

## The Short Short Story Session 3

### The last line

Generally not as tricky as the first line, but equally important.

### The last line can be...

#### Poignant -

*"But wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing."*

The House At Pooh Corner, A.A. Milne

#### Ominous -

*"The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."*

Animal Farm, George Orwell

#### Open - ambiguous, sometimes seen as a non-ending.

*"Then our mother came in, and she said to us two, 'Did you have any fun? Tell me. What did you do?' And Sally and I did not know what to say. Should we tell her the things that went on there that day? Well...what would YOU do if your mother asked you?"*

The Cat in the Hat, Dr. Seuss

#### The twist -

*"He loved Big Brother."*

1984, George Orwell

**The funny** - can be from the character or the narrator. Irony, exaggeration, understatement, sarcasm, one liner,... anything that leaves you with a smile on your face.

*"An excellent year's progress."*

Bridget Jones's Diary, Helen Fielding

*"I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."*

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

#### Focusing on a character -

*"I've grown, but whatever monster might be in me, it was always mine, my choice, my responsibility, my evil if you will. It's what I am, and if you want excuses, come and take them."*

Prince of Thorns, Mark Lawrence

*"She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously."*

"The Grapes of Wrath," John Steinbeck

#### Referencing back to the title or main theme of a book -

*"It's like a game. Repetitive. Even a little tedious after more than twenty years. But there are much worse games to play."*

Mockingjay, by Suzanne Collins (conclusion to The Hunger Games trilogy)

**The final kiss** - Couple come together, all loose endings tied.

*"Yes, it is enough," he answered, smiling. 'Enough for forever.' And he leaned down to press his cold lips once more to my throat."*

Twilight, Stephanie Meyer

**Riding off into the sunset**

*"He was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance."*

"Frankenstein: Mary Shelley 1818

*"As I left China farther and farther behind, I looked out of the window and saw a great universe beyond the plane's silver wing. I took one more glance over my past life, then turned to the future. I was eager to embrace the world."*

Wild Swans, Jung Chang

**Resolution** - Problem solved

*"I do so like green eggs and ham. Thank you, thank you, Sam I Am."*

Green Eggs and Ham, Dr. Seuss

*"Max stepped into his private boat and waved goodbye and sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him—and it was still hot."*

Where the Wild Things Are, Maurice Sendak

*"The bitch is dead now."*

Casino Royale, Ian Fleming

**Happily-ever-after** -

*"The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well."*

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, by J.K. Rowling

*"And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!"*

A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens

**The anti-happily-ever-after or 'but life goes on'** - it is not going to be alright, but everyone is going to have to learn to live with it, including the reader. Can stand as a single line to signify to the reader that now all the drama is over, they can start processing the trauma of the journey.

*"He turned away to give them time to pull themselves together; and waited, allowing his eyes to rest on the trim cruiser in the distance."*

Lord of the Flies, William Golding

**Tragic ending** -

*"For never was a story of more woe. Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."*

Romeo and Juliet, William Shakespeare

(The tragedy is in the final moments of the story, as opposed to the 'but life goes on' where the whole journey is one trauma after another. You're left feel sad over the tragedy, and battered by the but-life-goes-on.)

**The anti-ending** - Often used to get them to come back for more, but sometime to leave the feeling of 'what the...'

**Mid-action** - diving back into the battle

*"The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off."*

Catch 22, Joseph Heller

**Cliff-hanger** - hanging, right off the edge of that cliff...

*"A terrible, disappointed howl. 'That wretched burgling little rat has stolen the map!'*

*No, this was*

*NOT THE END"*

How to Steal a Dragon's Sword, Cressida Cowell

**Starting on a new journey or the next stage of a journey that has already begun** -

*"Then shouldering their burdens, they set off, seeking a path that would bring them over the grey hills of the Emyrn Muil, and down into the Land of Shadow."*

*The Fellowship of the Ring, J.R.R. Tolkien*

**Implication of there being more to come** -

*"I never saw any of them again — except the cops. No way has yet been invented to say goodbye to them."*

The Long Goodbye, Raymond Chandler

*"Might I trouble you then to be ready in half an hour, and we can stop at Marcini's for a little dinner on the way?"*

The Hound of the Baskervilles, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

**The 'I'm really clever' ending** - generally only the literary greats can really carry these off...

**Not finishing a sentence** - can fit in if just spouting out a stream of consciousness, looping the ending to the start, trying to peter out a last thought, or wanting to leave the reader in doubt.

