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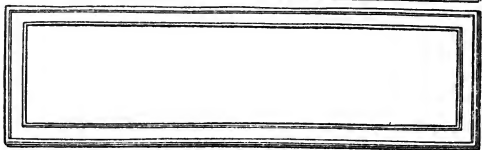
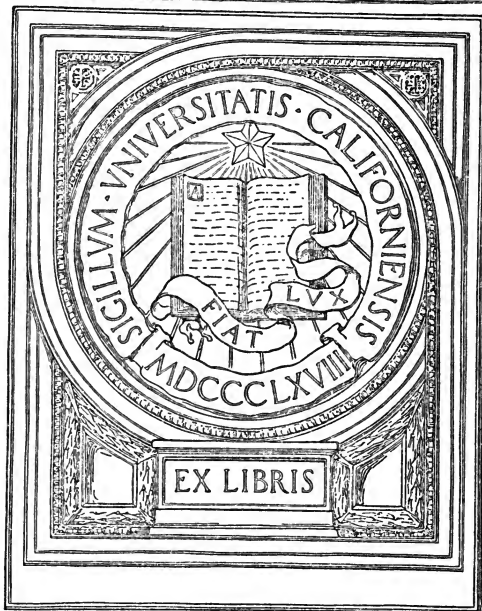
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TO WRITE  
A Short Story

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By LESLIE W. QUIRK

GIFT OF  
ESTATE OF  
CAROLINE E. LE CONTE



Caroline Le Conte  
Berkeley Calif.



# **HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY**

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# HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY

AN EXPOSITION  
OF THE TECHNIQUE  
OF SHORT FICTION

BY

LESLIE W. QUIRK

THE EDITOR PUBLISHING COMPANY  
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## PREFACE

**T**HE material in the following pages is a series of suggestive talks rather than a scholarly discourse. I leave to others the discussion of polish, atmosphere, and artistic handling; I take for my theme the writing of a short story that will sell.

There are many writers throughout the country, with good educations, with clear brains, and with the ambition to see their work in print, who are failing merely because they are not familiar with the technique of the short story. It is to these that I would appeal.

In the following pages, therefore, I have aimed above all else to be practical. I have written in the first person, without even the shield of the editorial "we." I have addressed my

reader directly, in a desire to impress upon his mind the fundamental requisites of a salable short story. In a word, I have endeavored to point out, more or less systematically, every step by which an idea may be converted into a short story, fit to appear between the covers of a reputable magazine.

L. W. Q.

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## INTRODUCTION

**N**OWADAYS a good short story is a cash asset. The demand is steady, the market unlimited, and the prices good. No other form of writing attracts half the attention nor commands half the rates of payment. "Fiction," says Jack London, "pays best of all, and when it is of a fair quality, is most easily sold." A literary beginner, I firmly believe, has a much better chance in this field than in any other; and if he possesses a fair education and is in earnest, he has the chance to make a good living and acquire a modest fame.

Every day that passes adds new markets for the short story. Says Frank A. Munsey:

"The great field to-day is for writers of fiction. There is not half enough to go around. Publishers all over the world are reaching out for both short and

long stories. Good ones are extremely difficult to find. Prices have gone up and up and up, but the supply does not begin to equal the demand. Nothing appeals to so wide a class or gives so much pleasure. Love, romance, mystery, adventure, will never lose their charm. They are as fresh to-day with the human heart as they were in old Pompeii and countless ages before."

Nor is the call only for stories by well-known authors. The editors of the very best magazines are constantly on the alert for new writers. Mr. Alden, editor of *Harper's*, says that were it not for these contributors "the magazine would languish in all its fine tissues for lack of the infusion of new blood."

To-day the literary beginner who succeeds is the one who welcomes suggestions. He knows he cannot turn author on the instant, merely by wishing; the wish-appeasing genii are not abroad in this enlightened age. On the contrary he realizes that he must study the profession; must fit himself for the work.

"In my own case," says William Dean

Howells, in his recent book, "Literature and Life," "I noticed that the contributors who could be best left to themselves were those who were most amenable to suggestion and even correction, who took the blue pencil with a smile, and bowed gladly to the rod of the proof-reader. Those who were on the alert for offence, who resented a marginal note as a slight, and bumptiously demanded that their work be printed just as they had written it, were commonly not much more desired by the reader than by the editor."

In conclusion, it may not be amiss to suggest that the short story writer often becomes a novelist. It is true that all who can write short fiction cannot produce a readable book, but a little reflection will show that a large percentage of the novelists served an apprenticeship writing short stories.





I

**THE PLOT**



## CHAPTER I

### THE PLOT

**I**F you want to write a short story, and doubt if you have anything worth the telling, go to bed early some night, get up with the sun the next morning, and take a long walk. Now, with the smell of nature in your nostrils, let your imagination run "as wild as a spook on a spree." Suppose that cloud up there were an air-ship, with a kidnapper aboard, and suppose the boy who had been stolen were the king of Spain. Can't you work out the details of what might happen? Or suppose that girl over there should come to you, silently and mysteriously, and place a roll of greenbacks in your hand, with the words, "To pay for your burial." How would it end? Or suppose you stumbled over that bush there and dropped into a deep hole, where you lay,

far below the surface, listening to the drip! drip! of water near you. And suppose you became thirsty and crawled nearer for a drink, and instead of water found a stream of red blood gurgling among the rocks. Can't you make a story out of that?

