



Stories That Win – The Scholastic Short Story Playbook

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

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05.1 Premise, Character, and Conflict

05.2 Plot Shape, Scene, and Point of View

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Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

05.1 Premise, Character, and Conflict

A short story wins or loses on its premise and its people. Learn what the Short Story category asks for, then build a character who wants something, an obstacle that pushes back, and a reason the story needs 1,000 to 3,000 words.

Why This Matters

The Short Story category of the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards takes fictional prose narratives of 1,000 to 3,000 words. A story under 1,000 words belongs in Flash Fiction instead, and a story built around science fiction, fantasy, horror, or alternate history may fit Speculative Fiction better. Scholastic publishes a short list of what jurors weigh: originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. It does not publish a detailed rubric or tier percentages, so everything in this guide beyond those three criteria is coaching, not a Scholastic statement. This guide is independent coaching and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Scholastic.

Here is where most students lose points: the premise. A grade 9-12 writer who opens with a lonely teenager, a car accident, a dying grandparent, or a dream often writes a competent story that a juror has seen many times. Originality does not mean strange. It means a specific person in a specific pressure, handled in a way only you would handle it. Jurors at this level expect characters with wants, scenes that cause other scenes, and a voice that is not borrowed from a TV drama. Remember the rule that matters most: the final work must be entirely your own idea and creation.

Core Ideas

A story is not a topic. A topic is grief, or friendship, or war. A story is a **person** who wants something, an **obstacle** that stands in the way, and a **choice** that costs something. Premise is the shortest sentence that holds all three: *A girl who needs her friend to stay the same keeps returning to the day he changed.* Notice that the sentence has a character, a desire, and a pressure, and that it does not yet say what the theme is. Theme arrives later, from the choices.

The Premise Test

Can you say it in one sentence with a WHO, a WANT, and an OBSTACLE?

Could another writer in your class write the same sentence? If yes, find the detail only you know.

Does the want create scenes you can picture, or only feelings you can describe?

Is there a decision at the end that costs the character something?

Does 1,000 to 3,000 words fit? Too small a premise sags past 1,500; too big a premise rushes.

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Character is built from three layers. The outer layer is what we see: how she talks, what he carries in his pockets, how they enter a room. The middle layer is what the character says they want. The deep layer is what the character needs but will not admit. Strong short stories let the middle layer collide with the deep layer. A narrator says she wants her friend back, but the deeper need is to stop feeling responsible for a loss she could not prevent. The reader sees the gap before the narrator does, and that gap is where tension lives.

Element	Weak version	Strong version
Want	Be happy, find herself	Get the one ticket, win the argument, keep the secret until Friday
Obstacle	The world is hard	A specific person, rule, deadline, or flaw of the character's own
Detail	A messy room	A room where one object (a chipped mug, a lanyard) reveals a history
Choice	The character learns a lesson	The character gives something up, and the reader feels the price
Name and voice	Any teen could say it	Only this person would phrase it this way

Conflict has three sources: person versus person, person versus circumstance, and person versus self. The best short stories braid at least two. A boy who must tell his sister the truth (person versus person) while hiding that he caused the problem (person versus self) has a story. A boy who is merely sad has a mood. A short story of 1,000 to 3,000 words can sustain one central conflict and perhaps one complication. Resist the urge to add three subplots; a short story is closer to a single held breath than to a season of television.

Objects Carry Feeling

Pick two or three physical things that stay in the story: a toy, a poster, a key, a song.

Introduce each early, plainly, with no explanation.

Bring each back changed by what has happened.

Let the object do the work so the narrator does not have to say how it feels.

Case Studies

The studies below come from publicly readable stories whose schools report a Scholastic tier. Read them as models, not formulas. Three cautions apply. First, the craft notes come from summarized readings of each page, so they are strongest on structure and weaker on exact word choice. Second, the tiers are self-reports from school websites, not checked against the official database. Third, five of the stories in our research set come from one private school's blog, so they show one school's culture and not a random sample. Nothing here is a Scholastic statement, and no passages are reproduced.

CASE STUDY 1: CARNIVAL GAMES (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL AND GOLD KEY, 2017; PER A SCHOOL AWARDS INDEX)

Short story, roughly 1,700 words. Source: a school blog and awards index named in the research file. Content note: the story ends on a school shooting seen through a grieving narrator, so read it with care and do not imitate the subject for shock.

SOLUTION

Premise and character. A grieving narrator watches a friend change after his sister's death. The want is simple and aching: she needs to believe he is still in there. That one want generates every scene, from a tense carnival exchange to a basement confrontation. The obstacle is the friend himself, plus her own refusal to accept the change.

Development, beginning to end. The story opens in the middle of a tense dialogue at a carnival game, before we know who is speaking. It then loops: backstory of his decline, a return to the present frame in the narrator's room, the carnival day again, and the frame again. The circular structure mirrors how grief returns to the same day.

Devices and effect. Sweet sensory detail (lights, sugar, powdered funnel cake) sits next to dread the reader already senses. Recurring objects, including a stuffed panda and a poster that belonged to the sister, hold feeling so the narrator does not have to explain it. Dialogue is clipped; emotional passages run in long sentences.

Coach takeaway. Objects plus a frame can carry a premise. The research file notes that the likely edge over weaker drafts is the frame and the object motifs, which is inference, not a Scholastic judgment.

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CASE STUDY 2: THE SUN, THE MOON, THE STARS (GOLD KEY, 2017; SCHOOL REPORT)

Short story, roughly 1,300 to 1,500 words. Source: a school blog named in the research file.

SOLUTION

Premise and character. A narrator with limited self-awareness cannot say how they feel about a girl, so the story lets them talk sideways: a classroom discussion of a science-fiction novel stands in for the narrator's own situation. The world of the story is realistic. The speculative material lives only inside the book being discussed.

Development. It opens mid-thought in a confessional voice, then moves through short sections, italicized interior voices, fragments of class talk, and childhood flashbacks. It returns to the same classroom and the same unresolved feeling. The ending is fragmented and image-driven as the narrator watches her walk away holding someone else's hand.

Devices and effect. Motifs (a desk carving, light against dark, glass and shattering) tie the fragments together. The collage form matches an unsettled mind. The research file adds a caution: a collage can look like a gimmick unless motifs and an anchor scene explain why the pieces sit in that order.

Coach takeaway. A character who cannot speak plainly is a premise engine. Give your narrator a sideways way to say the thing, such as a book, a game, or a chore.

CASE STUDY 3: I'M SITTING IN THE CAR (SILVER KEY, 2025-26 CYCLE; SCHOOL CLAIM ONLY)

Short story, roughly 2,000 words plus a short author note, told as eight vignettes. The school page calls it a Silver Key piece; the PDF itself never mentions Scholastic, so treat the tier as the school's claim.

SOLUTION

Premise and character. One constraint organizes everything: every vignette begins with the narrator in a car. The narrator changes across generations of women in a family, from child to grandmother, so character is built by accumulation, not by one long arc.

Development. The order is loosely chronological. Early and late vignettes mirror each other, and a puzzling moment of tears in one vignette is explained in a later one, which rewards rereading. The final vignette is fragmentary and ambiguous and returns a line from the first, closing a loop.

