

Plot: What happens in the story? How do the events tie together? You might want to summarize the plot briefly when you finish a story, just to clarify plot structure in your mind.

Conflict: What is the story's major conflict? Is it internal—someone struggling with himself or herself—or is it external—a struggle between people, between a person and society, between two groups? Are there secondary conflicts? How do the conflicts direct the plot? Who, or what, comes out on top, and how does the outcome of the conflicts express the theme? One of the problem areas in first stories is commonly this element of conflict. Often ideas for a short story are based on a character, and it is then hard to take this person we know and involve him in a clear conflict. Conflict and plot are closely allied. Look at the conflicts and stories you read to see how conflict operates to advance plot.

Setting: What has the writer done to give the reader a sense of place? What does "place" do in the story? How can you hone your descriptive skills so that you can write passages that set the scene at the same time that they characterize your protagonist and advanced the action?

Your own personal setting may do much to make your stories rich. Think of the scenes most familiar to you—places where you know the name of every tree, where nothing that occurs is surprising to you because everything is very familiar, and where the people have been formed by their environment. These places may be your best settings for stories.

Character: How does the writer characterize? In a good short story you get a clear impression of what someone is like. How does the writer communicate to you both easily distinguishable character traits, like generosity or stinginess, love of order or tendency to live in disorder, and all the subtle nuances of character? Often when you are reading a story or novel, especially a novel, you will be able to guess how a character will react. How do you know this—what are the keys are hidden in the narrative? Often a story idea will start with the character, a person you know either well or slightly, or even someone you merely observe. Having come up with the notion of "what she's like," you may then proceed to formulate your plot on that basis: "what she would do if...?"

Dialogue: What part does dialogue play in the story, and how does the writer used dialogue to characterize events the plot? How does a writer make the characters speak differently—if a professor is talking to a high school student for instance, how does the author show the difference in age and education? How do you make characters sound as though they are speaking normally? Should you try to attempt dialect and your writing?

Pacing: How does the writer make the events seem to occur naturally—that is, without the reader feeling that he or she is being rushed through events, or that important elements of the action have been left out? How does the writer get the reader from one scene to the next? How can you avoid making the entire first section into a tedious scene setting for what is about to happen?

The creation of individual scenes, as well as the movement from one to the next in the natural seeming way, is not easy. You will need to look to see how it has been done and other stories.

Theme and Meaning: What statement is the story making about how people live (and sometimes die)? What values underlie the story? How does the writer make the presence of these values known? How can you make a short story support your value system without turning it into a sermon?

Style and Voice: What makes it sound as though the same person is telling the entire story—that is, that there is a unified intelligence behind the narrative? What methods does the writer use to sustain the sense that there is someone "home" in the story? Sentence structure is one element of style, of course; you might compare William Faulkner's sentence structure with Ernest Hemingway's, or Adrienne Rich's with Lucille Clifton's to see how important style is in establishing voice.

Point of View: Who is telling the story? Is it told in the first person singular "I" or the third person singular "he" or "she," or even, as is occasionally the case, and the second person "you." Then, if the story is told in the third person, through who's consciousness are the events slanted? Do we see one person's thoughts? Everyone's thoughts? No one's? Most modernist fiction sustains a single point of view. Post modernist, experimental fiction tends to have multiple points of view.

Diction: This aspect of fiction writing is, of course, related to all the others. The words that you choose have an important bearing on voice, characterization, setting, symbolism—you name it.

Allusions: just as in poetry, works of fiction often refer, or allude, to other fictional works, to events in history, or to other arts. You need to heighten your awareness of these references in the fiction that you read and to be aware of how you can use allusion profitably in your own work. Sometimes recognizing a reference may simply enrich your appreciation of the work; sometimes, four instance, if you are reading a contemporary representation of the Oedipus story, the allusion is the key to the whole experience.

(courtesy of a text book I once used and have long since forgotten the name)