All this smacks of the sensational, I grant, but I am going at this theme in a practical manner. I believe your first story will be sold because of its plot. Nine first stories out of ten are. The language is handled carelessly, the situations clumsily, and the development illogically. Yet the stories go right into the heart of things, and are different from those of the rank and file. So I say, if you want to get into print, your story must have a strong plot.

Write love stories. "All the world loves a lover," and editors are human. But make your love story one of action. Don't, as many writers do, take a man and a woman and a dozen meetings and an engagement, and call it a story. Make it unique, make it worth while, make it different from the other love

stories of yesterday and the day before. Make it dramatic; melodramatic, if you will. But wake up your reader; startle the editor and make him read it in spite of himself.

It may interest you to know that fully three-fourths of all the stories submitted nowadays are rejected because of weak or trite plot-interest. In this connection, the following statement, issued by the Frank A. Munsey Co. to its contributors, is of interest:

“We want stories; not dialect sketches, not washed out studies of effete human nature, not weak tales of sickly sentimentality, not pretty writing. We want fiction in which there is a story—action, force, complications. Good writing is as common as clam shells; good stories are as rare as statesmanship. We get thousands of manuscripts, alleged stories, in which the story is not worth the telling, meaningless, flat, inane; and yet many of these stories are cleverly told. They lack merely one thing, and that is the story itself.”

In this statement lies the nucleus of

all I would say. Your first story is not going to be accepted because it has the grace and polish of a master-hand, but because it has something in it worth the telling. This does not mean that it must be sensational or impossible, by any means, but that it is something out of the rut, something that has not been repeated again and again since the beginning of time, something that shall interest the editor and make the public glad that it has been written.

The prime requisite in the manufacture of all such plots is imagination. You may get your suggestion as you will, in the night-time staring hard into the darkness, from a stray paragraph in a paper, from a scene on the street, or in any other way; but you must dress it up, and smooth off the corners that are impossible, and the edges that are not to be told, and build up the hollow places, all with your imagination.

Your plot must be simple enough to meet the requirements of a short story. In novels and in dramas there are a dozen skeins to be untangled, and a

dozen joyous reunions in the last chapter, or just before the curtain drops. The short story should concern itself with but one of these tangles.

Action is the fundamental requisite of a good plot. It transposes affections and situations from what they were at the beginning. A good, selling plot should bridge seeming impossibilities over practically certain disasters to a pleasing end. It should have unity of time, place and action; it should be brief, compact and plausible.

All these qualities are the result of the molder's skill. Let me outline a few methods of obtaining the raw material.

Since the origin of advice, writers have been told to search the newspapers for plots. It is probable, indeed, that a majority are secured through these mediums. Sometimes the plot is the development of a hint or suggestion, sometimes the completion of an unfinished bit of action, and sometimes, more rarely, an incident itself, precisely as it happened.

Again, writers are told to observe the unrecorded incidents of a busy world, the everyday events of their own lives. This method, too, is responsible for many good plots.

In spite of a process for manufacturing plots, however, there are many writers who sit at their desks, gazing blankly at the white paper and praying for inspiration, which in most cases includes something to write and the thoughts to clothe that something. If writers would only concede that in many instances inspiration is only another name for inclination, there would be less praying of this nature.

Very naturally the voluminous writer, *i. e.*, the much inspired writer, soon runs short of plots. Here the amateur flounders; the experienced writer plods on with scarcely a pause. If plots fail him for the moment, he creates situations that afford ample opportunity for dramatic action. The man who writes the Nick Carter weeklies confesses that he forces his characters into some position from which escape, by all the laws of



chance, is impossible. Then he leans back, presumably elated over his skill, and for the first time conceives some method by which the characters may once more acquire liberty and the privilege of more adventures.

In this method lies another plot producer. Outline, in your mind, some situation, improbable, inconsistent, inexplicable. Then fit in the characters and incidents necessary to make it altogether probable, consistent, explainable. Have the country lass, whom the hero loves devoutly, discover him in her father's chicken-coop with a fat pullet under his arm. There's material for a little love comedy. Or have the tourist, begging a drink at the hermit's hut, suddenly cringe at his feet. There's material for a melodramatic tale. Or have a page from a diary, telling of a man's undying passion for a woman, flutter to her feet in some deserted place, preferably from a balloon, an air-ship, an exploding shell far overhead, or what you will. There's material for an unique love story.

It takes imagination, of course, to work out the logical explanation; but if your intellect is not equal to the task, you have no business in the profession of writing fiction. And even when you have supplied your plot in this fashion, and written your story, it will not be a literary production. It will be just the "stuff" of a hack-writer, just a "pot-boiler"; but pot-boilers sell.