*"You can trust me," R.V. said, watching her hand. 'I'm a man of my'"*

The Broom of the System, David Foster Wallace

**Finishing with 'the end.'** -

*"And she comes to you, and she does not speak, and the others do not notice her, and she takes your hand, and you ready yourself to die, eyes open, aware this is all an illusion, a last aroma cast up by the chemical stew that is your brain, which will soon cease to function, and there will be nothing, and you are ready, ready to die well, ready to die like a man, like a woman, like a human, for despite all else you have loved, you have loved your father and your mother and your brother and your sister and your son and yes, your ex-wife, and you have loved the pretty girl, you have been beyond yourself, and so you have courage, and you have dignity, and you have calmness in the face of terror, and awe, and the pretty girl holds your hand, and you contain her, and this book, and me writing it, and I too contain you, who may not yet even be born, you inside me inside you, though not in a creepy way, and so may you, may I, may we, so may we all of us confront the end."*

How To Get Filthy Rich In Rising Asia, Mohsin Hamid

## Short short story last lines:

### The Mice

***“They might venture out a few steps, but soon the overwhelming sights and smells drive them back into their holes, uncomfortable and embarrassed at not being able to scavenge as they should.”***

Lydia Davis (<http://www.conjunctions.com/print/article/lydia-davis-c24>)

### Uncle Ray Intercedes for Us

*“The drought had been exceptionally brutal the past few years so Uncle Ray, having had a decent run, decided to offer himself up. We buried him in the yard early that spring, chopped him into four mostly equal-sized pieces and dug holes near the east, west, north, and southern facing corners of the lawn. We sprinkled dried marigold petals mixed with conifer dust into the holes, and kneeling, said our prayers and went back to bed. Uncle Ray must have interceded for us, because soon after, the rains came slow and steady before finally going full on torrential. We had a magnificent harvest that summer, corn up to the power lines, beans strong as chisel plows, zucchini plants spread out for miles, pumpkins the size of twenty or more head of cattle—the sweet peas wound their way past Aunt Ida’s house and into the neighbor’s chicken coops. **But the most miraculous occurrence of all was the way the youngest children, having hitherto known only hardship, suddenly sprouted the most glorious wings and peeling away out of our arms, lifted off and left us for more friendly and temperate environs.”***

Jody Kennedy (<https://tinhouse.com/uncle-ray-intercedes-us/>)

### The Bug Man

*“Ma often said that despite everything, we were lucky people, because the Bug Man came over to our house for free, sprayed in places nobody had ever seen. Places that we never knew were there.*

*Happy times were when the Bug Man pulled up, in his strange truck with a giant plastic model spider glued to the top of it.*

*“Your mother means business,” he said to Josh and me, blinking into the sunlight.*

*“You’re one lucky dog,” he said to Muttsy.*

*Once, when he came to spray, he hugged Ma in the side yard. They seemed to want privacy. I watched them from the upstairs bathroom window. Ma looked pretty in his long skinny arms, like a different mother.*

*I thought that maybe our lives could change. He could marry us, become our father and take us to live in a large, bugless house.*

*But three days before Christmas, Ma, reading the newspaper, slammed down her coffee cup. It splattered the table, dripped onto the floor.*

*“Ma, are you okay?”*

*She sat mesmerized, glaring at the newspaper. I grabbed a roll of paper towels to clean up the brown puddle at her feet.*

