

Making Your Fiction Flashy: Six Ways to Tell Your Story

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Flash Fiction

- short—1000 words or less (most of the time, less)
- few characters
- a single scene
- starts close to (or right in the thick of) the main action
- tightly focused
- conflict early on

Try...

- telling the story with a twist ending--withhold information or mislead the reader until the end
- telling the story in second person
- telling the story backwards
- telling the story from multiple points of view
- telling the story from a unique point of view--an inanimate object or an animal
- repeating a significant/cool line--a “repetend”

What I do in my classes...

- We do ten quickwrites using various prompts--photos, art, story starters, other pieces of flash fiction; they write for about 10/15 minutes each day.
- At the end, they pick a few to revise, expand, and experiment with. I force them to try at least two of the strategies before they decide which is the best fit for that particular piece.

Resources

- Rich, S. (Ed.) (2009). *Half-minute horrors*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Thomas, J., Thomas, D., & Hazuka, T. (Eds.) (1992). *Flash fiction: 72 very short stories*. New York: Norton.
- “Writing Flash Fiction” by G. W. Thomas
 - <http://www.fictionfactor.com/guests/flashfiction.html>
- “Flashes on the Meridian: Dazzled by Flash Fiction” by Pamelyn Casto
 - <http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/casto.shtml>
- “Flashes of Brilliance” by S. Joan Popek
 - <http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/popek.shtml>
- Van Allsburg, C. (1984). *The mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

THE LEGEND OF ALEXANDRA & ROSE

BY JON KLASSEN



LEGEND:

1. ALEXANDRA'S ROOM WITH THE SMALL WINDOW
2. ROSE'S ROOM WITH THE BIGGER WINDOW
3. TOOLSHED
4. 5. 6. 7. ROSE
2. ALEXANDRA'S ROOM WITH THE BIGGER WINDOW

Another fun thing to try:

- have the kids pick a four-digit number (including zeros)
- then, reveal, one at a time, the following lists
- based on what they get for each part of the story, they try to write a piece of flash fiction including those elements
- later, they can try any number of combinations

Digit #1: Times

- 0 midnight
- 1 six A.M.
- 2 July Fourth
- 3 three A.M.
- 4 Christmas morning
- 5 New Year's Eve
- 6 the character's birthday
- 7 noon
- 8 the hottest day of the year
- 9 the coldest day of the year

Digit #2: Places

- 0 the beach
- 1 an elevator
- 2 an abandoned house
- 3 a remote farmhouse
- 4 the cellar/basement
- 5 an insane asylum
- 6 a boat
- 7 a public school
- 8 a roadside diner
- 9 the woods

Digit #3: Main Character

- 0 a toddler
- 1 a dog
- 2 a truck driver
- 3 a waitress
- 4 an angry teen
- 5 an old lady
- 6 a spy
- 7 a garbage man
- 8 an obnoxious 7-year-old
- 9 a mime

Digit #4: Situation

- 0 the last day on earth
- 1 everything was fine one minute and then...
- 2 someone meets the love of his/her life
- 3 he/she never saw it coming
- 4 he/she ran for his/her life
- 5 he/she just can't take it anymore!
- 6 someone dies
- 7 the best day ever
- 8 he/she finds himself/herself completely alone
- 9 everything he/she knows is wrong

Sample Strategies for “The Legend of Alexandra and Rose”

BACKWARDS

In the Yard

Mrs. Wilson was hella upset. Rose was nowhere to be found, and if they didn't get in the Dodge Caravan in the next five minutes they were going to be late, and if there's anything that made Mrs. Wilson absolutely crazy, it was being late. The woman HATED to be late.

She flew into Rose's room to find Alexandra on the bed, phone in hand, earbuds jammed so far into her ears that her spleen was in danger of rupturing--Alexandra, Rose's kid sister, whose room was half the size of her sister's, whose hand-me-downs were half as cool as her sister's new stuff.

Whose mean streak was ten times the size of her sister's.

“What are you doing in your sister's room? You know she hates it when you're in here. And is that her phone? Good lord, Alexandra,” Mrs. Wilson said. “Forget it. Whatever. Where's your sister?”

Without so much as an iota of tone, Alexandra said, “She's in the yard.”

“Alexandra, really. She's not in the yard,” Mrs. Wilson said, looking out of the huge window--the window ten times the size of the prison-cell window Alexandra had in her room. The only thing missing was the bars.

On her way out of the room, Mrs. Wilson made sure to stop, turn around, and say, “And Alexandra, for the love of Pete, turn that music down before you go deaf.”

Alexandra had no intention of turning it down. Not now, not ever.

About seven hours before that, Alexandra removed her muddy boots, leaving them on the doorstep, and tiptoed into the back door of the house trying to minimize the squeaking of the wooden floors as she entered the downstairs bathroom, thoroughly washing the dirt off her hands, trying her best to get it out from under her fingernails. And the blood. That too.

About three minutes before that, Alexandra gently placed the shovel back in the shed. Right by the door. She wasn't about to go walking in there in the dark, not with all the nasty cobwebs and who knows what rodents lurking around in there.

About two minutes before that, Alexandra stomped down the wet dirt behind the shed. There was still a decent-sized mound, but she figured that no one ever went back there. She was right.