Devices and effect. The car becomes a room for confession, the rearview mirror a place for eye contact, and a pair of pearls passes between generations. Period details such as cassettes anchor each era.

Coach takeaway, including the flaws. The research notes visible typos and an author note that states the purpose outright, which the stories could carry alone. Clean copy and trust in the reader are free upgrades.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Collect five specific seeds** Write five items you know better than most people: a job, a family ritual, a place, a rule, a failure. Specific knowledge is the raw material of originality.
- 2 Pick a character under pressure** Choose one seed and put a person in it who wants something by a deadline. Write the want as an action, such as to return the borrowed car before anyone notices.
- 3 Name the obstacle and the secret** Write who or what blocks the want, then write what your character is hiding from others or from themselves.
- 4 Write the premise sentence** Fill in: A [person] who wants [want] must [face obstacle], but [secret or flaw]. Revise until a stranger could picture the first scene.
- 5 Choose two or three objects** Pick physical things that will recur. Decide in advance how each will look different at the end.
- 6 Test the size** List the scenes the premise needs. Six to ten scenes usually fit 1,000 to 3,000 words. If you have fifteen, cut the premise. If you have two, add a complication.
- 7 Draft the first scene only** Write your opening scene in one sitting, starting after the story has already begun.

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BEFORE AND AFTER: GIVING A CHARACTER A WANT

WEAK (coach sample):
Mara was sad about her brother leaving for the army. She sat in her room and thought about how much she missed him and how everything was different now.

SOLUTION

STRONG (coach sample):
Mara had until the bus left at six to find his other boot. She turned the hall closet inside out, then his bed, then the trunk of her mother's car, while her mother pretended not to watch.

What changed. The weak version names a feeling and sits still. The strong version gives Mara a want (find the boot), a deadline (six), an obstacle (a missing object and a watchful mother), and a gesture of avoidance (the search stands in for what she cannot say). The sadness is still there, but the reader now infers it.

BEFORE AND AFTER: A PREMISE THAT CAN BE PICTURED

WEAK (coach sample):
A story about a teenager who learns that friendship matters.

SOLUTION

STRONG (coach sample):
A boy who has promised to keep his best friend's secret sits beside the friend's mother at a school fundraiser, holding the one fact that could end her worry.

What changed. The weak line is a theme. The strong line is a situation with a who, a promise, a pressure, and a decision. Notice that it never mentions friendship, yet friendship is the cost of every choice.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no tier percentages and no rubric beyond originality, skill, and personal voice or vision. The table is the coach's inference from the published winners above, not a Scholastic statement. Our sample is small and shows only winners, so the right-hand column describes what weaker drafts tend to do, not observed contrasts.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Premise carries a structural idea (a frame, a recurring object, a constraint) tied to the ending	Strong premise and voice, with a form that is interesting but sometimes needs more support	Familiar premise told in order, with the feeling stated
Character wants something visible and hides something deeper	Clear want, thinner hidden need	Character mainly reacts and reflects
Objects and details carry feeling	Some objects, some stated emotion	Generic detail and named emotions
Conflict braids outer and inner pressure	One clear conflict	Mood without conflict, or too many subplots

Common traps

1. Starting with a theme (loss, friendship) instead of a person who wants something. 2. A narrator who explains every feeling. 3. Real-life events pasted in without a shape (a story is not a diary). 4. Borrowing tragedies for shock without earning the character first.

Coach's Playbook

Premise sentence with who, want, obstacle. Two or three recurring objects. A secret the character keeps. A scene list of six to ten scenes. A fresh detail only you know on page one.

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Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, write three premise sentences for three different seeds. Underline the want in each. Circle the one where you can already picture the first scene, and write its first five lines.

Practice

WORKSHOP Premise, Character, and Conflict

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. List ten things you know unusually well (jobs, rituals, rules, places). Star the three that most people your age would not know.
2. Write three premise sentences using the pattern: A [person] who wants [want] must [obstacle], but [secret or flaw].
3. Take your best premise and write the want as a physical action with a deadline.
4. Write a one-paragraph portrait of your character using only outer-layer details: speech, gestures, what they carry.
5. Write down what your character wants and what they need. Then write one scene moment where the two collide.
6. Choose two recurring objects. For each, write its first appearance (plain) and its last appearance (changed) in two lines apiece.
7. Rewrite this weak line so the character wants something: 'Jo felt lonely at her new school.'
8. List the six to ten scenes your premise needs. Mark which ones the story cannot do without.
9. Write the opening scene (200 to 400 words) beginning after the action has started. No backstory in the first paragraph.
10. Read your opening aloud and mark every sentence where you named a feeling. Rewrite two of them as action or an object.

05.2 Plot Shape, Scene, and Point of View

Once you have a person who wants something, you need a shape that delivers it. Learn how winning stories move through scene and summary, why point of view is a decision about what the reader may know, and how to choose a structure that serves your ending.

Why This Matters

Scholastic jurors read the Short Story category at 1,000 to 3,000 words, and they publish only three criteria: originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. Plot shape and point of view fall under technical skill. A common loss is a story that begins with a promising character and then wanders: three events in a row with no cause between them, a middle that restates the opening, and an ending that arrives because the word count did.

A second common loss is an unexamined point of view. Many drafts are in first person because it feels easy, then leak information the narrator could not know, or tell the reader what the narrator feels instead of letting actions show it. Grade 9–12 writers are expected to choose a point of view on purpose and to keep it consistent. The choice should be able to answer one question: why this person, telling it this way, at this distance from the events?

Core Ideas

Think of plot as a chain of causes. Each scene should create a pressure that the next scene must answer. A simple frame works for most stories of this length: a situation with a want, a disturbance that blocks it, an escalation in which each attempt makes things worse or costlier, a crisis choice, and a closing image that shows what the choice cost. You do not need to follow this order strictly, as the stories below prove, but you should know what you are bending.

Scene Versus Summary

SCENE: the story slows down. We get a place, a time, people speaking, and action in real time. Use it for turns, confrontations, and choices.

SUMMARY: the story speeds up. We get a sentence or paragraph covering hours, years, or a pattern. Use it for context, repetition, and the moments that do not change anything.

Budget your words: spend them on the three or four moments that change the situation.

Test each scene: what is different at the end of it than at the start? If nothing, cut or summarize.

Point of view is a lens with two settings: **who** is telling, and **how close** they stand. First person gives voice and intimacy but limits knowledge to what the narrator sees and can plausibly infer. Close third gives you the same limits with more room for the writer's language. Omniscient third lets you move among minds but can feel distant in a short story. Second person is rare and demands a reason. Whichever you choose, decide what the narrator knows, when the narrator knows it, and what the narrator refuses to see.

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POV Decision Checklist

- Who sees this best, or who has the most to lose in it?
- What can this narrator not know? Write it down and do not break the rule.
- Is the narrator reliable? Where does the reader know more than they do?
- What tense carries the pressure: past for reflection, present for immediacy?
- If you switch point of view or time, is there a signal the reader can follow?

Structure	Best when	Risk
Linear chain	One main conflict that escalates	Predictable if every beat is expected
Frame (present moment around past events)	Memory, grief, or confession is central	Frame can be decorative if it never changes
Circular (end returns to opening image)	Theme is repetition or loss	Ending feels closed without cost
Fragments or vignettes	A pattern emerges across scenes	Reader loses the thread without an anchor
Nested or loop (dream, replay)	Perception is the subject	Can read as a trick without meaning

Case Studies

Each study uses a publicly readable story whose school reports a Scholastic tier. Reminders: the notes come from summarized readings and are most reliable on structure, tiers are school self-reports, and nothing here reproduces student text. Coach inference is labeled as such.