**II**

**METHOD OF NARRATION**



## CHAPTER II

### METHOD OF NARRATION

**N**OW that you have your plot well in mind, you must decide how your story is to be told. You must not go about writing it in a haphazard, hit-and-miss fashion, just because you have an idea.

First of all, as I say, you must decide on the method of narration. And right here let me set down a few "don'ts."

Don't write in the first person till the conceit of being a mainstay of a story is a thing of the past. If you persist in being one of the characters, just study yourself. You will find that in the story you are either a conceited ass or a person of impossible intelligence. Telling a story in the first person is open to serious objections. Either you must keep in the background and only guess at what is going on around you, or else you must

put yourself in the middle of the stage, where you can see the full action and where you will be certain to indulge in bits of moralizing and criticising. In a short story, absolutely every paragraph, and even every sentence, should be an unfolding and a development of the plot. You must not preach nor teach in your story; not even hint at such things.

Secondly, don't tell your story by the use of letters or diaries. It is just as impossible to narrate a good story in this manner as it is for an old soldier who fought at Gettysburg to describe the charge up San Juan Hill. To be natural, you must bring in details foreign to your plot, and the story that is not sharply condensed is hopeless.

Thirdly, don't allow an animal or inanimate object to relate the story. The one argument against this course is that no magazine in the country will accept such a story.

Fourthly, don't attempt dialect stories. Although they were in vogue a few years ago, there is now no market at all for them.

Fifthly, don't have a story within a story. All of us have read tales of a railroad wreck, where in the course of a thousand words an injured man is carried to a farm house. Just when you get interested, the man rises up in bed and says: "I will now tell you of my past." And then you find that the real story is about to begin, and that the wreck, and the girl who banded his head, and the quaint old farmer really had nothing to do with the story proper. Common sense should teach that this style is to be avoided.

Successful stories have been written along the above lines, it is true, but the beginner has no right to handicap himself by using these methods.

The best short stories have been written in the third person. These are far more apt to be simple and direct, free from irritating deviations from the central theme, and withal stronger and more interesting. You stand just behind the curtain, with your hand on your puppets. You observe from a distance, and there is no obtruding of your

personality. You tell your story in a perfectly natural, straightforward manner, that is bound to be a pleasant contrast to the affected, slinking way of the first person, of the diaries or letters, or of the narration within narration.

But even in this method there are pitfalls for the unwary. You are apt to believe yourself a regular magician because you can create people out of nothingness, and to imagine you have a perfect right to put down the innermost thoughts of all your characters. This is a wrong view-point. In reality you are the mind of some one of your characters. You can write of his actions, of his likes and dislikes, of his thoughts. But there your power ends. You must not err by putting down the thoughts of all your characters. With the single exception of the one whom you push to the foreground, you must make the minds of your people closed books. You don't know what they feel. You are breathing, thinking, living with just one person. You observe the others as he might.



These rules hold true, of course, only in the ideal short story; the presenting of a bit of real life, the relating of an incident covering only a brief period of time.

No matter what method of narration you may choose, you must make up your mind at the outset to be simple and direct in telling your story. If you try to put style in your work, it will fall flat. After all, style is more or less of a humbug. If your writing is correct, and straight from the heart, and you put your individuality into it, critics will label your way of telling things "style."

Not long ago Mr. Frank A. Munsey said some good things in regard to this quality to the students of Yale University.

"The style that means most," he averred, "is that which comes from a man's own soul. Every one who cuts any figure in life has his own individuality, and it is this very individuality that gives character to style and lifts it out of the rut of machine-made stuff. No man ever gets very far with the

public who squares his work to the slant of other writers.

“The best way to tell your story is to plunge right into it, and let the atmosphere take care of itself, which it is sure to do in good time. The closer you can write to the way you talk, the closer you will come to interesting the reader and attaining a good literary style.”

Charles Darwin once said to a young writer:

“Do not despair about your style. I never study style; all that I do is to try to get the subject as clear as I can in my own head, and express it in the commonest language which occurs to me. But I generally have to think a good deal before the simplest arrangement of words occurs to me. It is a golden rule always to use, if possible, a short old Saxon word. Such a sentence as ‘so purely dependent is the incipient plant on the specific morphological tendency’ does not sound to my ears like good mother English—it wants translating.”

I think there is nothing to add to the foregoing, except that style is largely a quality that comes only after much practice in writing. A beginner apes those who have gone before, and as soon as he learns that in his own individuality lies the only style he can hope to acquire, he is on the high road to success in literature. He must learn to be himself; to make his writing, not affected, but natural. When he fully comprehends this fact, and begins to profit by it, he sets about cultivating style.



**III**  
**THE INTRODUCTION**



## CHAPTER III

### THE INTRODUCTION

**A** STORY well begun is half told. Unless you can interest an editor in your first two or three paragraphs, your story may be submitted to every periodical in the country without the slightest chance of acceptance.

So much depends on the introductory sentences, from the viewpoint of the editor, that fully three-fourths of the stories submitted are never read beyond the first page. If they are lacking in interest here, the editor realizes that the writer knows nothing about the fundamental principles of story-writing, and that what follows is practically certain to violate all its rules. Unless the beginning interests him, therefore, he rejects the manuscript promptly without further reading.

