

Short Fiction & Flash Fiction — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into finished, submission-ready stories. Each section mirrors a course module with hands-on exercises, fill-in worksheets, and checklists. Work through it in order, and by the end you will have two polished pieces, a tiered market list, and an active submission tracker.

The Shape of a Short Story

Define the form, lock the three structural beats, and map your first story before drafting.

Exercise: Name the Single Effect

Choose a piece of real material (an anecdote, a memory, an overheard moment). Write the single dominant impression you want to leave in one sentence. If you cannot name it, you have material, not yet a story.

- In one sentence, the one feeling I want the reader to walk away with is...

- The one-eighth of this story I will show, and the seven-eighths I will leave below the surface, are...

- Rewrite the single effect as a feeling, not a topic (e.g. not grief but the grief of being forgiven too late).

Worksheet: Story Map (Desire-Obstacle-Change)

Fill every field for the story you will draft this module. Bring real material. Keep it to one page; if a field is blank, your story is not ready to draft.

Character (one line, one defining pressure)

Concrete scene-level desire (specific, not abstract)

Obstacle (ideally another person with their own want)

Stakes (cost of failure or success)

Inciting incident (what makes today different)

The turn (the irreversible change)

Resonant ending image

Single effect (one sentence)

Target word count

Checklist: Structure Soundness Check

- My story starts as close to the change as possible (late entry)
- The inciting incident disturbs a stable situation
- There is one irreversible turn, not three competing ones
- The obstacle is a person, not weather or bad luck
- The ending resonates with an image rather than explaining the meaning
- Word-count target matches scene count (flash = 1-2 scenes)

Compression and the Art of Flash

Build the compression skills that let a complete story land in under 1,000 words.

Exercise: Scene-or-Summary Audit

Take a draft of 1,000 to 1,500 words. Label every paragraph S (scene, real-time) or U (summary, compressed time). Then rebalance so scene is spent only on the turn and the highest-stakes exchange.

- Which paragraph contains my turn, and is it rendered in scene?

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- Which scene can I compress into a single summary sentence?

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- Where can a white-space break replace a transitional scene?
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Exercise: Two Lengths, One Material

Draft the same core moment twice: once as a 100-word drabble and once as a 750-word flash piece. Compare how much arc each length can hold.

- In the 100-word version, does the last word reverse or recontextualize the first?

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- In the 750-word version, what one controlling image carries the emotion?

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- Which version delivers the single effect more strongly, and why?
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Worksheet: Controlling Image Planner

Pick one concrete image to carry your flash piece. Fill in how it appears and shifts across the story so it gathers meaning instead of just decorating.

The single controlling image (a concrete object or motif)

How it appears early (neutral or admired)

How it shifts at the turn

How it echoes, changed, at the end

One sentence of stated emotion I will DELETE and let the image carry instead

Borrowed (hermit-crab) form, if any (recipe, transcript, quiz, safety card)

Checklist: Flash Tightness Check

- [] Total word count is under my target (100, 750, or 1,000)
- [] The setup is summarized; the turn is in scene
- [] One controlling image recurs and changes meaning
- [] At least one white-space break does compression work
- [] No sentence states an emotion the image could carry
- [] The piece fits at least one real flash market's word cap

Voice, Openings, and Endings

Sharpen point of view, write an opening that earns the next sentence, and land a resonant last line.

Exercise: Same Opening, Three POVs

Write a 150-word opening three times: first person, close third, and second person. Read each aloud and notice how each changes what the reader feels (confession, witness, accusation).

- Which POV best serves my single effect, and why?

• Where in my chosen POV does the psychic distance shift, and is the shift gradual?

• Does any sentence lurch from distant (level 1) to deep interiority (level 5) and jar the reader?

Exercise: First Sentence and the Delete Test

Rewrite your opening so the first sentence carries a concrete action and an implied stake. Then delete your original opening paragraph and decide whether the story is stronger without it.

- Does my first sentence contain a body, a stake, and a question?

• Is the real start actually paragraph two?

• Would I keep reading past the first paragraph if this were not my own story?

Worksheet: Five Last Lines

Write five alternate final sentences for one draft, each using a different ending move. Read all five aloud and mark the one that delivers the single effect most strongly.

Closing image ending

Reversal ending (flips an earlier meaning)

Resonant gap ending (stops before the obvious next beat)

Earned return ending (echoes the opening, now changed)

Wildcard ending

Chosen last line and why it wins

Checklist: Line-Level Voice Check

- [] POV is consistent and serves the single effect
- [] The opening drops the reader into a moment, not into weather or backstory
- [] The first sentence establishes voice through rhythm and diction

- [] The ending resonates rather than explaining the lesson
- [] I avoided the trick ending, the false uplift, and the explained ending

Revision and Getting Published

Revise in named passes, build a tiered market list, and run a real submission pipeline.

Exercise: Four-Pass Revision Run

Run one draft through all four passes in order, ideally on separate days: structure, scene, line (read aloud), and proof. Record word count before and after.

- Structure pass: which whole scene can I cut without losing the single effect?

- Line pass: which filter words (saw, heard, felt, realized) and crutch words (just, very, suddenly) did I remove?

- How many words did I cut, and did the piece gain power?

Worksheet: Tiered Market List

Using Duotrope, Chill Subs, or the Submission Grinder, build a ranked list of at least 20 markets. Fill the fields for each, then assign a tier (reach, target, safety).

Market name

Word-count cap

Reading fee (and whether it is over 25 dollars)

Pay (token, contributor copy, or pro rate of 8 cents per word or more)

Average response time

Simultaneous submissions allowed (yes or no)

One published story I read for fit

Tier (reach, target, or safety)

Worksheet: Cover Letter Builder

Draft a short, professional cover letter (about three sentences). Do not summarize or explain the story. Fill each field and assemble.

Greeting (editor name if known, otherwise Dear Editors)

Title and exact word count

One line of relevant publication history, or none

Closing thanks and your name

Note: does this market want the story pasted, attached, or via Submittable?

Checklist: Pre-Submission Final Check

- Manuscript is formatted to Shunn standard (or the market's stated format)
- Cover letter is three sentences and does not explain the story
- I confirmed whether simultaneous submissions are allowed
- I logged the submission with date, market, fee, and response window
- I have a plan to withdraw from other markets immediately on acceptance
- I accept that a 90 percent-plus rejection rate is normal and will keep submitting

Your Action Plan

1. Complete a story map and draft your first short story (target 1,500 to 4,000 words)
2. Draft one 100-word drabble and one 750-word flash piece
3. Rewrite the flash piece around a single controlling image, cutting all stated emotion
4. Test three POVs on one opening and choose the one your single effect needs
5. Apply the delete-paragraph-one test and rewrite your strongest opening
6. Write five alternate last lines and select the most resonant
7. Run your two best pieces through the full four-pass revision
8. Build a tiered market list of 20-plus journals, anthologies, and contests
9. Format both pieces to Shunn standard and draft a cover letter for each
10. Submit to at least three markets and log every submission in your tracker