CASE STUDY 1: CARNIVAL GAMES (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL AND GOLD KEY, 2017; PER A SCHOOL AWARDS INDEX)

Short story, roughly 1,700 words, first person, past tense with a present-tense frame. Content note: it deals with a school shooting; study the structure, not the subject.

SOLUTION

- Structure from beginning to end. The story begins mid-dialogue at a carnival game. It then cycles between a present-tense frame (the narrator in her room with a stuffed panda) and the carnival day, with backstory scenes in between. Returning to one day repeatedly turns the shape into a loop, and the loop is how the story performs grief.
- Scene and summary. Dramatized moments, such as the basement confrontation and the carnival games, alternate with summary of the sister's death, the withdrawal, and the father's drinking. The summary is quick; the scenes are where choices and silences happen.
- Point of view. A grieving first-person narrator who is close to the friend gives the reader intimate access and a built-in blind spot: she needs to believe he is still in there.
- Effect. The reader is waiting for something worse in the carnival scenes because of foreshadowing. The coach inference is that the frame and the repeated day are what lift the piece, since the same plot told in a straight line would be a sequence of sad events.

CASE STUDY 2: DREAMS (GOLD KEY, 2017; SCHOOL REPORT)

Short story, roughly 790 words, first person, past tense. Source: a school blog named in the research file.

SOLUTION

- Structure. A nested dream: the narrator wakes to a sound in the hall, moves toward danger, fights an intruder, appears to kill him, and wakes again to what seems to be a real body. The final image leaves it unresolved whether any of it was real.
- Scene and summary. The confrontation and killing are fully dramatized. Corridor wandering and a desk encounter are briskly summarized, which matches dream dislocation.
- Point of view. Close and limited, so the reader knows only what the narrator perceives. That restriction makes the loop believable.
- Devices. A pocketknife on the bedside table is planted early and pays off. The narrator and intruder are doubled: similar height, each surprised by the other's youth. The research file's coach note is useful: an it-was-all-a-dream ending is a famously weak move on its own. This piece likely works because the doubling and the unresolved last image give the dream a meaning. A bare dream twist would be a cheat.

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CASE STUDY 3: HOME (SCHOLASTIC RAY BRADBURY AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY, 2021)

Science fiction, roughly 2,900 words, first person from an artificial probe. Note: this is a special award for science fiction and fantasy. It is not described as a Gold Medal, so do not treat it as one. Source: the Alliance's newsroom page named in the research file.

SOLUTION

Structure. Chronological, with long digressions into memory, building to a late reveal that the perfect planet being sought is Earth. The structure turns the search into a return, so early loneliness becomes grief.

Scene and summary. Mostly summary, covering millennia in compressed form, which is justified because the narrator is a machine reviewing a long mission. A handful of dramatized beats carry the weight: the departure memory, the lifeless systems, the discovery of a termination program, and the landing among ruins.

Point of view as delivery system. The speculative backstory arrives through the probe's programming and records, so exposition is credible and gradual. The constraint of the narrator solves the problem of how to explain a world.

Effect. The narrator's choice to restore life at the cost of its own consciousness gives the premise a human cost, and the closing question lets it keep an interior life. At this length the story is a model for a full short story, not for flash.

Step-by-Step

- 1 List your turning points** Write the four to six moments when the situation changes: a decision, a revelation, a loss, a refusal. Everything else is connective tissue.
- 2 Label each as scene or summary** Give full scenes to turning points. Summarize everything else in a sentence or paragraph.
- 3 Choose your point of view on purpose** Write one sentence: This story is told by ___ because ___, and they cannot know ___.
- 4 Pick a structure** Choose from linear, frame, circular, fragments, or loop. Write what the form does for the ending in one sentence. If you cannot, use linear.
- 5 Draft the crisis scene first** Write the moment of choice before anything else. Knowing what it costs tells you what to plant earlier.
- 6 Plant and pay off** List three things from the crisis that must appear earlier (an object, a skill, a habit). Insert them quietly into early scenes.
- 7 Check each scene for change** Write a line under each scene: what changed? If you cannot answer, merge it or cut it.

BEFORE AND AFTER: SCENE INSTEAD OF SUMMARY AT A TURNING POINT

WEAK (coach sample):

When Theo got home, he and his father argued about the money. His father was angry and said Theo could not go to the competition. Theo felt hurt and went to his room.

SOLUTION

STRONG (coach sample):

His father did not look up from the envelope. 'Fifty-two dollars for a bus to a room full of people who already know the answers.' 'It's a hundred and four for the team.'

'Then the team can pay.' The envelope slid across the table and stopped against the salt.

What changed. The weak version reports an argument and two emotions. The strong version drops the reader into the moment, uses concrete figures, lets one object (the envelope sliding to the salt) end the beat, and trusts the reader to feel hurt. The scene is short, but it is a scene: speakers, stakes, and an action that closes it.

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BEFORE AND AFTER: POINT OF VIEW THAT KNOWS TOO MUCH

WEAK (coach sample):
I walked into the kitchen. Mom was smiling, but she was actually worried about the layoff she hadn't told anyone about, and she was thinking about the mortgage.

SOLUTION
STRONG (coach sample):
I walked into the kitchen. Mom was smiling the way she smiles at the dentist. She had turned the radio off, and she never turns the radio off.

What changed. The first-person narrator cannot know her mother's thoughts. The strong version keeps what the narrator can see (a smile with a tell, a silent radio) and lets the reader do the inference. The rule is simple: if your narrator could not know it, only show it.

Tier Check

This table is the coach's inference from published winners, not a Scholastic rubric. Scholastic publishes no tier percentages, and the pieces above are all winners, so the right-hand column describes common patterns in weaker drafts.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Structure carries meaning (a loop that enacts grief, a return that recasts a search)	Strong form or voice, with some reliance on a twist or device that needs support	Events in order, with no chain of cause
Scene and summary budgeted unevenly, with words spent on turning points	Mostly well balanced, some flat stretches	Every moment given equal space
Point of view is a decision and creates irony or blind spots	Consistent point of view	Narrator knows too much or tells feelings
Planted details pay off	Some foreshadowing	Coincidence or a last-minute solution

Common traps

1. A middle where the same conflict restates itself. 2. A twist ending that nothing earlier prepared. 3. A narrator who reads other characters' minds. 4. A dream or it-was-all-imagined ending used as an escape instead of a meaning.

Coach's Playbook

Four to six turning points. Full scenes for each, summary for the rest. One sentence defending your point of view. A crisis scene drafted first. Three planted details. A what-changed line under every scene.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, list the scenes of a story you have drafted or are planning. Write a what-changed line next to each. Cross out or merge any scene where the answer is nothing.

Practice

WORKSHOP Plot Shape, Scene, and Point of View

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. List the four to six turning points of a story you are developing or have drafted.
2. Beside each turning point, write SCENE or SUMMARY. Then explain in one sentence why your longest scene earns its length.
3. Write the sentence: This story is told by ___ because ___, and they cannot know ___.
4. Draft the crisis scene (the moment of choice) in 300 to 500 words before you write anything earlier.

