

Flash Fiction Dos and Do Nots

From the Editors of *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*¹

Do:

1. Jump into the story. Get on with it. Avoid the unnecessary. For example, if your flash is about what Bob's wife does after he dies, then 'When Bob farted and died, Sheila smiled and went online' is probably a better way to start your flash than a paragraph about Bob's childhood in Chester in the 1950s.
2. Be original. 'The rain beat on the window' is unoriginal: it is a cliché that your readers will not find interesting. 'The rain kicked the window', however, is one of *many* more interesting descriptions that you could use.
3. Keep your descriptions concise. For example, 'The rain kicked the window' is better than: 'The rain kicked, kneed, punched, elbowed, shouldered and head-butted the window.' One word – 'kicked' – is enough.
4. Be wary of silliness (e.g. a man has a second head on his shoulder that looks like Shrek) and the supernatural (ghosts, zombies, vampires). Your (adult) readers would probably rather read a flash about people like Sheila.
5. Try to *show* something about a character's personality or mood, rather than telling your readers directly with a statement. For example, 'With the fish fingers parallel and exactly one centimetre apart, James can begin to eat' is more interesting than stating: 'James has OCD'.
6. Ensure that your characters talk how they actually talk. For example, working-class Rita from Liverpool would say, 'I'm parched', not: 'My tongue suggests that what I need to do is imbibe some liquid.'
7. Avoid ending a flash with a supposedly profound statement; for example: 'We should all love one another', 'Life is so fragile', 'Our dreams are nourishment in a cruel world'. If your story is good, it will have *shown* these ideas.
8. Avoid unnecessary words. Look at *every* word and ask: 'Can I delete it?'
9. Make sense. Write clear, accessible prose that doesn't confuse your readers. Think carefully about what you have written.
10. Proofread carefully. Ensure that there aren't any spelling mistakes or punctuation errors. The final version of every flash must be perfect.

¹ The editors – Drs Peter Blair and Ashley Chantler – also teach flash fiction on BA (Hons) Creative Writing at the University of Chester. For information about the programme and the Department of English, go to: <https://www.chester.ac.uk/english>

Do Not:

1. Have lots of characters. You're a flasher, not a novelist.
2. Have lots of settings. Focus on a limited number of places – perhaps just one.
3. Have lots of similes: they can be more distracting than helpful. Ask: 'Is this simile here for a reason? Do my readers want or need this simile?'
4. Tell your readers unnecessary stuff. If it's not important how Beccy gets to Chester station after she's left her husband, don't tell your readers.
5. Explain everything. Feel free to make your readers wonder about things, to ask questions: Why is Beccy running away from her husband?
6. End with a clunky conclusion; for example: 'And Beccy lived happily ever after.' Feel free to make your readers wonder what happened next: Did Beccy find happiness in Bristol?
7. Have a title that is trying to impress or gives too much away. 'Life, Death, Eternity, Woe, and the Human Condition' is pretentious and terrible. The title 'Carrots' is better than: 'Buying Carrots at the Market to Make Soup for My Ill Wife. Carrot Soup Will Help Her Get Better'.
8. Assume that your first draft (and second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth ...) is perfect. The best flashes have gone through *numerous* drafts.
9. Write in isolation. You should share your flashes with classmates, friends and family, and ask them for constructive, honest criticism. Don't be precious about your writing: you're just asking for comments about some words you've put on a piece of paper. Those words might need changing.
10. Forget that your readers want their imaginations stimulated. You *must* be original, interesting and entertaining. *Never* be boring, which is why a flash about a man who *thinks* he has grown a Shrek head on his shoulder *might* work.

A Final Tip:

Don't just write: you should also read. Learn from other flashers.

For some suggested books, go to: <http://www.chester.ac.uk/flash.fiction/schools>

There are also numerous online flash magazines. Start with *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Spelk: Short, Sharp Fiction*.