An editor's method of determining the value of a manuscript is very simple.

He scans the introductory paragraph, and if he finds that the writer plunges into his story at the very outset he is interested enough to skim over the entire first page. If nothing is found that condemns the story, the editor now turns to the last page and studies the conclusion. If he finds this weak, the story is returned without further reading; but if it ends with a quick, sharp turn, or in a manner that suggests rapid dramatic action somewhere earlier in the story, he dips into the middle and glances over the other pages; not systematically, but in a hop-skip-and-jump manner. Then, if the first promise is fulfilled, he leans back and reads the story clear through. If he does this, the chances are all in favor of an acceptance, though some detail may still warrant a rejection; or, possibly, the tenor of the story may not be in line with his publication.

From the foregoing it will be seen that if you expect even a careful examination of your story, you must interest the editor at once. You cannot do this with a long description. You



cannot do it by labeling your characters, in imitation of a theater programme. You cannot do it by presenting familiar and worn-out situations.

Ninety per cent. of the "unavailable" stories have one of these faults in their introduction. A good majority of those that are accepted begin with conversation that arouses interest, or striking sentences that make the reader anxious enough for an explanation to read further.

Your first sentence should plunge your reader into the action of your story. Leave your descriptions until you have interested him; then what would have bored him at first will prove only a pleasing explanation of the situation. In the ideal short story, the descriptions are sifted in so adroitly that there is no lagging of movement.

Don't begin your story by having a beautiful maiden wondering if her lover is true. Don't begin by saying that the heroine, dressed in well-fitting clothes, makes a handsome picture. Don't begin by presenting a girl who is review-

ing her past life. All these have been done time and time again. Strive for originality if you would write acceptable stories.

Why not have the girl watching her faithless lover, ten miles away, through a telescope? Why not have the heroine dressed in brightest crimson and living in a convent? Why not have the girl wondering if the man she just pushed in the cistern is dead? All these are far-fetched and extravagant, I admit, but they illustrate the point I would make: that you must begin your story in a manner novel and original.

A goodly number of the light little love stories of to-day need no setting beyond that suggested by the conversation. It is pure idiocy to dilate upon the beauty of the scene, or the charm of the weather, or the innermost feelings of the characters. If you must get these points into your story, do it by suggestion. Make the man and woman so thoroughly in love with each other, that neither you nor a master-hand can keep your reader from knowing that the

scenery is magnificent, nor that the sun is shining its brightest, nor that every sentence your lovers utter is bubbling with sentiment. If you can't get this happiness into your love story, you have failed. Tear it up and write it all over.

Did you ever study Hope's "Dolly Dialogues"? If so, you have found that, although there is no direct information given or scenes described, you are in full possession of all the necessary facts, gleaned through the words and actions of the characters. Yet the stories start abruptly and go forward in a natural sequence of events.

It is the best practice in the world to write a story without the use of any method of presenting ideas except direct discourse.

There are times, of course, when a description of the setting of your story is absolutely necessary. Suppose you wished to say that a man who had been away for years from a girl he loved was approaching her house, a great stone structure high on a hill. You might follow the beginner's example, thus:

“The house of Dorothy Owens was a magnificent stone mansion, beautiful inside and out. It stood on a high hill. But, in spite of its beauty, Dorothy was not happy. Years before she had had a lover, who, could she but have known it, was even now approaching the house, mounted on a mettlesome steed.”

Your ear tells you that this is trite and dull. There is no reason to go on reading; no promise of anything better. Would it not be more interesting if begun a little differently? For instance:

“The horse stopped suddenly, and the man lifted his head with a jerk. For the last mile he had been sitting in the saddle, not caring whom he met, not seeing. Now he looked ahead at the road that led straight up the hill to a house that stood on the summit. For a moment he stared at it, debating with himself. Then he smiled and dug his spurs into the horse.”

The one objection to this latter method is the necessity of saying, more or less bluntly: “But I must now explain that years before this man and woman

had been lovers.” Now, above all else, a short story should possess unity. With this quality of paramount importance, any retrospection is apt to mar the artistic handling. But even this objection may be overcome by the use of suggestive conversation that gives the reader enough of a clue to enable him to understand the situation.

Remember, then, that readers are a busy people, who would have their stories served in condensed pellets if they could, and that to win their approbation you must begin well along in your tale, where enough complications are to be found to catch the interest. In writing, as nowhere else, can be seen the truth of the trite old proverb, “Well begun is half done.”

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**IV**

**THE STORY PROPER**





## CHAPTER IV

### THE STORY PROPER

**T**HE ideal short story is the relation of an isolated incident. In a novel you may introduce your heroine in one chapter and your hero in another, and then shift scenes and seasons with bewildering rapidity to the very end. There is a runaway, perhaps, in which the man saves the girl's life. There is a forest in which the lovers get lost together. There is an automobile wreck that drives them to a farmer's house for supper. But each of these leads up to the climax—the inevitable marriage of the two.