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5. List three details from the crisis that must be planted earlier. Write the planting lines.
6. Rewrite one summary paragraph that covers a turning point as a short scene with at least two lines of dialogue.
7. Take a paragraph where your narrator knows another character's thoughts. Rewrite it using only what the narrator can see, hear, and infer.
8. Choose one structure from the table (linear, frame, circular, fragments, loop) and write what it does for your ending in one sentence.
9. Reread Case Study 2. Write two sentences explaining what would turn a dream ending into a cheat and what would turn it into a meaning.
10. Add a what-changed line under every scene in your outline. Cut or merge one scene that fails the test.

05.3 Dialogue, Setting, and Sentence-Level Craft

Jurors notice your sentences before they notice your structure. Learn how to make dialogue do two jobs at once, turn setting into pressure, and vary syntax and diction so that your voice is recognizable by the end of the first page.

Why This Matters

Scholastic names technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision among its judging criteria, and the sentence level is where both show up first. A juror reading many stories at 1,000 to 3,000 words each forms an impression quickly: does this writer control rhythm, choose exact words, and let dialogue and setting do more than one job? Scholastic does not publish a line-by-line rubric, so what follows is coaching drawn from published winners.

Students lose points here in predictable ways. Dialogue that exists to deliver information (as you know, Dad, we moved here after the accident). Setting that opens a story as a paragraph of weather and then vanishes. Sentences that all run the same length and begin with the same pronoun. Adjectives and adverbs doing the work a verb should do. Each of these is fixable in revision, which makes this section the most efficient place to raise a draft.

Core Ideas

Dialogue should work like a contact sport: two people want different things, and every line is a move. Real people interrupt, dodge, and answer the question they wish had been asked. Good dialogue carries subtext, meaning that the surface topic (money, a boot, dinner) is not the real topic (control, fear, love). Tags should be invisible: said is nearly always enough. Attach action beats (a hand on a salt shaker) to show what a character does while saying something else.

Dialogue Checklist

- Does each speaker want something from the other in this exchange?
- Could a line be cut without losing a move? Cut it.
- Are characters telling each other what both already know? Rewrite.
- Does every speaker sound like themselves (word choice, rhythm, what they avoid)?
- Is there at least one interruption, dodge, or silence that carries meaning?
- Are action beats showing the real emotion while the words show the cover story?

Setting is not backdrop. A well-chosen setting applies pressure: a carnival with sugar and lights makes dread sharper by contrast, a car makes confession unavoidable because nobody can leave. Pick one or two details that only this place has, and let characters touch them. Return to the same setting details later, changed by what has happened. A winning story rarely describes a place for a full paragraph; it gives a few exact items and moves.

Syntax and rhythm are your fingerprints. Long, accumulating sentences carry rising emotion or deliberate movement. Short, blunt sentences land turns. If everything is long, the story drones; if everything is short, it stutters. Aim for deliberate variation, with short sentences at moments of impact. **Diction** is the register of your words. A story can gain tension by mixing registers, such as plain conversational language beside a more formal or technical one, as long as the mix is controlled.

Sentence Craft Rules of Thumb

- Strong nouns and verbs first. Add an adjective only if it changes the picture.
- Vary sentence openings. Check three in a row for the same subject.
- Place the surprising word at the end of the sentence.
- Cut repeated words unless repetition is the point.
- Read aloud. If you run out of breath, find a place to break; if you trip, find a place to smooth.

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Device	What it does	Watch out for
Motif (a recurring image or object)	Ties scenes together without explanation	Overusing it until it becomes a lecture
Repetition	Builds rhythm and obsession	Accidental repetition of pet words
Figurative language	Makes feeling concrete	Mixed or borrowed metaphors
Sensory detail	Anchors scenes in the body	Listing five senses when two will do
Foreshadowing	Creates dread or expectation	Planting something that never pays off

Case Studies

These studies come from publicly readable stories whose schools report a Scholastic tier. The notes derive from summarized readings, which are better on structure than on exact word choice, so syntax and diction comments below are general. A reader should confirm any claim about a specific line on the live page before repeating it. No student text is reproduced here.

CASE STUDY 1: CARNIVAL GAMES (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL AND GOLD KEY, 2017; PER A SCHOOL AWARDS INDEX)

Short story, roughly 1,700 words. Content note: the story ends on a school shooting; study how sentences and setting build dread, not the subject.

SOLUTION

Dialogue. The opening is a clipped exchange at a carnival game, before the reader knows who is speaking. Short lines and interruptions give the scene tension, and the basement confrontation works the same way. Emotional passages in the narration run on in long sentences, so the contrast between spoken and unspoken is itself a device.

Setting. The carnival is not a backdrop: lights, cotton candy, sugar-stained faces, and powdered funnel cake are sweet and bright, and they sit against James's changed face and empty eyes. The pleasant surface makes the reader wait for harm.

Diction and devices. Plain, conversational language with a few sharper moments, including profanity. A trembling voice is compared to the start of an earthquake. Recurring objects, a stuffed panda and a Beatles poster, carry feeling that the narrator never has to label.

Coach takeaway. Put sweetness next to dread, keep spoken lines short, and let a few objects say what the narration does not.

CASE STUDY 2: I'M SITTING IN THE CAR (SILVER KEY, 2025-26 CYCLE; SCHOOL CLAIM ONLY)

Short story of eight vignettes, roughly 2,000 words. The school page calls it a Silver Key piece; the PDF does not mention Scholastic, so the tier is the school's claim.

SOLUTION

Dialogue. Mostly scene, built from dialogue, physical action, and sensory detail, with brief reflective summary. Short clipped sentences appear in dialogue and tense moments; longer, looping sentences carry emotional description. Counting silent seconds is a repetition that builds pressure.

Setting. One setting, a car, is made to do many jobs: a space for confession, a place for eye contact through the rearview mirror, and a time capsule through songs and cassettes. Because the setting never changes, small details such as perfume, mud, and afternoon light must change instead, and they do.

Diction. Conversational and accessible, with harsher language in conflict. A recurring image of Neptune eyes links a daughter to the sea and renewal.

Coach takeaway, with its flaw. The research notes typos and inconsistent capitalization in this Silver Key piece, plus an author note that explains the purpose. Clean copy and trusting the work are within your control.

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CASE STUDY 3: THE SUN, THE MOON, THE STARS (GOLD KEY, 2017; SCHOOL REPORT)

Short story, roughly 1,300 to 1,500 words, first person. Source: a school blog named in the research file.

SOLUTION

Syntax. Often run-on and associative, with dashes and interruptions that enact a mind that cannot settle. At moments of rupture, especially near the end, the sentences become short and clipped. The rhythm change is the emotional change.

Diction. Teenage colloquial voice mixed with academic vocabulary from a class discussion. The contrast reflects a divided attention: the narrator is in the room and not in the room.

Setting and imagery. A classroom anchor, plus gardens, trees, light and dark, glass and shattering. The recurring glass image foreshadows the break at the end.

Coach takeaway. Let sentence length track your narrator's state. A form that mirrors a mind works only if recurring images tie the pieces together.