*“Cancer, just like his father who started the goddamn pest company!” Tears rolled quickly down her nose. “He’s already gone,” she said, sobbing.*

*I hated the word. “Cancer.” She looked bitter and ugly saying it, as though it was stuck between her front teeth. Josh ran outside, good at acting like nothing was wrong.*

*Watching her cry, my ankles itched. They were already covered with flea bites. Soon, families of spiders would bubble up through the floorboards.*

***I cut out the Bug Man’s obituary, as if he had belonged to us.”***

Meg Pokrass, (<https://tinhouse.com/the-bug-man/>)

## Give It Up

*"It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was walking to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was already much later than I had thought, I had to hurry, the shock of this discovery made me unsure of the way, I did not yet know my way very well in this town; luckily, a policeman was nearby, I ran up to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "From me you want to know the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I cannot find it myself." "Give it up! Give it up," he said, and turned away with a sudden jerk, like people who want to be alone with their laughter."*

Franz Kafka (<http://flashfictiononline.com/main/article/give-it-up/>)

### Tips for the last line:

- **Flow with what comes before**, eg. longer sentences leading to one final punchy short one

*"I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."*

The Shawshank Redemption, Rita Hayworth.

- **Challenging can be fun**, but too off-the-wall plot twist can put people off, e.g. "martians came out of nowhere and ate everyone. The end."

*"Then I took the package from my coat and undid it, and threw away the wrapper and the fancy string, and sat there looking down at the little heart I held in my hand."*

Kiss Me Again, Stranger, Daphne du Maurier

- **Slight element of surprise** can help it linger with the reader for longer, e.g.

*"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together." Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me. "Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"*

The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway

(Rest of the book is about them coming together as a couple, but the end line raises doubt about whether that is ever possible.)

- **Character leaving on a high** - need heavy lows earlier in the book to give this real punch. e.g.

*"I ran with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the valley of Panjsher on my lips. I ran."*

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini

- **Bittersweet** - makes for a very emotionally complex finish

*"He reached the top of the bank in a single, powerful leap. Hazel followed; and together they slipped away, running easily down through the wood, where the first primroses were beginning to bloom."*

Watership Down, Richard Adams

- **Open ending** - Leaving room for interpretation, letting the reader decide.

*"And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and a new and glorious life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they still had a long, long road before them, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning."*

The Lady with the Dog, Anton Chekhov

- **Tie up loose ends quickly** - don't linger on the detail of what happens next. Finish the story and move on, you don't want the final bit to be a long, slow death of a story.

*Titty began, and the others joined in at once, for they all knew it:*

*'Oh, soon we'll hear the Old Man say,  
Leave her, Johnny, leave her.  
You can go ashore and take your pay,  
It's time for us to leave her.  
Leave her, Johnny, leave her like a man,  
leave her Johnny, leave her.  
Oh leave her, Johnny, leave her when you can,  
It's time for us to leave her.'*

*'Who was Johnny?' said Roger. 'Hullo, there's Mother and Vicky coming down the field.'*  
Swallows and Amazons, Arthur Ransome

- **Highlight your theme** without spelling it out, such as true love wins over all, or a character being too old for this sort of shenanigans.

*"But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt."*

*The Color Purple, Alice Walker*

(Some of the main themes of the book: family, belonging, female emancipation.)

- **Keep it punchy** - if you are really struggling, make it short. it's harder to get in wrong in five words than it is in twenty.

*"After all, tomorrow is another day."*

Gone With the Wind, Margaret Mitchell

*"Are there any questions?"*

The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood

(Context: The book ends, with an epilogue where a Professor gives a lecture about the dystopian world we have read about in the main part of the book. "Are there any questions?" is so apt because that is all you have about the book.)

- **Allow the characters to live and breathe after the story ends.** It gives the reader something to chew on.

*"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."*

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

## Editing:

1. **Check you have a narrative arc.** A story with no story is not a story.

