

Extreme Flash Fiction Workshop: How To Write Stories Under Thirty Words

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

Part I of this workshop is on my blog. Click this link and play the game.

When you're done, come back (there's a link from the blog).

BUT...

Don't read beyond this point until you've played.

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PART II: The Rest of the Workshop

The work excuses game I presented on June 1, 2013 was not actually a game. Well, it WAS a game. But it was also a writing class in extreme flash fiction (you can read all the stories here), with this follow-up article to the game in which I show you why the game worked, and how you can write extreme flash fiction and get paid for it.

The folks who played the game by following the rules—by making up a work excuse that told an extremely condensed version of something that was preventing them from going to work, but that left essential details unsaid—wrote up to three extreme flash fiction stories.

This story, often attributed to Hemingway, but apparently misattributed, is a six-word example of the same category:

“For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.”

By following the instructions I gave—to offer a short explanation while omitting essential details that would leave the listener unable to sleep until he had them—writers created some truly compelling stories.

But how did they—perhaps you—do this, without realizing you were writing flash fiction, without fighting for ideas, without struggling with recalcitrant muses?

Let me break down my own extreme flash stories, show you why they work, and explain WHY this exercise resulted in so many really good stories.

First, my stories and why they worked.

The rules of the game were that all three stories were given at excuses for why the narrators could not go in to work that

day, and that the narrator had to go immediately because the situation was still developing. The only part the writers were to write was the work excuse itself.

Onward.

STORY ONE: I'm on my way to the ER because I caught my nipple in a chain-link fence.

Why does this story work?

First, there's the gender issue, which is male or female? If female, the need for an explanation is more intense, because chain link fences are outside, and female nipples...aren't. So there's the *WHAT?!* question.

Second, whether male or female, there is no rational connection between nipples and chain-link fences. These two items are not related to each other normally, so next, the reader's mind goes the question of HOW? What were you DOING that caused this to happen?

Third, once the reader has wondered about HOW, he or she has to wonder WHY the narrator got himself into this situation?

Fourth, the reader, left wondering both HOW and WHY this happened, has to think, is this something that could ever happen to me (the reader)?

STORY TWO: The National Guard has cordoned off the space ship and my house is inside the perimeter.

I don't think this story is as strong, but it does have its tenths of a second.

First, what happened that brought in the National Guard, which is called up for disasters, riots, and other things that generally involve a whole lot of folks in big trouble?

Second, "space ship" moves the story into the realm of a lot

of folks' "please let this be real" zone, and simultaneously hits the "please let this be a hoax" zone for a lot of other folks.

Third, if the spaceship is cordoned off, HOW is the house **inside** the perimeter. In other words, WHERE is the space ship in relation to the house?

Fourth, of course, is WHY? Why is the space ship here (on the planet), WHY is the space ship there (in, on, under, or over the house)? Why is the space ship THERE (that particular house, that particular person)?

Fifth is, is any part of this conflict between the National Guard, a space ship, and the reader going to expand to involve **me** (the reader)?

STORY THREE: The other tiger is still loose.

Consider this one before reading my answers. See if you can figure out why it works before I tell you.

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First, tigers are big and scary, so where is the narrator that tigers are involved?

Second, WHY is the narrator where tigers are involved?

Third, WHERE are the tigers supposed to be, and WHY are they not there?

Fourth, WHAT happened to the first tiger?

Fifth, WHERE is the second tiger...and might that second tiger

involve me?

For stories much longer than a single sentence—say from 31 words up to about a thousand words, you need to do more. I cover the details of longer flash fiction in **How To Create Flash Fiction That Doesn't Suck**, which is a **free three-week class** over at HowToThinkSideways.com.

But learning to create any sort of fiction is a learnable, step-by-step process.

Second, then, let me walk you through the three steps for writing extreme flash fiction.

- 1. Create a situation with which potential readers can connect, or empathize.**

Why? Because the reader of a story he empathizes with will role-play the story in his head. He will be, in the case of the game I created, either the boss receiving the excuse for absence, or the narrator telling it. By assuming one of these two roles, he will create an emotional attachment to the story and its outcome. He will, in other words, build out a number of possible scenarios in which the story could come to a conclusion.

- 2. Create a plausible reason for only telling a part of the story** (in this case, the hurried telephone call; in the case of the “Baby Shoes” story, the fact that it’s appearing in the classifieds, where each word cost the advertiser money. This reason gives each story context and immediacy. For example: *Of course you can't tell the whole story...you've been invaded by both aliens and the National Guard.*

- 3. Write out a sentence that gives just enough detail to require the reader to connect odd dots** to try to complete the story himself. These are fun to read

because the reader has to invent situations that fit the information he's been given. Our brains love to play, and this is play of the best kind.

Third, the answer to the question: What can you *DO* with extremely short flash fiction that will PAY you?

You can come up with a situation that a lot of folks can relate to:

- Wanting (or needing) to miss a day at work
- Having a baby
- Being a mother
- Being a father
- Talking to young children
- Pursuing a hobby, like fishing, or skiing, or skydiving, or knitting
- Designing software, being a fireman, being a cop, being a nurse, being a writer
- And so on...

You then come up with a reason why the stories will all be short:

- **One Hundred Things A Four Year Old Can Say That Will Make Your Hair Stand On End**
- **Ninety-Nine 30-Second Excuses Lost Aliens Make When They've Crashed On Your Lawn**
- **102 Things You'll NEVER Tell Your Doctor**
- **The 100 Scariest Things You'll Ever See In The ER** (do make sure it's VERY clear this is fiction, and make up 100% of your stories, because otherwise you'll be violating all the patient confidentiality rules in the world).

And then you write them out. Make sure you have at least 2500 words of stories, do a little intro, do an *About The Author* at the end with a link to your website, package the thing into an ebook, and put it on sale. Humor, horror, science fiction, romance, lit fic, fantasy, mystery, Westerns... There is no genre where this would not work.

Finally, why were these stories so easy for writers to write?

Why could these writers create these great stories without stalling out, being self-conscious, or suffering from writers block or lack of ideas?

I engaged their muse (their right brain, or subconscious mind), by framing this as a game, not as a contest, not as an assignment, not as a thing that had to be perfect.

It was fun, and it wasn't threatening—so the stories came out quickly, and they came out good.

This is my objective: to teach writers who want to make a living from their writing how to create stories that will pay them.



If you had fun with the game, if you now understand why these extreme flash fiction stories work, and if you would like to learn how to create salable flash fiction, you can can join my

free three-week *How To Write Flash Fiction That Doesn't Suck Class* now.

<http://howtothinksideways.com/shop/free-three-week-flash-fiction-class/>

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