CASE STUDY 4: DREAMS (GOLD KEY, 2017; SCHOOL REPORT)

Short story, roughly 790 words. Source: a school blog named in the research file.

SOLUTION

Syntax. Long comma-linked sentences with participial phrases build tension, and short blunt sentences land at moments of impact.

Diction is formal and somewhat elevated, which contrasts with the violence it describes.

Setting and sensory shift. Light and dark carry the story: a flashlight, a lamp, dawn, against an engulfing dark. Sensory detail moves from sound at the start to touch at the end.

Coach takeaway. Letting one sense lead early and another lead late gives a short story an arc even when the plot is a loop.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Mark your dialogue** Highlight every line of dialogue in a draft. Next to each, write what the speaker wants from the listener. Delete lines where the answer is nothing.
- 2 Add subtext** For three exchanges, write what the characters are really talking about. Rewrite so the surface topic differs from that.
- 3 Choose setting details** Pick two details only this place would have. Make a character touch them. Bring one back later, altered.
- 4 Audit your sentences** Underline the first word of ten sentences in a row. If four share a subject, vary them. Count words in each sentence and find your longest and shortest.
- 5 Upgrade verbs and nouns** Circle every adjective and adverb. Where possible, replace the pair with a stronger verb or noun.
- 6 Read aloud** Read the entire draft aloud. Mark where you run out of breath or stumble, and fix those spots.
- 7 Proofread last** Read once for typos from the end of the draft to the beginning, paragraph by paragraph.

BEFORE AND AFTER: DIALOGUE THAT INFORMS VERSUS DIALOGUE THAT MOVES

WEAK (coach sample):

'I am upset that you forgot my birthday,' Ana said. 'You always forget things that matter to me.'

'I am sorry,' Luis said. 'I have been busy with work.'

SOLUTION

STRONG (coach sample):

'Nice of you to stop by.' Ana kept stacking chairs.

'Traffic was a mess.'

'On a Tuesday.'

Luis picked up the last chair, the one with the loose leg, and held it until she took it from him.

What changed. The weak version states feelings and excuses. In the strong version Ana's anger is hidden under politeness, Luis dodges, and the action (a chair with a loose leg that neither will name) carries the apology. The subject is traffic; the real subject is whether he cares.

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BEFORE AND AFTER: SETTING AND SENTENCE RHYTHM

WEAK (coach sample):
It was a cold and gray day and the sky was dark and the street was empty and the wind was blowing and Kai was walking to school and he was very sad.

SOLUTION
STRONG (coach sample):
The bus shelter had lost its glass again. Kai stood where the glass used to be, and the wind came straight through. Nobody else was waiting. That was how he knew he was late.
What changed. The weak line stacks and-clauses of equal weight and names an emotion. The strong version picks one specific detail (the missing glass), varies sentence length (a short blunt sentence lands the turn), and shows isolation through an absence. The last sentence places the surprise at the end.

Tier Check

Coach's inference from published winners, not a Scholastic rubric. Scholastic publishes no tier percentages, and our sample consists of winners only, so lower-tier descriptions reflect common weaker-draft patterns, not observed pieces.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Dialogue carries subtext and action beats; each line is a move	Dialogue is lively but sometimes explains	Dialogue delivers information or repeats feelings
Setting applies pressure and returns changed	Vivid setting, used mostly in the opening	Setting is a weather paragraph
Sentence length is controlled, with short sentences placed at turns	Good variation, some drift	Uniform length and repeated openers
Diction shows control, including deliberate mixing of registers	Consistent, clear diction	Generic or borrowed phrases
Clean copy	Mostly clean copy	Typos and inconsistent formatting

Common traps

1. Characters announcing their feelings. 2. A single paragraph of setting at the top, then nothing. 3. Every sentence the same length. 4. Attributive tags like exclaimed or whispered doing work the words should do.

Coach's Playbook

A want under every line of dialogue. Two exact setting details that return changed. A short sentence at every turn. One strong verb replacing every adjective and adverb pair. A full read-aloud before you submit.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, take one page of your draft. Circle every adjective and adverb. Replace five of them with sharper verbs or nouns, and read the page aloud once.

Practice

WORKSHOP Dialogue, Setting, and Sentence-Level Craft

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a 150-word dialogue between two characters where one wants to leave and the other wants them to stay, and neither says so.
2. Rewrite this line so it carries subtext: 'I am afraid you will leave me.'
3. Annotate one page of your own draft by writing the speaker's want beside each line of dialogue. Delete one line that has none.

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4. Choose a setting from your story and write five details only this place would have. Pick two to keep.
5. Write a second paragraph that returns to one of those details after the story's main event has changed it.
6. Take a paragraph with six sentences of similar length and rewrite it so lengths range from three words to thirty.
7. Replace each adjective-and-adverb pair in this sentence with a stronger verb: 'She walked very slowly and quietly into the room.'
8. Write four sentences from your narrator's voice that no other character in your story could say. Explain what makes them distinctive.
9. Read a published short story you admire. Write three sentences describing its dialogue, setting, and rhythm without quoting more than a few words.
10. Read your whole draft aloud. Mark three places to fix and write the fixes.

05.4 Endings, Revision, and Submission Polish

An ending is a promise kept in a way the reader did not expect but recognizes. Learn how winning stories close, how to revise in layers, and how to prepare a clean, rule-compliant Short Story entry for the Scholastic portal.

Why This Matters

Jurors read many entries, and endings are where stories either land or blur. Scholastic does not publish a rubric beyond originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, but an ending is where all three show: an original choice, controlled execution, and a sense that the writer knew what the story was about. Common losses include endings that explain the lesson, tie every thread with a bow, or arrive through a twist that nothing earlier prepared.

Revision is the second place students lose. Many entrants submit a first draft with a spell-check pass. Scholastic's rules let you edit until your regional deadline, and the published winners we studied show craft decisions that read as revised, such as planted details that pay off. Revision is also where you must confirm your story fits the rules: Short Story entries run 1,000 to 3,000 words, with no identifying information in the manuscript, typed or pasted directly into the portal text box. The final work must be entirely your own.

Core Ideas

A strong ending usually does one of three things: it **completes an action** (the character finally does the thing), **returns to an image** changed by the story, or **withholds** the last piece so the reader supplies it. What it rarely does is state the theme. If your last paragraph begins with and that was when I learned, cut it and see whether the story survives. Often the final image above it is stronger.

Ending Test

- Does the final image or action answer the question the opening raised?
- Does it cost the character something, or is it a rescue?
- Can you cut your last paragraph, and does the story end better?
- Is anything introduced for the first time in the final lines? If so, was it planted?
- Does the ending leave a feeling and not a summary?

Endings in the studied pieces vary, which is useful: one returns to its opening frame and an object, one leaves a dream unresolved but meaningful, one closes a loop by repeating a line, and one ends on a choice that restores life at a personal cost. What they share is that none of them stops to explain. The research file's inference, not a Scholastic statement, is that endings which withhold or redirect tend to appear in the strongest pieces, while endings that explain, reconcile, or moralize are common in weaker drafts.

Layered Revision

- Pass 1, story: Is the want clear on page one? Does every scene change something?
- Pass 2, scene: Cut summary that stalls and expand turning points.
- Pass 3, line: Strong verbs, varied sentences, cut repeated words.
- Pass 4, copy: Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, consistent tense and point of view.
- Pass 5, rules: Word count in range, no name or school in the text, formatting works in a plain text box.