Now, any one of these counter-incidents would make a short story, but all of them together lack the fundamental requisite of brief fiction—unity. The ideal short story begins in one place and ends in that place. It begins with a certain number of characters and ends

with that number. It is an incident by itself, isolated from the other happenings of everyday life.

It may be any length, provided it is not too ungainly to crowd between the covers of a magazine, or too tiny to demand a place at all. Generally speaking, a short story should run between 1,000 and 6,000 words.

Length, of course, is largely a matter of demand rather than of choice. You can't tell some stories in less than 5,000 words without condensing them so sharply as to destroy utterly their charm, and you can't stretch others above 1,500 words without padding them unduly. As in all other things, the ones that do not come close to either extreme are most apt to prove acceptable.

Whatever the length, the ideal short story is one complete chapter. Above all else, it is a unit; and any plot that necessitates chapter divisions is faulty and had better be discarded.

Many of the stories that are sliced up in this fashion by beginners, however, really possess unity. The divisions are

false, and are the result of the writer's idea that they make his story more presentable. The scene may be the same and no interruption to the action have taken place.

Young writers have a habit of using a series of stars or dashes to indicate the lapse of time in their stories. There is no reason for this, other than that the plot is wrongly constructed or that the writers err flatly. The craze for chapter divisions is a senseless one, and comes from a study of the novel.

Perhaps the most common error of the young writer is the unconscious padding by the use of remarks, comments, stray bits of information, or morals entirely foreign to the plot. The proper way to tell a short story is to draw a line from the striking introductory sentence straight to the climax, and never, by a hair's breadth, deviate from that line. Remarks and comments are for the editorial, information for the essay and scientific article, and morals for the religious article. A salable short story is nothing more nor less than a good plot

draped enough to soften the naked crudities without hiding the general beauty of form.

No two stories are alike in structure. For this reason, it is impossible to give specific advice as to the telling. But if you have something with a laugh, a tear, or a thrill, and go about presenting it in a straightforward, natural manner, without hurrying or lagging overmuch, you are pretty sure to produce a story that will sell.

It seems to be the fate of most writers to have a tendency either to take up a great deal too much time in telling their story, or to do it admirably nearly to the end and then seemingly to tire and hurry through to the climax. You will find, most likely, that in writing a story you have a habit of completing it in 1,000 words, or even less, or else taking five or six times that many. In either case, you can easily discover your weakness and strive to correct it.

After you have acquired a little ease in your composition, you will find that there are a dozen ways of telling the same

story, and that your way is apt to be the one that comes to you most easily.

Now, it may be worth while, financially, to try an experiment. After you have your plot well in mind, pick up some magazine and study the structure of its predominating stories. Then adapt your style to that of the magazine, and write your story with the idea that it must follow precisely the model you have chosen. It seems to me that in this way you have a story exactly fitted to a certain line of publications rather than one adapted, almost, to anything published.

You will find, however, that on at least one point all editors are agreed; that is, that conversation is always preferable to description. It is a good plan to go through a completed story and substitute the former for the latter wherever possible. I think I can offer no more forcible advice than that of the writer who said: "It is not necessary to say that a woman is a snarling, grumpy person. Bring in the old lady and let her snarl."

But no matter how you tell your story, it must follow the general rule of leading up to a climax. In its broadest sense, this may be illustrated by recalling a good detective or mystery story. It is this very thing that makes the poorly educated read stories; the very thing that makes some people turn to the last chapter in a book before reading the others; the very thing that makes a child urge you to go on and on in telling a story—merely the desire to see how it all comes out, to know why this character did that and that one this, all through the narrative. It is really inborn curiosity, and if a story did not hold out the promise of a denouement or climax very few would read it.

In writing your story, therefore, you must keep this always in mind. Little suggestions whet the reader's appetite and make him eager to go on. These, however, should not be broad. "Little did she think that ere the setting of another sun a great calamity would be upon them." This method lacks delicacy and is certain to create disgust.

Strike out along new lines, that your reader may never guess how the story is to end, and then lead him on, step by step, till the climax comes, sharp and clear, like the snap of a whip.

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 14th inst. in relation to the above mentioned matter. I have the pleasure to inform you that the same has been forwarded to the proper authorities for their consideration. I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
 Yours obediently,  
 J. M. Smith



**V**

**CONCLUSION AND CLIMAX**



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND CLIMAX

**W**HEN your story is ended, stop. Don't ramble on and tell how the man built a magnificent home and how the two turtle doves lived there for years and years. Lead your reader up to the engagement and drop the curtain abruptly on the scene of bliss. The chances are that later a flurry in stocks swallowed up all the man's wealth and that the white hands of the girl turned brown and chapped over the wash board. But if you stop at the proper place, your reader will never think of the possibility of such things.

If you tack on a remark after your story is ended, it will ruin it all. Amateurs have a habit of closing a love story something like this:

"She looked up at him, with the love

light in her eyes, and said, ever so softly, 'Yes.' Then he put his arms around her, and drew her close, and pressed kiss after kiss on her eager lips. And finally, just at twilight, the two walked back to the village, busily planning a little cottage for the future."

Now, properly this story ends with the word "Yes." What follows is anticlimax, and is the kind of writing that has given rise to the phrase, "sickly sentimentality."