**Exposition:** The exposition in a story is a set of scenes that are meant to introduce the audience to the characters, world, and tone of the story. It is relatively short, and no major changes occur.

**Inciting incident:** The inciting incident is an event in a story that upsets the status quo and begins the story's movement, either in a positive way or negative, that culminates in the climax and denouement.

**Rising action:** The rising action in a story moves the plot towards the climax through a series of progressively more complicated events and decisions by the main character or characters, leading up to a final decision of great significance.

**Crisis:** The essential moment where the character has to make a choice.

**Climax:** The climax in a story is the point, usually near the end of the third act, where the value of the story is tested to its highest degree. As such, it is also the moment in a story with the greatest amount of drama, action, and movement.

**Denouement:** Denouement (pronounced day-new-mah) is a literary term referring to the final part of a narrative, usually in which the outcome of the story is revealed.

Don't worry if it doesn't seem too exciting as bullet points, amplify the emotion through reactions to the situation. E.g. change story of 'woman doesn't like her hair cut' to...

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Exposition:        | Woman needs hair cut   |
| Inciting incident: | Can't get usual hair dresser   |
| rising action:     | Devastated by hair cut from new hair dresser   |
| Crisis:            | Goes home and cuts it herself  |
| Climax:            | Eventually it is so bad and she is so manic she shaves it off.   |
| Denouement:        | Realisation at what she has done and preparing to break the news to the modelling agency she works for, knowing it will mean no more work until it grows back. |

Check that your plot makes sense to someone who isn't you. If it doesn't tweak it until it does.

2. **Start the inciting incident in the opening paragraph, or even earlier.** Because this is a very short story, some of our stages must blend into one, e.g. exposition and inciting incident.

3. **Check you have a character arc.**

Who are they? - Do your characters stand up to scrutiny? Are they believable? Does their personality fit the role they are meant to be playing?

What is their back story? - it doesn't have to be in your story, but if you don't know it as a writer, you will not understand what spurs your protagonist on.

What motivate them and drives them forward? - What do they want? Does their behaviour fit their motivations?

How are they going to change or develop? - It doesn't always have to be for the better.

What is their future story? - don't spell it out, but make sure you leave your story open for your readers to give it this ending outside of your written word.

4. **Focus.** Take out any side stories. Just allow one theme and a couple of characters (at most) to come through.
5. **Limit number of scenes.** Think back to plot and character development (narrative and character arcs). Be tough on yourself. If it doesn't add to the story, no matter how beautiful a piece of writing it may be, remove it.
6. **Don't forget the title.** It can tell you loads about the story without you having to use up any of your precious word count.

e.g. You don't have to explain about how a woman lost her parents when she was small and she is missing them now that she is getting married, if your story is called 'The Orphan's Wedding'.

7. **Read the story out loud.** Do the words flow? Is the punctuation in the right place and being used to best effect? Are there any clichés that should come out (expressions used so often, they sound a bit lacking, e.g. as brave as a lion)?
8. **Look at the actual words you have used.**

- **Cut out descriptions describing emotion** - let the words and actions speak for you

E.g.

'**Dave was so angry.** He climbed down the tree in an ungainly fashion, and shook his fist in Pat's face.

Dave shouted so loudly it rang round the street,"How dare you come round here again!"  
Pat **calmly** replied, "I bought the house next to yours. I live here now. Have a good day, neighbour."

(55 words)

Swap for...

'Dave climbed down the tree in an ungainly fashion, and shook his fist in Pat's face.  
Dave shouted so loudly it rang round the street,"How dare you come round here again!"  
Pat replied, "I bought the house next to yours. I live here now. Have a good day, neighbour."

- **Don't use three words when one will do.**

E.g.

'Dave **climbed** down the tree **in an ungainly fashion**, and **shook his fist in Pat's face.**  
Dave **shouted so loudly it rang round the street**,"How dare you come round here again!"  
Pat replied, "I bought **the house next to yours**. I live here now. Have a good day, neighbour."