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Submission check	What to do
Word count	1,000 to 3,000 for Short Story; under 1,000 belongs in Flash Fiction
Identity	No name, school, or teacher anywhere in the manuscript, including headers
Format	Type or paste directly into the portal text box; PDFs and hyperlinks cannot be reviewed by judges
Originality	The work must be your own idea; list influences in the Work Sources field
AI policy	A final work that is itself AI-generated is ineligible; disclose any permitted use
Edits	You may edit until your regional deadline; check your region's date

Case Studies

These studies come from publicly readable stories whose schools report a Scholastic tier. Notes come from summarized readings, tier labels are self-reports, and no student text is reproduced here. Coach inference is labeled.

CASE STUDY 1: DREAMS (GOLD KEY, 2017; SCHOOL REPORT)

Short story, roughly 790 words. Source: a school blog named in the research file.

SOLUTION

The ending. The narrator wakes to what seems to be a real body in blood, and it stays unresolved whether the violence was real. A dream-based twist is usually a weak ending, and the research file says so plainly.

Why it still works. The earlier pocketknife is a plant that pays off. The narrator and intruder are doubled, so the last image carries meaning: the intruder may be a version of the self. The unresolved question is the point, not a dodge.

Coach inference. A writer who ends with it was all a dream and nothing else has a trick. A writer who has built a double, a planted object, and a sensory shift from sound to touch has an ending that means something. If you choose a loop or a dream, build the second purpose before you write the last line.

CASE STUDY 2: I'M SITTING IN THE CAR (SILVER KEY, 2025-26 CYCLE; SCHOOL CLAIM ONLY)

Short story of eight vignettes, roughly 2,000 words plus an author note. The tier is the school's claim; the PDF does not mention Scholastic.

SOLUTION

The ending. The final vignette is fragmentary and ambiguous, suggesting the narrator may be dying or dead, and it repeats the mother's go-to-sleep line from the beginning. The loop closes on sound, not explanation.

What the ending gets right. Mirrored pairs of vignettes let earlier unexplained moments, such as tears in one scene, be understood later. The final repetition rewards readers who stayed with the pattern.

Revision lessons. The research file notes typos, inconsistent capitalization, and an author note that states the purpose directly. The coach reading is that final polish and trust in the work would make a good piece cleaner. This is inference, not a judgment by Scholastic.

CASE STUDY 3: HOME (SCHOLASTIC RAY BRADBURY AWARD FOR SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY, 2021)

Science fiction, roughly 2,900 words, first person from an artificial probe. This is a special scholarship award, not a Gold Medal; treat it only as a model for a full-length ending. Source: the Alliance's newsroom page.

SOLUTION

The ending. Bittersweet and open: the narrator chooses to restore life to Earth at the cost of its own consciousness, and its last thought is a question about whether it will dream.

How it earns the ending. A late reveal turns the search into a return, so the early loneliness reads as grief. Dramatic irony lets the reader learn Earth's fate before the narrator does. A dreaming motif returns at the end, so the final question is planted.

Coach takeaway. A closing question can work when it belongs to the narrator's interior life and is prepared by an earlier motif.

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CASE STUDY 4: CARNIVAL GAMES (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL AND GOLD KEY, 2017; PER A SCHOOL AWARDS INDEX)

Short story, roughly 1,700 words. Content note: the story involves a school shooting.

SOLUTION

The ending. It returns to the present-tense frame and the stuffed panda, leaving grief and memory unresolved and circling back to the opening.

How it earns the ending. A circular structure, repeated visits to one day, and recurring objects mean the final image gathers weight from every earlier appearance.

Coach inference. The ending needs no summary because the frame already performs the idea. A circular ending is only as strong as the changes the objects have undergone.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Write three possible endings** Draft one that completes an action, one that returns to an image, and one that withholds. Choose the one that costs the character most.
- 2 Cut the explanation** Delete the last paragraph. If the story still ends, leave it deleted. If it does not, rewrite it as an image or action.
- 3 Trace plants and payoffs** List every object or detail in the final scene. Confirm each appears earlier, quietly.
- 4 Let it rest** Set the draft aside for at least a day. Fresh eyes find the flat middle.
- 5 Revise in layers** Work through the five passes in order: story, scene, line, copy, rules. Do not proofread before you restructure.
- 6 Ask a reader the right question** Hand your story to someone and ask, Where did you want more, and where did you skim? Do not argue with the answers.
- 7 Final check in the portal** Paste the text into a plain text box, check line breaks and spacing, confirm word count, and remove any name.

BEFORE AND AFTER: CUTTING THE MORAL

WEAK (coach sample):

He closed the shed door and walked back to the house. He realized then that forgiving his father did not mean forgetting, and that sometimes the people we love hurt us, but love is stronger.

SOLUTION

STRONG (coach sample):

He closed the shed door and walked back to the house. The porch light was on. He stood on the step until his father opened the screen and held it.

What changed. The weak ending explains the theme in general terms. The strong ending uses a planted object (the porch light), an action (standing), and a gesture from the other character. The reader supplies forgiveness, which feels earned.

BEFORE AND AFTER: REPLACING A TWIST WITH A PAYOFF

WEAK (coach sample):

She screamed and jumped from the bed. Then she woke up. It had all been a dream.

SOLUTION

STRONG (coach sample):

She reached for the lamp and found her own hand already on it, the knuckles scraped. On the nightstand the pocketknife lay open, which she had not done.

What changed. The weak version cancels the story. The strong version plants an object, leaves the question open, and ties the physical evidence to the narrator, so the reader is unsettled and not cheated. The ambiguity has a cause the reader can trace.

Tier Check

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Coach's inference from published winners, not a Scholastic rubric. Scholastic publishes no tier percentages. The studied sample is small, comes largely from one school's blog, and contains winners only, so the right-hand column reflects typical weaker-draft habits, not observed pieces.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Ending withholds or redirects and is prepared by planted details	Strong closing image, sometimes a loose end	Ending explains, reconciles, or moralizes
Form is tied to the ending effect	Interesting form, with some reliance on a device	Twist or dream used as an escape
Revision visible in structure, line, and copy	Some visible revision	First draft with spell-check
Fully compliant, clean entry	Compliant entry, a few slips	Rule problems or errors (identifying information, wrong category)

Common traps

1. Ending with the narrator stating the lesson. 2. A twist nothing planted. 3. Submitting with a name, school, or teacher in the manuscript. 4. Entering a 900-word story as a Short Story instead of Flash Fiction.

Coach's Playbook

Three candidate endings. Last paragraph cut-test. Plant-and-payoff list. Five revision passes in order. One honest reader. Plain-text paste test before you submit.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, delete your last paragraph and reread the story. Write the new final line as an image or action, then compare both versions aloud.