In the story suggested by the foregoing conclusions, all the ideas are centered on the winning of the girl's hand. Earlier in the tale, perhaps, there has been another lover, and complications and desperate moves. Everything has led up to the proposal and acceptance. All through, the reader has seen what is coming, and has hoped and feared with the hero. The conclusion of all this has been the single word, "Yes." This, then, is the climax.

Let us look for a moment at what this climax accomplishes. First, it ends definitely the element of suspense. Sec-

only, it decides the destinies of the characters. Thirdly, it is the severing of all connection with the plot. Fourthly, it is a logical explanation of the cause of all the previous action. Fifthly, it is really the point of the whole story. It may be said, therefore, to fulfill all the requirements.

A climax should never drag. It should come clear and sharp, like the snap of a whip. You should then be able to finish your story before the sound has died out, before the impression it leaves has been counterbalanced by tedious and dull explanations.

The climax in what is known as the "surprise story" is invariably false. Though it may amuse, it does so through the ingenuity of the writer rather than through a logical appeal to the sensibilities. It is clever, but not artistic, to write that a man followed you home one night, and slunk in the shadows when you stopped, and that he ran toward you suddenly, at your doorstep, and you saw—only your Newfoundland dog; or that after smoking the drugged

cigar, and allowing the pocketbook to slip to the floor as you became unconscious, you—suddenly awoke and found it was all a dream; or that in the middle of the night, by some intuitive process, you felt certain that some assailant near at hand was about to murder you in cold blood, and that you lay there quivering—until you fell asleep and woke the next morning to laugh over your active imagination. The climax in all these stories is false, and will not pass muster with a critical editor.

The single good point about this class is that its stories seldom deal with real tragedy. In spite of all the hue and cry for realistic fiction, it is the stories with happy endings that sell. True, the best magazines give space to tragic stories, but they do it, not because tragedy appeals to them, but because the telling is too artistic to risk rejection; in other words, the manner overbalances the matter. But these stories are written by experienced authors, whose positions are secure. The beginner should shun the sad ending.

The true story should also be avoided. Here, again, it is the conclusion that causes a good share of the trouble. In real life, it is next to impossible to find a narrative that ends as you and the editor would wish. To make it artistic at all, you must put in a generous seasoning of the untrue and transform the climax altogether.

The conclusion of any story is worthy of the very best efforts of a writer. It is really the story itself, for it embraces the climax, or culmination of the plot. Nine times out of ten, your whole story may be discovered by reading your last paragraph or two. It takes but a glance at this point to indicate its nature.

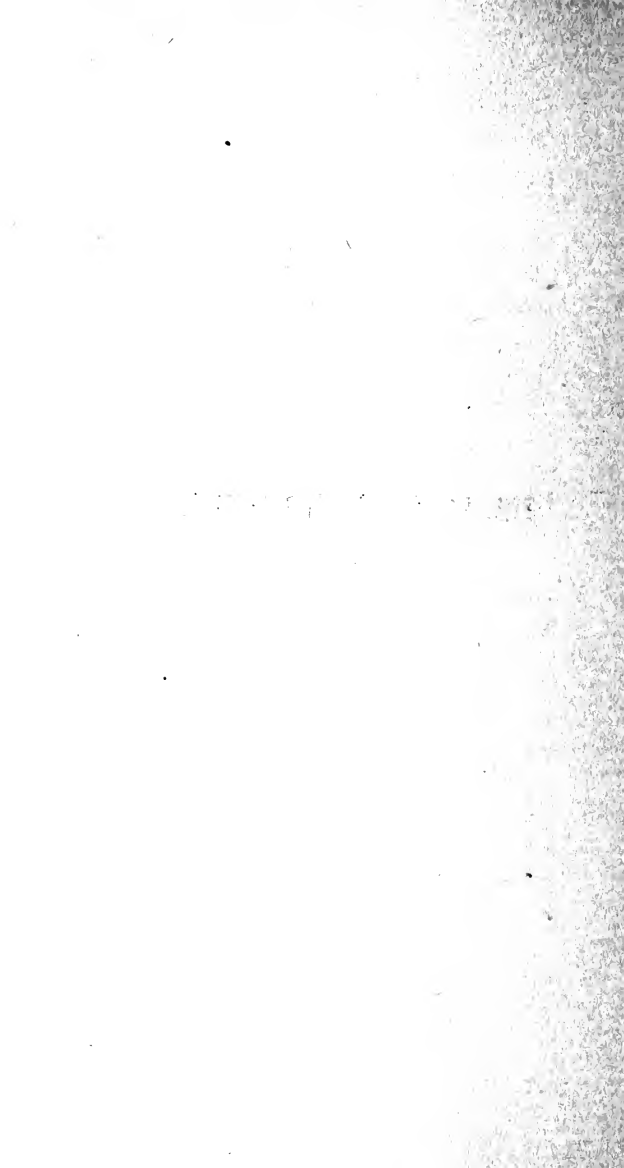
If you will keep always in mind the fact that the editor studies your conclusions to see whether the story proper is worth an examination, it is probable that you will see to it that this part has merit. It is the conclusion, remember, that leaves the taste in the reader's mouth, and makes him decide whether or not the story is worth while. If you end tritely, he will characterize your

whole composition as trite; if you round off your story artistically, he will be apt to consider all that has gone before as artistic.



