



The Short Story Arc.

*one change,
fully shaped.*

A complete field guide to the short story as a shape: the six-beat arc that carries a single character through one decisive turn. Enter late, tighten one line of pressure to the moment that matters, then exit early - with a worked example carried from its first image to its last, and a printable arc sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft.

The short story arc is the compact single-arc shape that most short fiction has worn since it became its own form: one central character, one line of pressure, one turn, one change. It suits stories of roughly 1,500 to 7,500 words. It is not a branded method with an owner but the common spine of the form, and this guide is One More Draft's plain walkthrough of it.

Two orientation notes. First, this is the **structure**, the arc itself, not a manual of line-level craft; for scene, voice, and cutting at the sentence, its companion is the field guide **How to Write a Short Story**. Second, the arc is **compressed**. A novel wanders in; a short story enters late, turns once, and leaves early. Keep that in mind on every page that follows.

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A story built for one effect.

one character, one line of pressure, one change.

A novel can hold many effects and afford to. A short story cannot. The principle underneath the form, usually credited to Edgar Allan Poe, is **unity of effect**: every sentence bends toward a single preconceived impression, and anything that pulls against it is cut. The arc in this guide is simply the delivery system for that one effect, built to carry it from the first line to the last with nothing wasted between.

Beneath the effect is a **single change**. Name it before you draft. The protagonist believes, has, or is one thing when the story opens, and the opposite when it closes, and the distance between those two states is the whole story. Everything on the page exists to move the character along that one axis. If a scene does not, it belongs to a different piece.

Compression is the price and the gift. Few characters, one place where you can manage it, a span of time short enough to feel like a held breath. The short story does not build a world; it lights a single room very brightly and lets the reader see one thing clearly that a longer form would blur.

THE SINGLE-EFFECT TEST

- Say the effect in one word before you outline: dread, grief, relief, shame, wonder. Then keep every scene loyal to it.
- Count your characters. If a name never touches the central change, it has walked in from another story.
- State the change as a sentence with a from and a to. If you cannot, you have a situation, not yet a story.

THE STORY WITH THREE PLOTS

A draft carrying a subplot, a second protagonist, and a theme loose from both is a novel in hiding. Fix: choose the one change that matters most, and cut everything toward it until a single effect remains.

Not a small novel.

enter late, turn once, and leave before the room cools.

The six beats ahead look like a novel's spine, but the proportions are inverted. A novel opens early and wanders toward its problem across a hundred pages; a short story opens as late as the reader can still follow, often with the disturbing pressure already in the room. You are not building up to the story. You are dropping the reader into it, one step before the turn.

And there is only **one turn**. A novel stacks reversals across three acts; the short arc spends its entire budget on a single pivot. The complication is one line tightening, not a web of them. Everything before the turn exists to load it, and everything after exists to land it. Then you **exit early**. There is no real denouement: the resolution is a few strokes and a last image, and the reader finishes the story in their own head.

STRUCTURE, NOT SENTENCES

This guide is about the shape. For the line-level craft that fills it, from opening in motion to building a scene to cutting to the bone, its companion is the field guide **How to Write a Short Story**. Read this one to plan the arc; read that one to write the prose.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET PEG

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented literary short story, working title **Rhubarb**. Peg Halloran, seventy-four, has left a pie on the porch of the young couple next door every week for a year, on plates that never come back, and has stopped expecting so much as a wave. The single effect: the ache of a kindness that seems to go unseen, turned in one stroke into something else. The change: Peg begins certain she is invisible and ends knowing she was watched over all along.*

Six beats, three movements.

two beats to enter, two to turn, two to leave.

The six beats below are the whole arc. The percentages mark where each beat tends to fall, not a law; a seven-page story and a thirty-page one wear them differently. What matters is the order and the single turn at the center of gravity. Read the map as the shape of the reader's experience, and plan around the turn.

THE OPENING • ENTER LATE

01	Hook	~1%
02	Inciting Moment	~15%

THE MIDDLE • ONE LINE OF PRESSURE

03	Complication	~40%
04	The Turn	~65%

THE ENDING • EXIT EARLY

05	Climax	~82%
06	Resolution	~93%

Notice how little runway there is. The Hook sits near one percent because the story starts almost on top of its subject, and the Resolution lands at ninety-three because the last image is the exit, not a long farewell. The whole shape leans toward the turn, and the two beats on either side of it do more work than all the rest combined.

BEAT 01

TARGET ~1%

Hook.

open in motion, close to the moment that matters.

The Hook is the first lines, and in a short story it does the work three chapters do in a novel. Establish the character, the place, and the tension at once. There is no runway. By the end of the first paragraph the reader should feel whose story this is and what quiet pressure it sits under, without a word of it being announced.

Open in motion: a person doing a specific thing in a specific place, with the central tension already breathing beneath the surface. Plant here, in passing, the object or habit the ending will need. The short arc has no room to fetch it later, so it must be present now, treated as ordinary furniture the reader files away and half forgets.