Practice

WORKSHOP Endings, Revision, and Submission Polish

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write three different endings for a story you are developing: one that completes an action, one that returns to an image, one that withholds.
2. Choose one ending and write what it costs the character in a single sentence.
3. Delete the last paragraph of a draft. Reread and decide whether to keep the deletion. Write what you found.
4. List every object in your final scene and find where each first appears. Add a plant for any that does not.
5. Rewrite this ending so it shows rather than explains: 'She understood that her mother had always loved her.'
6. Draft a revision plan with the five passes (story, scene, line, copy, rules) and one concrete task for each.
7. Trade drafts with a reader and ask them where they skimmed. Summarize the answer and what you will change.
8. Paste your story into a plain text file. Check line breaks, remove any name or school, and record the final word count.
9. Reread the Dreams case study and explain in three sentences what separates a bare dream twist from a meaningful one.
10. Write a Work Sources note listing any influences, in two or three lines, and confirm the story is entirely your own work.

05.5 Bonus Lab: The Annotated Short Story Draft Clinic

Watch a complete original story get taken apart, then run your own draft through six revision passes. This lab shows how premise, scene order, diction, and ending work together in a real draft.

Why This Matters

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A Short Story entry runs 1,000 to 3,000 words, and Scholastic's published criteria are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. It publishes no rubric beyond that, so this lab is coaching, not a Scholastic statement. The fastest way to learn story craft is to watch one complete draft get taken apart. Below is a full original story of about 450 words, split into three parts, each followed by an annotation. It is deliberately short so you can see every move. Your own entry will be longer and will need more scenes, but the same logic holds.

Read the story first as a reader, then again as an editor. Final work must be entirely your own, so use this as a model for the thinking, never as material to borrow.

COACH'S SAMPLE (ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER): PART 1, THE OPENING

Title: The Key Drawer

On the first Saturday after the funeral, Dani's mother started cleaning, which was how she stopped herself from crying. By ten she had stripped the beds. By noon she had reached the kitchen drawer where forty years of keys lived, tangled like a nest.

"Sort them," she said, and handed Dani a coffee can. "Keep the ones we know. Toss the ones we don't."

Dani wanted to say that nobody could know what any of them opened. She sat down on the linoleum and began.

SOLUTION

Development: the story starts inside an action, sorting keys, and the want is planted at once: Dani must decide what to keep.

Nothing is explained about the grief; it sits under the chore.

Organization: one setting, one task, a ticking sense of afternoon. The compressed time (ten, noon) tells you a day is being spent.

Syntax and diction: the first sentence is long and delayed, ending on the reason; the dialogue is short and bossy. Plain words (nest, coffee can) carry the feeling so the narrator never says 'sad'. The device is the controlling object, introduced early and plainly, as the Premise Test asks.

COACH'S SAMPLE (ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER): PART 2, THE COMPLICATION

Most keys were easy: the shed, the old Buick, a bike lock. But one small brass key had no match. Dani tried it in the back door, the cellar, her father's toolbox. Nothing.

"Toss it," her mother said, without looking up.

Dani slid it into her sock instead. That evening she found the only lock left unchecked, a tiny drawer in her father's desk that had always stuck. The key turned. Inside were eleven postcards, all addressed to Dani, none ever mailed, each one starting the same way: Next week I will tell you.

SOLUTION

Development: the want now has an obstacle with a face. The mother says toss it; Dani hides it. That small act of disobedience is the story's first real choice.

Organization: the drawer reveal sits roughly two thirds through the draft, after the reader has accepted the chore. The reveal is a discovery, not a coincidence, because Dani earns it by trying every lock.

Syntax and diction: the sentences speed up in the search (three short trials in a row), then slow for the postcards. The repeated opening line of the cards is a controlled echo, a device that implies a father who kept postponing something.

COACH'S SAMPLE (ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER): PART 3, THE CHOICE AND THE ENDING

She read all eleven standing up. None said what he would tell her. None needed to; the gap was the message.

In the kitchen her mother had finished the can. "Anything worth saving?"

Dani looked at the cards, then at her mother's hands, red from scrubbing. She could hand them over and let her mother take the grief too, or she could keep them and keep the silence.

"Just the shed key," Dani said, and put the coffee can on the shelf, the brass key still warm in her sock.

SOLUTION

Development: the final choice costs something. Dani protects her mother and lies by omission, so the ending is a decision, not a lesson announced by the narrator.

Organization: the story returns to the kitchen and the can from Part 1, closing the frame. A circular structure makes a small story feel finished.

Syntax and diction: the last sentence ends on a physical object, the warm key, so the reader finishes on an image. Notice that the theme (what we withhold to protect people we love) never appears as a statement. It lives in the choice.

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Look at what the sample proves. In about 450 words, it contains a want (sort the keys), an obstacle (the mother's order to toss the unknown one), a discovery, a choice with a price, and an ending that echoes the opening. A 3,000 word entry can add scenes, a second complication, and richer setting, but it should not add more kinds of event. Think of the sample as the skeleton and your draft as the body. Judges at the senior level tend to reward a story whose length feels earned, so if you can cut a scene without changing the ending, cut it.

Revision Pass Plan

- 1 Pass 1: Premise** Write your story as one sentence with a who, a want, and an obstacle. If you cannot, fix the premise before polishing lines.
- 2 Pass 2: Scene causality** List your scenes. Between each pair, write BECAUSE or BUT. If you can only write AND THEN, the scenes are not yet causing each other.
- 3 Pass 3: Opening and ending** Cut the first paragraph if the real story begins in the second. Make sure the last image echoes something planted early.
- 4 Pass 4: Voice and diction** Replace every vague adjective with a specific noun or verb. Read dialogue aloud; two characters should not sound alike.
- 5 Pass 5: Cut and compress** Delete any line that explains a feeling the scene already shows. Aim to lose at least 10 percent. Check you stay within 1,000 to 3,000 words.
- 6 Pass 6: Proof** Read backward sentence by sentence for errors, and confirm there is no name or identifying information anywhere in the manuscript.

Short Story Lab Checklist

Does the first page contain a character already doing something she cares about?
 Is there one want, one obstacle, and one costly choice?
 Does at least one object return changed?
 Do the sentences vary in length on purpose?
 Does the ending land on an image or action, not a moral?
 Is the title doing work, not just labeling?
 Is every word of it your own idea and creation?

Common traps

Starting with the character waking up. Ending on a dream or a lesson. Letting the narrator say what the reader should feel. Giving every character the same voice.

Do This Tonight

Take your current draft and mark the one sentence where the main character makes a choice. If you cannot find it, write it in fifteen minutes, then decide where it belongs.

Practice

WORKSHOP Bonus Lab: The Annotated Short Story Draft Clinic

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a one-sentence premise (who, want, obstacle) for a new story. Then rewrite it with a more specific detail.
2. Choose a controlling object for a story of your own. Write the plain, unexplained sentence that introduces it.
3. Rewrite the opening of 'The Key Drawer' with the funeral not mentioned at all. What does the reader now have to infer?
4. List the scenes of your current draft and write BECAUSE or BUT between each pair.
5. Write a version of Part 3 where Dani gives her mother the postcards. Which version costs more, and why?
6. Draft a 150-word scene in which two characters want opposite things but never state them.
7. Find a sentence in your draft that explains a feeling. Replace it with an action or object.

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8. Write a new last line for your story that ends on an image. Explain which early detail it echoes.
9. Do a 10 percent cut on one page of your draft. List what you removed and why it was safe to lose.

