

# One-Minute Stories: Harvey Stanbrough's Flash Fiction Workshop

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Ninety-nine words or less —  
that's all you get in true Flash

Writing a complete story in less than a hundred words may sound impossible, but Harvey Stanbrough makes it look easy. Stanbrough, a Pulitzer Prize nominee and popular OWFI speaker, shared his flash-fiction tips in a free two-hour workshop held May 7 in Edmond. OWFI co-sponsored the event along with Oklahoma Center for the Book and the Edmond Public Library.

Stanbrough began the workshop by clarifying what flash fiction is and isn't. Evolving from the short-short story, flash fiction is now considered a separate form. Word counts vary, with some markets and contests allowing up to a thousand words. But Stanbrough defines true flash fiction as limited to ninety-nine words, sometimes less. One major market restricts pieces to fifty-five words.

A flash fiction story is a complete work, not a skeleton outline or introduction for a longer piece. It may inspire a longer work—Stanbrough's fifty-five-word story "At Confession" was turned into a short film—but it must also stand on its own. Like a full-length story, it must contain a conflict and resolution.

Stanbrough offered these guidelines for crafting successful flash fiction:

*Include all four elements of fiction: setting, characterization, conflict, and resolution.* Setting doesn't need to be explicitly described, but should be suggested. Characters lack space to change and develop as they do in longer fiction, so the change often occurs in the reader's *perception* of the characters. Stanbrough suggests limiting characters to one or two, three at most. They don't always need to be human. Try animals, machines, or aliens for a surreal touch.

Conflict sets flash fiction apart from vi-

gnettes, prose poems, or other short forms. Without this key element, no story exists. Flash fiction also needs a satisfying, believable resolution that arises naturally from the story. No magical fixes allowed. If your story ends with a plot twist, as many do, make this twist convincing.

*Avoid telling everything. Use suggestion and implication.* Drop hints, allowing the reader to put the pieces together. In less than a hundred words, you don't have time to labor through a detailed explanation of every event or emotion. Flash fiction provides great practice in trusting the reader.

*Include plenty of dialogue.* There's no better way to plunge the reader into a scene without the need for extra telling. Dialogue can increase tension and move the story forward. With its compressed speech and many sentence fragments, dialogue also saves words. Stanbrough uses dialogue extensively in his own work, preferring it over narrative.

Tighten your dialogue by eliminating attributions such as "he said" wherever you can. Keep gestures short and economical ("he frowned" rather than "he frowned at her").

*Trim words whenever possible.* Limit adjectives and adverbs, and use strong verbs. Sound familiar? If you've been writing for a while, it should. The same rules that apply to longer forms are doubly important in flash fiction.

Stanbrough's final word-saving hint is more specific to this form: get creative with contractions. For example, "should not have" (three words) can become "shouldn't've" (one word). This strategy won't work for scientific reports, but for flash fiction, it might squeak you in under the limit.

To stay within a specific word limit, Stanbrough suggests the following technique: Number each line on a piece of ruled paper. When you reach the bottom, start a new column and continue numbering until you reach the desired word count. Then write your story, placing one word in

## At Confession

By Harvey Stanbrough

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."  
"How long since your last confession?"  
"Two years."  
"What's the trouble?"  
"I have wished death on a man."  
"You haven't acted on your wish?"  
"Not yet."  
"Who is the man?"  
"He is cheating with my wife."  
The priest paled. "I forgive you."  
I shot him through the screen.

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Harvey Stanbrough's Flash Fiction workshop.



# Flash Fiction Workshop continued

each numbered space. To revise, cross out words and replace.

*Edit and rewrite.* Stanbrough wrote the first draft of "At Confession" in about fifteen minutes. He spent a total of three or four hours revising the piece. Since every word is so essential in a flash-fiction story, it may take several drafts to

(OWFI.org) and the next issue of the *OWFI Report* for updates.

Maria Veres's poetry, fiction and nonfiction have appeared in many literary and trade magazines. With her husband, she published and edited a hobby magazine for five years. She won the Oklahoma City Writers 2004 crème-de-la-crème award for her book-length memoir, *Holly's Gift*. Maria will teach a poetry workshop at Francis Tuttle Institute in Oklahoma City this fall.



create a finished work.

*Find a market.* Both literary and mainstream magazines publish flash fiction. These short pieces also work well as fillers. Because the fiction market changes constantly, Stanbrough recommends the Internet as the best source of publishing opportunities. Search under "flash fiction" and follow the links.

Stanbrough's presentation offered an intriguing introduction for anyone wanting to write in this form. The afternoon also included hands-on writing time, and each participant left with a first draft of at least one flash fiction story.

You can read more about flash fiction in Stanbrough's book, *Writing Realistic Dialogue and Flash Fiction*. Stanbrough is also the author of *Punctuation for Writers*. His fifth poetry collection, *Beyond the Masks*, has a July 2005 release date. For more information on all Stanbrough's books, go to his Web site at [stonethread.com](http://stonethread.com). The Web site also contains samples of Stanbrough's poetry and fiction.

Disappointed that you missed the workshop? OWFI plans to sponsor more writing events at metro-area libraries later in the year. Check our Web site

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