AFTER THIS

Beth went through some Growing Pains.

Unfortunately, she learned The Facts of Life from Perfect Strangers.

She was never taught that Family Matters. Quickly, she realized that Three's Company and moved out.

And to make matters worse, Everybody Loves Raymond. That's her friend.

But like she told her mom, "I Love Lucy."

Jill Manni
Smithfield, RI

d. PAYBACK TIME

I woke up on the couch with a stiff back.

Quietly, I eased into bed and lay there without sleeping, replaying our argument.

Beside me, Karen writhed, screamed, trapped in one of her night terrors. I always woke her.

Tonight, I let her suffer and savored my revenge.

Chris Patton
Hermosa Beach

e. A PARTY FOR INNOCENCE

Persuasion enticed her there. Music played. Harmony danced with Rhythm.

Charm brushed a hand across her cheek, attracting Desire.

She thought she heard Sincerity; it was Seduction. He introduced Lust. Party over, the guest list lay forgotten like her.

She read that Love had declined to attend.

Honor had not been invited.

Innocence is gone.

Deirdra Barnes
Seattle, WA

f. ALEX AND ADAM

Alex, an aged almsman, articulated an afterthought.

"Always address agnostics amiably and answer atheists affectionately."

Adam, another aged almsman, addressed Alex's absurd aphorism, asking, "And after an apocalypse?"

Alex alluringly assumed an agreeable air and answered Adam: "Apocalypse and afflatus are amazingly abstract areas ... affection and amiability accomplish ample acquiescence and alleviate anger."

Adam agreed.

Jeremiah Jacques
Asheville, NC

g. INSIDE OUT

They had known each other a few years.

She was nice. He knew she liked him.

But she was just average-looking. He couldn't settle for that.

One weekend, she asked him to the movies. She was intelligent, funny, easy to be with.

After four months of dating, she became a stunning beauty.

John Bassi
Santa Maria

h. SHIFT WORK

"You're still here? Where's Dr. Jones?"

The Emergency Room is busy. I'm pissed at my missing replacement.

"He's late again," I say.

"Hey, Doc! Face versus windshield—better come quick!"

Cursing to myself, I yell at the charge nurse: "Page Dr. Jones again!"

As I intubate, I hear Jones' pager—on the patient's belt.

Erica Schalow
Atlanta, GA

i. ONE YEAR LATER

"Good morning, Eva."

"Morning, Sheryl."

"So how's your garden doing?"

"Growing like a weed!"

They laughed.

"I'm sure it's given you a lot of comfort since Henry disappeared," said Sheryl kindly.

"Actually," said Eva, "I often feel he never really left me at all."

Her roses were unusually large that summer.

Martha Phillips

Madison, WI

j. RUDE INTERRUPTION

I began writing my 55 Fiction story when suddenly a loud humming arose outside. I opened the door to find—a space ship!

Four tiny creatures emerged. I invited them in for tea. I told them my story idea.

They said it was boring and that I should write about them instead, so I did.

Nathaniel Nauert

Santa Maria

Writing Flash Fiction

<http://www.pifmagazine.com/vol13/essentials.htm>

The Essentials of Micro-Fiction

Micro Fiction, by nature, is defiant. It defies length, boundaries, and expectations. But tight, provocative fiction requires analysis and editing. Taking an idea and distilling it into a "micro"- cosm of its original self is challenging. So what are the essentials of Micro Fiction?

1. **Length and form obviously matter.** The average micro fiction will be less than 400 words, with some exceptions that reach as much as 750 words. The form is strictly prose. If the novel writer is the carpenter who structures a whole house, and a short story writer is the decorator of one of its rooms, then the micro fiction writer is the mailman who looks into the box before dropping in the household's letters. Readers discover something brief and intimate in a very short space.

This is the only point that stands alone for micro fiction. The following six points are made to declare the specific differences and similarities micro fiction has with short stories and poetry.

2. **Be willing to edit and re-edit:** Take a story of mine, for example. Here's what our Poetry Editor, Anne Doolittle did to a draft of my "A Carpenter's Wife."
Remember: You must have the guts to take criticism, but don't unnecessarily burn yourself. Make sure it's from the right people. Anne's a very sharp editor and writer, so she's a great person to have critique my work.
3. **Soul-stirring Language:** Choose your words carefully. You're using so few. Here's a prose

poem from Charles Simic's Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *The World Doesn't End*.

The stone is a mirror which works poorly. Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say? In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket.

4. **Imagery:** Here's the second paragraph of Francine Prose's "Pumpkins":

Actually, she is beheaded, her body thrown from the car and decapitated with such force that the head sails through the air and lands in a pile of pumpkins spilled out onto the road.

In such a short space some thread must hold the story together. A recurring image can always do this. By the end, the holiday season plays a primary role in the lives of the characters and the story. Don't you want to keep reading?

5. **Make it tight:** Use a minimum of words. Amy Hempel's story "Housewife" is a prime example:

She would always sleep with her husband and with another man in the course of the same day, and then the rest of the day, for whatever was left to her of that day, she would exploit by incanting, "*French film, French film.*"

(yes, this is Hempel's story in its entirety)

What was Hempel's original idea? Was the woman on a train or in a taxi going back and forth between lovers? Did she have lunch or buy a paper? Did she almost get caught by her husband? Did she go to a film festival with her lover and see *Purple Moon*? We don't need all these answers for the story to work. In fact, getting the reader to ask a few unanswered questions can be a part of a story's resonance (see #7).