**VI**

**THE PREPARATION OF MANUSCRIPT**



## CHAPTER VI

### THE PREPARATION OF MANUSCRIPT

**W**HEN you have expended your best energies on your story, and by careful revision have brought it to the highest degree of excellence of which you are capable, it is ready to be dressed up in a fetching manner for the editorial eye. You must now recopy it in such a way that no mark of your workmanship in recasting and reconstructing will show. Fine clothes do not make an acceptance, any more than they make a gentleman, but they command respect in both cases.

First of all, your manuscript should be neatly and correctly typewritten. I don't care how legibly you may write, you can't compare with the printed letters of the machine. Moreover, you are stringing a thousand-word story over great pads of paper, when you might print it on four thin sheets. An editor's

time is economized as much as possible, and he will run through three type-written stories sooner than plod through one penscript. He knows, furthermore, that the careful, experienced writer will send him type copy, and that the chances are ten to one that the script is full of blunders and errors common to the beginner, who has never studied the subject of writing. Penscripts are signs of inexperience. Editors appreciate this fact, and the sooner young writers do, the better will be their chances of success in literature.

In typewriting a manuscript, it should be doubly spaced. This is done for two reasons. First, it is much easier on the eyes if the lines are not close together. Munsey is said to get three thousand manuscripts each month. Of course, these are handled by a great many readers for the company, but at the same time one man has to read a large number of them. The strain on the eyes will be readily apparent, and the thoughtfulness of the writer who seeks to make easier the task by double spacing his

work will be appreciated. Again, if a manuscript can be made acceptable by changing it somewhat, the space between the lines gives plenty of room for correction. Nothing that will serve to lessen the work of an editor should be left undone.

Now that the story is typewritten, the name and address should be added in the upper, left-hand corner. It is much better to do this with the machine than with a pen, as most people write their names so hurriedly that it is almost impossible to decipher them. It seems to me that there is no reason for a signature on the manuscript, though some disagree on this point. At all events, it is imperative that the name and address, in some form, be on the first page.

The number of words should now be estimated and placed in the upper right-hand corner. This estimate need not be exact; indeed it is foolish to say the manuscript contains 3,449 words, or any other precise number. It should, however, be fairly accurate. Count the number of words in the average line,

the number of lines on a page, and the number of pages. No allowance should be made for short lines. In this way, it is easy to get the approximate length of the story. The editor will appreciate this courtesy, as it enables him to tell at a glance the amount of space the story would occupy in his magazine.

The top of the first page of your manuscript will now appear something like this:

J. D. Banner,	3,500 words.
Blank City, N. Y.	
THE REVOLT OF UNCLE JOHN.	
By	
JAMES DARKEN BANNER	

Just beneath the title of the story should be placed the name of the author as he wishes it to appear in print. If he is writing under a *nom-de-plume*, an affectation countenanced neither by good sense nor good business ability, it should be placed here.

A soiled manuscript tells its own story of previous rejections, and invites others.

“You are not taking an unfair advantage of an editor,” says Albert Bigelow Paine, “when you renovate your much-traveled manuscript, or recopy it on clean paper. You are taking an unfair advantage of your manuscript when you do not do it, and you are insulting the editor, who does not care where your story or article or poem has been, so long as it is presented to him invitingly.”

The paper on which the story is copied should be of good texture, light in weight, but not transparent. A size about  $8\frac{1}{2}$  by 11, folded twice, has a great many advantages. Never fasten the sheets of your manuscript together in any way. They should be loose, to be shuffled as the editor finds need. Two sizes of envelopes should be purchased, one to fit within the other without folding. A stamped, self addressed envelope should accompany every manuscript.

If the name and address of the writer are on the first page, no explanatory note is necessary. As a matter of courtesy, however, a very brief one may be

sent. It should be somewhat along the following lines:

Editor, Blank Magazine,  
New York City.

Dear Sir:

The enclosed manuscript is submitted with the hope that it may be found available for publication in The Blank Magazine, at your usual rates.

Never display your lack of common sense by any of the petty little tricks common to the writers who believe their manuscripts are not read. If an editor finds the sheets of your story lightly gummed together, he will not take the trouble to separate them. Neither will he sort out pages not properly numbered. He cannot afford to waste time on writers who stoop to such detestable actions. He knows they will never be able to please him with their work.

Your manuscript will be read if it is worth while and properly prepared. If your first page is dull, your second may never be read. But if you have good material, served up in such a way that the reading is more of a pleasure than a task, your manuscript will be con-



sidered on its merits, whether it is signed by Rudyard Kipling or by John Brown.

I have had the pleasure of reading manuscripts by such writers as Jack London, Albert Bigelow Paine, Charles Battell Loomis, and a great many of the best authors of the day; and I say unhesitatingly that their copy, without exception, was the neatest and most correct that ever came under my eye. These men have won their positions in current literature by pure merit, and their example in the preparation of copy is worth following.