About fifteen minutes before that, Alexandra did her best to reposition Rose's body so that she wouldn't have to dig any bigger a hole than she already had. Digging sucked. No doubt about it. So what if she had already dug it two nights before and only had to pull the loose dirt out of it?

About ten minutes before that, Alexandra conked Rose on the head with the shovel. Straight shot.

About a half-hour before that, Alexandra texted Rose and told her she had something important to show her. Out in the yard. *Something i found in yr room that m & d wont like*, she texted. Hehehehe.

About four months before that, Alexandra realized that her room was smaller than Rose's, her portion of her mother's love was smaller than Rose's, that her future would never be as bright as Rose's.

But not for long.

UNIQUE POINT OF VIEW/REPETEND

Through a Doll's Eyes

I was there when it happened.

The night that Alex and Rose's mother came into their bedroom to tell them that Alexandra would be moving. That she would have to take all of her clothes, her toys, her "things," and carry them up the stairs. To the room at the top of the steps where their mother used to do her sewing. To the room that was always cold. Always dark, with a smaller window, smaller closet, smaller everything. The room that Alex and Rose were pretty sure was haunted.

I was there when it happened.

After their mother left and Alex cried, Rose sitting on the bed, brushing her hair in the full-length mirror that would never, in a million years, fit in the room up at the top of the stairs, telling her sister that it's only fair that she, the older sister, got the bigger room. That it probably had nothing to do with the fact that their mother and father liked her better because she never complained like Alex did. Cried all the time like Alex did. Bothered their mother while she was sewing, the one thing she liked to do. Well, not anymore.

I was there when it happened.

When Alex stopped crying. Sucked up her snot. Turned toward Rose as she kept brushing and brushing and brushing her hair, a halo from the lamp highlighting her perfect, straight, brunette hair. Like their mother's. Unlike Alex's tangled mess that hurt to comb through. Turned toward Rose and glared at her back with shark eyes. Vacant, soulless eyes. A doll's eyes.

I was there when it happened.

In the middle of the night, when Alex left the room and came back with a rusty shovel. She raised it high into the moonlit room and brought the metal end down on Rose's head. Her lovely hair rising, sticking every time she raised it again. And brought it down. Again. And again. Until Alex stared at what she had done and, small and cold and haunted as her new room, dropped the shovel, waking her parents.

I was Rose's doll. Her favorite. Now, I'm sitting in the same place on the dresser, the dust of year's collecting on my head like snow that never melts in a room with a door that was closed and locked, never to be reopened.

I was there when it happened.

MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW/REPETEND

What Lead to the Legend of Alexandra and Rose

Alexandra figured that the only way she could get the bigger bedroom was to kill her big sister.

Rose figured that the only way she could get her little sister to shut up about what she wanted to show her in the shed was to put on her slippers and go out there with her, even if it was really dark and if their parents found out, they'd both be dead meat.

Alexandra and Rose's parents figured that the only way they could get the girls to get along was to separate them by moving Alexandra's bedroom into the attic. The smaller, colder, creepier attic.

A TWIST ENDING

Envy

Alexandra envied everything about Rose.

Her room is bigger.

Her bed is softer.

Her eyes, bluer.

She has friends, and parties, and playdates.

Sometimes, she wishes she could BE Rose. Take her place. Enjoy the bigger room, the softer bed, the way her mother looks into her bluer eyes and says, "I love you, honey."

She wants it all, and she'd do just about anything to make it happen.

But she can't.

Because dolls don't make anything happen. They sit.

Sit in cramped dollhouses with nothing to do but watch. And wish.

And envy.

SECOND PERSON POINT OF VIEW/REPETEND

Alone in Your Room

Alone in your room, you feel small. As small as a room meant for a baby.

Crushingly, overbearingly small. Four walls and a window small. A bed too small to fit you anymore. A dresser with three drawers and malevolent scratches in the wood where the closet door keeps smacking it. A lamp with a cracked shade that casts crooked shadows on the walls the second it gets dark.

You sit, alone, in your room, in the center of your tiny room, and ponder why it is you're here. Why it is that everyone else in the house is busy. Working. Playing. Thriving. But not you. You have nothing to do, no one to do it with, and a black hole of time in which to do it.

You hear laughter upstairs, in your sister's room, the bigger room, the much, much bigger room with a bigger bed and a bigger dresser and a bigger window and a bigger closet. Everything bigger. Friends. Music. Laughter. Creaking floorboards that can hardly stand all the excitement.

And you. Barely moving. Barely breathing. Thoughts racing through your mind like mice scampering across your hardwood floors while you barely sleep. You, in the dark, with your dark thoughts. Bad thoughts. Thoughts that can't be spoken, can't be written, can't be shared. Thoughts that keep you sane when you feel like lighting a match and bringing the whole place down.

Like this one:

You lure your sister to the shed.

You grab the shovel from its dark corner.

You stop the friends. The music. The laughter.

You take her room.

Just a thought.

Alone.

In your room.

HALF-MINUTE HORRORS

LEMONY SNICKET!
NEIL GAIMAN!
JAMES PATTERSON!
AND MORE!

INSTANT FRIGHTS FROM THE WORLD'S MOST ASTONISHING AUTHORS AND ARTISTS