6. **Play against expectations.** Let the narrator tell the reader one thing, lead him in one direction while the text leads the reader in just the opposite. A Hyper Fiction Contest on NPR included this example. For a moment the reader may think it ends too soon:

The World's Shortest Horror Story: The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door.

(author unknown to me)

7. **Implication:** The key requirement of a literary short-short is implication. There's no room for life stories. Just enough for resonance. An instructor once (correctly) labeled a piece of mine a situation not a story. You never want that said. Here's a list, by no means exhaustive, of how to create stories:

- **Use a directive last sentence** that gives narrative insight or opinion. Thomas Bernhard does this with nearly every story in his recent Micro-Fiction collection, *The Voice Imitator*. He uses closing sentences like, "In this way Fourati, as is well known, had ruined not only the lady's life but his own as well." Or, "He asked us what he should do to be freed from his guilty conscience, but we dared not give him any advice."
- **Make rereads necessary or at least inviting.** In "Three," Gordon Lish tells us three stories. He prefaces them with the statement, "One of them taught me the meaning of fear," but doesn't say which one. In the first story he talks to a woman who enjoys the funeral of her lover. In the second he sees a headless baritone on the subway that sings to

him. The last simply reads: "The third thing was I went home." What is it he said in that first paragraph again?

- **Close with a phrase that sends the reader back into the story.** Then it might sink into the reader's own life. In Molly Giles, "The Poet's Husband," she writes, "...but later that night when she is asleep, he will lie in their bed and stare at the moon through a spot on the glass that she missed." Wow. What did she miss? We don't know, but within eighteen lines, just one sentence long, we're stirred to think about the loved ones of all the writers we know. How do they feel about the ways and places that our fiction intersects with their lives?
- **Know when you've made your point.** In Grace Paley's "Mother," the last paragraph reads, "And then she died." Paley can end this way because she has summed up the distinctive character of her mother and made us miss our equally distinct mothers standing in doorways at night abrading us with, "You run around senselessly. What will become of you?" Mission accomplished.

Expectations for Writing:

1. Find topics and purposes for your writing that matter to you, to your life, to who you are and who you want to become.
2. Try new topics, purposes, audiences, genres, forms, and techniques. (Step out of your comfort zone!)
3. Make your own decisions about what is working and needs more work in pieces of your writing. Be the first responder to your writing.
4. Listen to, ask questions about, and comment on others' writing in ways that help them move the writing forward.
5. Recognize that readers' eyes and minds need your writing to be conventional in format, spelling, punctuation, and usage. Work toward conventionality and legibility, and use what you know about format, spelling, punctuation, and usage as you compose.
6. Keep an individualized proofreading list that you check your writing against when you edit and proofread.
7. Take a *deliberate* stance toward writing well: try to make all of your writing literature.
8. Work as hard in writing workshops as I do. Re-create happy times from your life, work through sad times, discover what you know about a subject and learn more, convey information and request it, parody, petition, play, explore, argue, apologize, advise, sympathize, imagine, look and look again, express love, and show gratitude.

Rules for Writing Workshop

1. Save everything: it's all part of the history of the piece of writing, and you never know when or where you might want to use it.
2. Date and label everything you write to help you keep track of what you've done (e.g. notes, draft 1, brainstorming).
3. When a piece of writing is finished, clip everything together, including drafts, notes, lists, editing checksheets, and peer-conference form, and file it in your permanent writing folder.
4. Collect data about yourself as a writer, look for patterns, and take satisfaction in your accomplishments over time.
5. Always skip a line if handwritten, or double space if typed. This will make revision, polishing, and editing easier and more productive for you.
6. Draft your prose in paragraphs and your poetry in lines and stanzas. Don't go back into a mess and try to create order out of it. Format as you go.
7. Get in the habit of punctuating and spelling as conventionally as you can while you're composing: this is what writers do.
8. When composing on a word processor, print every two to three days. Then, read with a pen in hand, away from the computer, and see and work with the whole, rather than a part at a time on the screen.
9. Get into the habit of beginning each workshop by reading what you've already written. Establish where you are in the piece and pick up the momentum.
10. Understand that writing is thinking. Do nothing to distract me or other writers. Don't put your words into our brains as we're struggling to find our own.
11. When you confer with me use as soft a voice as I use when I talk to you: whisper.
12. When you need to confer with peers, use a conference area and record responses on a peer-conference form so the writer has a reminder of what happened.
13. Self-edit in a color different from the print of your text and complete an editing checksheet to show what you know about conventions of writing.
14. Write as well and as much as you can.

Peer Writing Conference Record

Writer's Name _____ Date _____
Responder's Name _____ Topic _____

Writer, before you ask for a conference, your job is to consider what you want help with: ideas, images, organization, coherence, a part of the piece, a sense of the whole? Tell the responder what you want response to:

Responder, when you agree to confer with a writer, your job is to help the writer think and make decisions about the writing:

- Ask what he or she needs help with.
- Listen as the writer reads, try to understand the writing, then tell what you heard.
- If there are parts that confuse you, you don't understand, or you'd like to know more about, ask the writer about them. It will help you-and the writer-if you jot down your questions during and after the reading in the space below.
- Ask the writer what he or she plans to do next.
- Give this record of the conference to the writer.

Writer, jot down your plans before you forget them.