Notes**Coaching Notes and Model Responses**

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

05.1 Premise, Character, and Conflict**WORKSHOP · PREMISE, CHARACTER, AND CONFLICT**

1. Look for specificity. A list like 'my aunt's bakery shift, the way my brother signs up for chess' beats 'family, school.' The starred items are your best source of originality because a juror cannot have read them a hundred times.
2. A good test is whether a stranger could picture the first scene from the sentence alone. If two of your three sentences name only feelings, rewrite them with a person, a want, and a blocker.
3. Example: 'Dani has until the 6:15 train to return her cousin's borrowed jacket without anyone seeing the burn on the sleeve.' The action and the clock create scenes instantly.
4. Do not tell us she is shy. Show her entering a room, or what she does with her hands. Four or five exact details are enough, and each should suggest a history.
5. Example: A boy wants the lead in the school play (want) but needs to forgive his father for missing the last one (need). The collision: his father arrives early, and he flubs his line on purpose.
6. The objects should start as ordinary and end as loaded. A poster that is simply wall decoration early and a thing the narrator cannot look at late is exactly the change you want.
7. Model: 'Jo ate lunch in the stairwell, where the radiator hummed and nobody asked whose table it was.' The loneliness is now a place and a habit.
8. If you listed fifteen scenes, cut the premise or merge scenes. If a scene could be removed without changing the ending, it is probably summary in disguise.
9. A strong opening gives the reader a person, a want, and a pressure in about 150 words. Check that your first paragraph contains action, not weather or waking up.
10. Rewrites should replace the named feeling with a gesture, a line of dialogue, or an object. 'I was nervous' becomes 'I folded the program until it was the size of a stamp.'

05.2 Plot Shape, Scene, and Point of View**WORKSHOP · PLOT SHAPE, SCENE, AND POINT OF VIEW**

1. Turning points are changes in the situation, not events. 'They go to the lake' is not a turning point; 'she learns he lied about the lake' is. If your list is more than six, you may be writing a novel.
2. Your longest scene should be a turn or a confrontation. If your longest scene is a conversation that only conveys information, shrink it.
3. Example: 'told by the younger sister because she watches everything and says nothing, and she cannot know what their father said in the car.' The cannot-know clause protects you from cheating.
4. Drafting the crisis first shows you what must be planted. Check that the choice costs something specific, not just a feeling.
5. Examples: a skill used in the crisis (she can pick locks) must appear earlier, quietly. Plant it in a context that does not announce its importance.
6. Check that your scene has speakers who want different things. A scene needs friction. Two characters agreeing politely is summary wearing a costume.
7. Model: change 'He wondered if she resented him' to 'She stirred the tea long after the sugar was gone.' The inference stays with the reader.
8. A good answer ties the form to the ending: 'A circular shape makes the last image feel like the first one, which lets the cost of the choice show.' If the form does nothing, choose linear.
9. A dream turns into a meaning when it reveals something about the dreamer that the waking story cannot, such as doubling or fear. It turns into a cheat when it merely cancels what happened.
10. Scenes that survive the what-changed test usually change a relationship, a piece of knowledge, or a plan. Cutting a scene often makes the next one stronger.

05.3 Dialogue, Setting, and Sentence-Level Craft**WORKSHOP · DIALOGUE, SETTING, AND SENTENCE-LEVEL CRAFT**

1. Look for evasion. 'I should go' and 'The kettle's still hot' can carry the entire conflict. If either character states the feeling, rewrite.
2. Model: 'You keep your coat on, I notice.' or 'Which key did you leave on the hook?' Fear is shown by what the speaker watches.
3. A line with no want is usually filler. Cutting it speeds the scene and makes the next line hit harder.
4. The best details involve touch or sound, not just sight. Keep the ones another writer could not invent from a search.
5. The returned detail should mean something different. A porch light first signals welcome; later it signals waiting.
6. Short sentences belong at turns. Check that the three-word sentence lands at a moment of change and not at random.
7. Model: 'She crept in.' or 'She slipped in.' One precise verb replaces three words and sharpens the picture.
8. Distinctive voice is a matter of what a character notices and what they avoid. Mention a verbal habit, a metaphor source (cooking, sports, engines), or a rhythm.

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9. Describe function, not just surface: whether dialogue is clipped, whether setting is one place, how sentence length changes at the climax. Do not copy phrases.
10. Reading aloud finds repeated words, clumsy transitions, and breath problems. Fix the three worst, then reread.

05.4 Endings, Revision, and Submission Polish

WORKSHOP · ENDINGS, REVISION, AND SUBMISSION POLISH

1. The three endings should feel different, not just reworded. Often the withholding ending is the most surprising, but pick the one that matches the story's question.
2. Cost is specific: a friendship, a belief, a place. If the answer is 'she feels better,' there may be no cost, and the ending may be a rescue.
3. Many writers find the deletion improves the ending. If the story feels cut short, keep the deletion but add one image, not an explanation.
4. Every payoff needs a plant. If a key object first appears in the final scene, add a quiet mention in the first third.
5. Model: 'Her mother had left a plate in the oven, covered in foil, with the burner still warm.' Love is in the plate, not the statement.
6. Concrete tasks: Pass 1, state the want on page one. Pass 2, expand the crisis scene. Pass 3, replace ten adjective-adverb pairs. Pass 4, check tense. Pass 5, confirm 1,000 to 3,000 words and no name.
7. Write down specifics: 'Skimmed the long middle paragraph; wanted more of the argument scene.' Then pick two changes. You are not obliged to take every suggestion.
8. Jurors see roughly what appears in the box, including line breaks and spacing, so check that paragraphs look as you intended and that no identifying details remain.
9. A good answer notes that the meaningful twist is prepared by planted details and doubling and leaves a question, while the bare twist cancels the story without cost.
10. Sources are for ideas and influences, such as a book, a news story, or a conversation. The work must be your own idea and creation, and any permitted tool use must be disclosed per the rules.

05.5 Bonus Lab: The Annotated Short Story Draft Clinic

WORKSHOP · BONUS LAB: THE ANNOTATED SHORT STORY DRAFT CLINIC

1. A good premise names the person and the pressure, for example: a girl who must sort her late father's keys hides one from her mother. Specific beats general every time. Check whether another writer could have the same sentence; if so, add a detail only you know.
2. Keep it flat and early: 'The brass key hung on a nail by the door.' Do not say it matters. The object earns weight by returning later, changed by events.
3. Without the funeral, the reader pieces grief together from the mother's frantic cleaning and the forty-year drawer. Inference makes readers lean in, but keep one small clue so the confusion feels deliberate.
4. Strong stories read BECAUSE this, BUT that. A string of AND THEN means the scenes are interchangeable, which is a sign the plot needs a stronger want or a sharper obstacle.
5. Handing over the cards makes the ending kinder but more conventional; keeping them costs Dani her honesty with her mother. The second is more interesting because the cost is internal. Choose the version that matches your story's question.
6. Use objects and actions as proxies: one character keeps checking a phone while the other keeps stacking dishes. Subtext works when each want shows up in behavior, never in a statement.
7. Example: 'She was devastated' becomes 'She folded the same towel four times.' Keep the replacement concrete and slightly surprising.
8. Echo endings feel earned: a coffee can, a key, a phone call. Name the early detail and check that it was introduced plainly, not heavily.
9. Look for repeated information, stage business (sitting, standing, nodding), and adjectives stacked in threes. Cutting these usually raises tension without losing plot. Keep a copy of the old draft in case you regret one trim.

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