**VII**

**THE PLACING OF THE STORY**



## CHAPTER VII

### THE PLACING OF THE STORY

**I**RANK the ability to sell a story nearly as high as the ability to write one. Unless you can dispose of your manuscript, after you have spent hours over it, your work counts for nothing. I have seen a great many young writers, some of pronounced ability, who have given up the literary profession because they were unable to sell their work. For this reason, I say that the selling is well nigh as important as the writing.

To place a story to good advantage, you must know the market through and through. It is not enough to know that the leading ten-cent magazines use love stories. You must know wherein those found in *McClure's* differ from those in *Munsey's*, in *Everybody's*, in *The Cosmopolitan*, in every other magazine that

has a personality. You must know the shades of difference that separate *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas*; *Harper's*, and *The Smart Set*; *The Woman's Home Companion* and *The Ladies' Home Journal*. When you begin to detect the points in which the editorial needs and whims differ, you are in a position to become acquainted with the literary market.

If you write stories, it is your business to make a systematic and thorough study of magazines that use short fiction. You must learn to note whether action, complications, character drawing, style, humor, or any one of a dozen other qualities is responsible for the acceptance and publication of every story you read. If you find stories that lack plot altogether, you must discover what feature takes its place. It is only in this way that you can become fully acquainted with the magazines.

Too many young writers consider the ease with which a story may be written, rather than its adaptability for any magazine. A great number of students in

high schools and colleges write fiction which is praised by classmates and teachers, and which may really be good from an artistic standpoint, but which is entirely out of line with the needs of any magazine. I have seen stories that were offered to such publications as *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas*, in which the boys played pranks that would shock the good mothers and fathers of proper children. These stories were about boys, however, and for this reason their writers imagined them fitted for the publications to which they were sent. They had absolutely no chance of acceptance, and a study of the magazines would have shown the folly of submitting such manuscripts.

Not only must you know the market but you must know your own work. You must be able to distinguish between a story adapted to *Harper's* and *The Century*, and one that is fit only for the newspapers and syndicates. You must judge your own work honestly and without prejudice.

A story fresh from your brain will

sound better than one that has been laid aside for a day or two. You will be able to pass upon its merits more impartially if you put it away until your enthusiasm cools. You will also find that it is good practice to read your stories aloud to some other person before you submit them to any magazine. The defects and crude portions will become discernible in a way they never would otherwise, particularly if your hearer is capable of criticising.

A good critic is of inestimable value. I would rather have an unbiased, honest opinion of my story, from some one who was capable of judging it, than all the praise in the world. As a matter of fact, the friends who laud your work usually do not appreciate either the defects or the merits. An unprejudiced criticism of your story will benefit you more than anything else in this matter of choosing a market.

The question of timeliness is one that should be studied. A story that fits the season has a much better chance of acceptance than one which may be used



at any time and is of equal literary value. Readers expect a Christmas story in the December magazine, an Independence Day story in the July number, and seasonable fiction at all times. A great many writers overlook this fact altogether. Christmas stories are usually weak in plot; they have been done with a regularity that has exhausted all ideas. A fairly original Yule-tide story, offered during the summer months, or a good Fourth of July tale, submitted during the first quarter of the year, stands a very good chance of acceptance. If you will remember that stories should be submitted from three to six months before the issue of the magazine in which they should appear, you will be stealing a march on less experienced and less observing writers.

In considering the type of character of stories, a second side of the question of timeliness also plays a part. Like clothes, stories follow the fashions. Yesterday dialect stories were the style; the day before romantic fiction; the day before that, bald realism. To-day the

stories that border on history claim recognition. To-morrow the style may change. By keeping a close watch on what is in vogue, you can more easily please the editor.

Some one has said that there is a place for every story, good, bad or indifferent, that is written. To a great extent, this statement is true. At the top stand the best magazines; at the bottom, the little pamphlet publications that do not pay for contributions. Between these extremes lie hundreds of magazines, papers, syndicates, etc., that purchase stories. Just below the best magazines are the literary weeklies. The religious papers and magazines brighten their pages with fiction. The juvenile publications pay excellent prices. The household and domestic journals run serials and short stories. Even the class publications give space to fiction. Hundreds of newspapers throughout the country offer good markets. The several syndicates purchase liberally and pay well. For no class of work is the market as wide as for the short story.

You will meet rebuffs in placing your work, lots of them. You will grow discouraged, no doubt, before you dispose of your manuscript. But if you have not the bull-dog tenacity to stick to it, to meet each returning manuscript with a smile, and to go on hoping and believing in yourself, you have no business in the literary profession. Nor should rejections discourage you. "The story, or the article, or the poem," says Albert Bigelow Paine, "may come back again and again. The author may rewrite it over and over; but if he perseveres, and the offering is genuine, it will find its place and welcome at last. I have had stories and poems returned to me as many as fifteen times, only to place them at last in a better market than I had hoped for in the beginning. The author who gives up after one rejection, or two, or ten, is unworthy of the name."

THE END

# *The Editor*

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