**Characteristics of the Short Story:**

A *short story* is a name given to a fictional prose selection, which is short (*it can be read in one sitting*) and is a story (*it narrates an event or incident*).

A number of other general characteristics, however, can be given as a means of further defining the short story:

1. It is based on one incident or character
2. It has, usually, from 3 to 6 characters
3. It presents a conflict situation, from which suspense arises
4. It may or may not have a definite conclusion or outcome

**Elements of the Short Story:**

**1. PLOT**: The sequence of incidents or events that make up a story. The plot has the following parts:

1. Exposition
2. Initial Incident
3. Rising Action
4. Climax
5. Falling Action
6. Denouement/Resolution

**A. Exposition:** This first element is of vital importance to the short story reader. In it, the author outlines, either directly or by implication, background information that the reader must have if he/she is going to understand the story. The exposition may act as an introduction to the story, or it may be included in various places throughout the story, as the need arises, as explanation to help the reader. The following may be considered parts of the exposition:

1. **Time:** How specific the author is with the time period of the story varies greatly. He may be very specific, saying, for example, that this event took place between the hours of one and two in the morning of August 29, 1835. He may, on the other hand, tell the reader nothing about the time; the reader may be able, by implication only, to arrive at the time period. Usually, however, the time period of the story is made clear in some manner which falls between these two extremes.
2. **Place:** The events of the story must happen in some place, even if that setting is outer space. As in the case of time, the author may be very specific or very vague about the setting of the story.
3. **Antecedent Action:** This part of the exposition is probably the most important. Just as a person must become familiar with a new situation before he can understand what is going on, so does the reader of a short story need to become familiar with events that have occurred prior to the opening of the story, and which have led up to the situation or event beginning in the story itself. The author will be selective, and will include only those things that have a bearing on the story.
4. **Atmosphere and Mood**: The atmosphere of a story will likely be evident at the story’s beginning, although the mood may change as the story progresses. *Atmosphere* is generated by the author in order to create a certain *mood* in the reader.

**B. Initial Incident:** The initial incident begins the story proper. It is the first incident that introduces the conflict, or begins the suspense. Without this particular incident taking place, the conflict developed in the story could not have taken place. Care must be exercised to not confuse some incidents from the antecedent action, which happened prior to the introduction of the conflict, with the initial incident itself.

**C. Rising Action:** The major part of a short story is made up of the rising action. It is based on the conflict introduced in the initial incident, plus complications that cast doubt on the eventual solution of the protagonist’s problem. Suspense is built up through the combination of these two.

**D. Climax:** The climax occurs when the conflict, as introduced in the initial incident, is resolved.

1. **Happy Ending:** If the protagonist solved the conflict successfully, the climax brings about a happy ending to the story.
2. **Unhappy Ending:** If the protagonist does NOT solve the conflict, and is defeated by the forces arrayed against him (antagonist), the climax brings about an unhappy ending.
3. **Indeterminate Ending:** In some stories, the conflict is not solved. In this case there is no real climax, and the ending of the story is in fact undetermined (i.e. ‘cliff hanger’ ending in films)

**E. Falling Action:** This occurs right after the climax. It is what happens right after the main conflict of the story has been resolved; however, many short stories may not have a falling action.

**F. Denouement/Resolution:** The short story may or may not have a denouement. It is the ‘wrapping up’ of the story, where the author may explain the climax or tell what happens to the main characters following the climax. The denouement ties up any loose ends.

**2. CHARACTER:** Character development in the short story will depend on the relative importance of the character to the overall story. A character may be revealed in five ways, regardless of how deeply the author wishes to develop them:

**INDIRECT PRESENTATION DIRECT PRESENTATION**

1. What a person says 1. What others say about the person

2. What a person does 2. What the author says about the person

3. What a person thinks

Indirect presentation is the most effective because the reader generally prefers to reach his own conclusions about a character from what the character says, does, or thinks, rather than be told directly about them by the author or someone in the story.