ON THE PAGE

- Begin with an action the reader can see; a gesture beats a paragraph of background every time.
- Establish the one place and the one character in the first lines, and let the tension live under the surface, not on it.
- Plant the detail the ending will reach for - an object, a habit, a rule - and let it read as scenery.

WATCH OUT

The slow runway. A page of weather and backstory before anything happens is a novel habit the short story cannot afford. If nothing is in motion by the second paragraph, cut until it is.

RHUBARB • PEG

Dawn, wet grass. Peg Halloran cuts rhubarb in her nightgown and rubber boots, snapping the red stalks low the way Denny taught her before he died. On the porch, two chairs; she has never moved the second one. Next door the curtains are drawn, as they have been all year. She trims a pie's worth, glances at the couple's dark windows, and does not let herself hope for a light. The plates she sends over never come back.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~15%

Inciting Moment.

the disturbance that starts the story going.

The Inciting Moment is the disturbance that turns a situation into a story: the choice, the arrival, or the pressure that the rest of the piece exists to answer. In a short story it comes fast, often on the first page, because the arc has no time for a long normal to be slowly disturbed. The story begins when the ground shifts, so shift it early.

It need not be loud. A letter, a knock, a sentence overheard. What it must do is make the old routine impossible to continue unchanged, and it should point, however faintly, toward the single change the story is about. The reader should sense, without being told, that things cannot stay as they were, and lean forward to see what the character will do.

ON THE PAGE

- Land it as a concrete event, not a mood or a memory; something arrives, and the day bends around it.
- Aim it at this character's particular situation, so the disturbance threatens what they specifically have built.
- Keep it early. If the inciting moment is on page four of a ten-page story, the story started on page four.

WATCH OUT

The buried disturbance. If a reader has to guess what set the story going, it is too quiet or too late. Make the change of state unmistakable, even when the event itself is small.

RHUBARB • PEG

This morning there is a moving truck in the couple's drive, ramp down, half the rooms already boxed. They are leaving, and Peg never once learned their names. Tucked under her doormat, where the milkman used to leave the bottles, is a plain white envelope with Mrs Halloran written across it in a careful, unfamiliar hand. She stands on the step holding it, the year of silence suddenly ending, and cannot make herself lift the flap.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~40%

Complication.

the situation deepens. one line of pressure, tightening.

The Complication is the single line of pressure drawn taut. The situation deepens, the cost rises, and the options narrow toward a decision. A novel would branch here into subplots and secondary casts; the short arc does the opposite. It tightens everything onto the one question the turn will answer, so the reader feels the walls drawing in rather than the world opening out.

This is where compression earns its keep. Do not add threads; deepen the one you have. Each beat should remove an option or raise a stake. The character resists the decision that is coming, and the resistance is exactly what will make the turn cost something. Pressure without reluctance is only busyness; pressure against a character who does not want to move is a story.

ON THE PAGE

- Deepen, do not widen; a fresh subplot in the middle of a short story is almost always a mistake.
- Take away an easy exit on the page, so the reader watches the situation narrow toward one choice.
- Let the character resist the obvious step; reluctance charges the turn that will override it.

WATCH OUT

The busy middle. Piling on new characters and errands to fill pages is a novelist's reflex. Fix: cut the additions and press harder on the single pressure you already have.

RHUBARB • PEG

Peg cannot open it. It will be a complaint, she decides, or a curt goodbye, and either would spoil the one thing she still has. So she does what she always does: she bakes. While the pie sets she watches from the kitchen window. Only the young man is out there, gaunt, carrying boxes alone, stopping to lean on the truck. On the porch rail, a year of her plates stand stacked and unwashed. Pride tells her to stay inside. The truck tells her she is running out of morning.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~65%

The Turn.

the pivot the whole story is built around.

The Turn is the beat the entire arc is built around: a revelation, a reversal, or a choice that changes how the character, or the reader, sees everything that came before. It is the single effect delivered in one stroke. In the strongest short stories the turn does both jobs at once, changing the character's understanding and re-lighting every earlier scene in the same instant.

It should feel inevitable in hindsight and surprising in the moment, which is only possible if the Hook planted it. When the turn lands, the details you filed away as scenery should snap into new meaning. This is why the short arc guards its opening so carefully. The turn spends exactly what the Hook saved, and a pivot with nothing behind it reads as a trick rather than a truth.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the turn recast the past, not merely advance the plot; the reader should reread the opening in their head.
- Pay it off from a Hook plant; a revelation no one could have seen coming is a trick, not a turn.
- Keep it to one. A short story has the budget for a single pivot done fully, not three done thinly.

WATCH OUT

The turn that only informs. New information that does not change how we read the story is exposition. Ask what the character, and the reader, must now see differently. If the answer is nothing, keep digging.

RHUBARB • PEG

She opens it on the step. Inside are not words but her plates' whole story: a year of thank-you notes, written and never delivered, and beneath them one card in a woman's failing hand, signed Lena. The drawn curtains were a sickroom. The husband was not rude but exhausted, ashamed of the unwashed plates, too spent to knock. Your pie, the card says, was the only thing all year that came without being asked for. Peg was never unseen. She was the thing they held on to.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~82%

Climax.

the peak of pressure. the character acts, and the question is answered.