Swap for...

'Dave **clambered** down the tree. **Aggressing** Pat, Dave yelled, "How dare you come round here again!"  
Pat replied, "I live **at no.57** now. Have a good day, neighbour."



- **Take out unnecessary dialogue cues** - within the context of the rest of your story, often the reader can work out for themselves who is saying what.

E.g.

‘Dave clambered down the tree. **Aggressing Pat, Dave yelled,** “How dare you come round here again!”

Pat **replied,** “I live at no.57 now. Have a good day, neighbour.”

Swap for...

‘Dave clambered down the tree.

”How dare you come round here again, Pat!”

“I live at no.57 now. Have a good day, neighbour.”

(When you take out some of the cues, you realise other words become obsolete, such as ‘aggressing’.)

- **Take out unnecessary names.** If a name doesn’t tell you about a character, do you need it?

E.g.

‘Dave clambered down the tree.

”How dare you come round here again, **Pat!**”

“I live at no.57 now. Have a good day, neighbour.”

Swap for...

‘Dave clambered down the tree.

”How dare you come round here again!”

“I live at no.57 now. Have a good day, neighbour.”

- **Cut out words and actions altogether if the details don’t matter.**

E.g.

‘Dave **climbed down the tree in an ungainly fashion, and shook his fist in Pat’s face.**

**Dave shouted so loudly it rang round the street,**”How dare you come round here again!”

Pat **replied,** “I bought the house next to yours. I live here now. Have a good day, neighbour.””

Swap for...

Dave and Pat **had another altercation.**

(6 words)

- **Take out filler words**, such as ‘just’, ‘only’, ‘really’ etc. - they generally don’t add anything and eat into your word count.

E.g.

“I’m **just** going for a walk”  
“**Really?** OK, **only** be back by five.”

(13 words)

Swap for...

“I’m going for a walk.”  
“Ok. Be back by five.”

But if it an important part of your characters voice, keep it.

- **If it is implied, don’t say it**

E.g.

“I’m going for a walk”  
“**OK.** Be back by five.”

Swap for...

“I’m going for a walk.”  
“Be back by five.”

(9 words)

- **If you have a tendency to use the same word over and over, take them out** - repetition means they lose meaning, and disrupt the flow of reading.

E.g.

“Because Angela **really** liked strawberries, she stood **really** staring at the bowl on the table.”

(15 words)

Swap for...

“Because Angela liked strawberries, she stood staring at the bowl on the table.”

- **Remove conjunctions at the beginning of a sentence**, ‘And...’ ‘But,...’ etc. - unless it adds to the voice of a character.

E.g.

“**Because** Angela liked strawberries, she stood staring at the bowl on the table.”

Swap for...

“Angela liked strawberries. She stood staring at the bowl on the table.”

- For every sentence think: does it further the plot? The voice? The atmosphere? If not, take it out.

E.g.

"Angela liked strawberries. She stood staring at the bowl on the table."

Swap for

"Angela stared at the strawberries hungrily.

(6 words)

(What the berries are in and where they are is irrelevant - unless the bowl and table are somehow part of the plot.)

(Swapping descriptions longer for punchier adjective, such as 'hungrily', can also add something extra to our characters and the excitement in the story, as well as lower word count.)

9. **Spelling, grammar and punctuation** - if in doubt, get someone to go through it with you - you often can't see your own mistakes.
10. **Formatting** - Do all paragraphs have the same indent? Is there the same gap between paragraphs and between lines? Are you using the same font the whole way through? Are italics and bolds used appropriately? Are capitals used appropriately?

### **Activity:**

Edit your story.

Tweak your first and last line.

Re-write any bits you think you can improve.

We are aiming to get it down to 200 words, but even if you already have less than that, EDIT BACK ANYWAY. It will make for a neater, more concise story.