Each character in a short story can be described by using one or more of the following terms:

1. **Flat character**: is a character that may be summed up by one or two traits. They receive limited development at the hands of the author.
2. **Round character**: is a character that is complex and many-faceted, and thus realistic. The author developed this character fully.
3. **Static character**: is a character that is the same at the end of the story as at the beginning. They do not undergo any basic personality changes.
4. **Dynamic (developing) character**: a character that undergoes a permanent change in his personality as a result of the situation presented in the story.
5. **Stock character**: is a stereotyped character, whose characteristics are immediately known because of common conceptions (or misconceptions) about certain groups of people.

The central character in the short story is referred to as the **protagonist**. The force or forces working against the protagonist is/are called the **antagonist**.

**3. POINT OF VIEW:** The short story writer may use any of the following methods (points of view) in telling the story:

1. **Omniscient narrator**: The narrator may be compared with God, seeing all and knowing all. They know the past, present and future of all of the characters, and may take the reader into the characters’ minds to tell us what they are thinking. The story is written in the **third person**.
2. **Limited omniscient narrator**: The author limits the narrator’s omniscience to only one character, about which they know all. They can tell the reader what that character is thinking, but cannot do so for the other characters. The story is written in the **third person**.
3. **First person narrator**: The narrator becomes a character in the story. They know all about the character’s past and what is happening to them at present, but cannot predict the future. The story is written in the **first** **person**.
4. **Objective narrator**: The narrator tells the story as though they are a video camera. They tell only what they see and hear and do not try to interpret or go into the feelings of the characters. The story is written in the **third person**.

**4. CONFLICT:** You must have a *conflict* in order to have a plot. The three general types of conflict in literature are:

1. **Character vs. character**: This involves the struggle between the main protagonist and the antagonist. A character struggles with another character (good guy vs. bad guy).
2. **Character vs. himself**: This involves the struggle between a character and himself. This struggle takes place in the character’s mind and it usually has something to do with a choice (right and wrong) or overcoming emotions or mixed feelings.
3. **Character vs. environment:** This involves the struggle between the character and an outside force (nature, supernatural, society). The character may be struggling to survive or fighting against traditions or rules.

**5. IRONY:** The ironical writer presents a surface meaning – ***what is said*** – and an intended meaning – ***what is really meant***. The reader must discern the difference. Irony is a contrast in which one term of the contrast in some way indicates the other term. Irony is used primarily by the author to suggest the complexity of life and experience. There are three types of irony:

a) **Verbal Irony**: The opposite is said from what is actually intended.

Ex: *“A healthy young child… is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled”.* Jonathan Swift uses this grotesque, ironical image to plead more forcefully for the humane treatment of the Irish who were starving in the Irish famine. Some verbal irony sounds like sarcasm, and in fact most sarcasm is verbal irony in an extremely simple form.

b) **Dramatic Irony**: The contrast is between what a character says or thinks and what the reader knows to be true. We as readers have information the other characters do not. This type of irony is commonly used to involve readers in a storyline.

c) **Situational Irony**: This is the discrepancy between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate.

**6. THEME:** Theme is the controlling idea or central insight of a piece of fiction; the unifying generalization about life which is stated or implied by the story. To find theme we must ask:

1. “What is the central purpose of the story?”
2. “What is the view of life supported by the story?”
3. “What are the insights into life revealed by the story?”

Not all stories have themes, and not all themes are apparent to everyone. A theme only occurs when an author has seriously tried to record life realistically in their story, or if he/she is trying to reveal some truth about life. This explains why interpretive literature always has a theme.

**7. SYMBOLS:** A symbol is an object that stands for something larger than itself, usually an abstract concept (such as love, jealousy, or faith). It is an object, a person, a situation, an action, or some other item which has a literal meaning in the story, but suggests or represents other meanings as well. It means both what it is and something more. For example, a dove is both a bird and a symbol of peace.

Keep the following ‘cautions’ in mind when looking for symbols:

1. Symbols always signal their existence by repetition.
2. The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported throughout the entire story.
3. The symbol must suggest an abstract meaning in addition to its literal meaning.
4. Symbols may have more than one meaning.

**8. FORESHADOWING:** This is a [literary device](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Literary_device) in which an [author](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Author) drops subtle hints about [plot](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Plot) developments to come later in the [story](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Story). Each of these hints widens the range of possible consequences and maintains tension throughout the narrative as these possibilities narrow.

**PLOT DIAGRAM:**