The Climax is the peak of pressure, where the character acts, or fails to, and the story's question is answered in the doing. After the Turn there is nothing left to learn; there is only what the character does with what they now know. In a short story the climax is often small on the outside and enormous underneath, a single gesture carrying the weight of the whole piece.

The decisive act must be this character's own, and it should be one the Hook's version of them could not have performed. That is how the reader measures the change: not by a speech about it, but by a person doing the thing they could not do on page one. Keep it in scene, keep it brief, and let the doing say what a paragraph of reflection would only dilute.

ON THE PAGE

- Answer the story's question through action, not reflection; let the character do the thing, on the page.
- Make the act impossible for the page-one version of the character, so the change shows in the doing.
- Resist explaining it. The reader has followed the pressure this far and does not need the meaning spelled out.

WATCH OUT

The climax talked about. A character who narrates the change instead of enacting it robs the reader of the moment. Fix: find the smallest concrete act that could only come from the changed person, and end on it.

RHUBARB • PEG

Peg does the thing she has not done in a year, and never once this way. She lifts the warm pie, tucks the envelope against it, and walks out across the wet lawn she has kept to her own side of, up the couple's steps, past the stacked plates, and knocks. Her hand does not shake. The page-one Peg, who would not let herself hope for a light in a window, is not the woman standing at this door.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~93%

Resolution.

the aftermath in a few strokes. land it and get out.

The Resolution is the aftermath rendered in a few strokes: what changed, what it cost, and the resonant final image. The short arc does not budget a denouement. Whatever settling the story needs happens fast, and the last image carries the single effect out of the story and into the reader, where it goes on ringing after the page is turned.

End close to the turn's echo. Once the change is on the page in a concrete image, every further sentence spends the reader's trust. The best short-story endings stop a beat before you think they should, leaving the reader to finish the feeling. Cut the last paragraph you wrote; in a short story it is almost always one paragraph too many.

ON THE PAGE

- Render the aftermath in strokes, not scenes; a short story earns its close by trusting the reader to fill it.
- End on an image, not a summary; the last thing seen is the effect the reader carries away.
- Stop early. When the change is visible in a single picture, the story is over, whatever else you meant to add.

WATCH OUT

The ending that will not leave. Tying off every thread and explaining the meaning drains the effect you spent the whole story building. Land the last image, and get out.

RHUBARB • PEG

The door opens. The young man, and then behind him a woman wrapped in a blanket, thinner than the notes had let Peg picture, smiling as though she already knew her. Lena, at last a face. That evening Peg washes the two returned plates and dries them at her window. She sets one down across the table, at the place she has left empty for three years, and for once the second chair does not feel like an absence.

Seven ways the arc reads like a squeezed novel.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The slow runway.** Weather and backstory before anything moves. Fix: start in motion, on the first concrete action, and cut everything that came before it.
- **2. The cast of thousands.** Six named characters in four thousand words, none of them inside the change. Fix: keep only those who touch the single turn, and fold or cut the rest.
- **3. The buried inciting moment.** The disturbance arrives on page four, so the story idles until then. Fix: move it to the first page and let the ground shift early.
- **4. The widening middle.** A subplot sprouts at the complication and splits the pressure. Fix: deepen the one line you have instead of adding a second.
- **5. The unplanted turn.** A revelation the Hook never set up, so it reads as a trick. Fix: go back and plant it as ordinary scenery, then let the turn recast it.
- **6. The turn that only informs.** New facts that change nothing in how we read the story. Fix: make the pivot alter the character's understanding and re-light the opening.
- **7. The ending that will not leave.** A full denouement that ties every thread and explains the point. Fix: land the last image a beat early and trust the reader to finish it.

PAIRS WITH THE CRAFT GUIDE

Every fix here is structural. For the line-level craft that carries the arc, from opening in motion to building a scene to cutting to the bone, read its companion, the field guide *How to Write a Short Story*. Plan the shape with this one; write the prose with that one.

Your short-story arc sheet.

print this page. one story, one page, six lines.

ONE-LINE PREMISE

THE SINGLE EFFECT

ONE WORD

THE ONE CHANGE

FROM / TO

01 HOOK

1%

02 INCITING MOMENT

15%

03 COMPLICATION

40%

04 THE TURN

65%

05 CLIMAX

82%

06 RESOLUTION

93%

THE LAST IMAGE

TARGET LENGTH

WORDS

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

This arc sheet lives as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same six beats and a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the beat, draft your story's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a working outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/short-story-arc

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, industry-standard screenplay formatting, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, your resident story editor, when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- How to Write a Short Story · the craft companion to this arc
- Flash Fiction · the whole story in under a thousand words
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- The Novella · the long story that is not yet a novel
- Seven-Point Story Structure · write the ending first, then invert it

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ONE MORE DRAFT

The short story arc described here is the common shape of short fiction rather than a branded method, and it has no single owner; the principle of a single unified effect is usually credited to Edgar Allan Poe. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary on short-story structure. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.