

# Flash Fiction as an Innovative Tool in English Language Teaching

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# 1 Flash Fiction: Definitions and Demarcations

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"For sale:

Baby shoes. Never worn."

E. Hemingway

# 1 Flash Fiction: Definitions and Demarcations

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- Very short narratives are not a recent invention (for example, Aesop's fables around 700 BC)
  - In anglophone literature, an increase in production since the late **1970s** by authors such as Ian McEwan, Nadine Gordimer and Angela Carter.
- ➔ This rise is often linked to **postmodernism**, especially its scepticism towards masternarratives (Lyotard 1979)
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# 1 Flash Fiction: Definitions and Demarcations

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Shortness of Flash Fiction results in the following characteristics (cf. Nelles 2012):

- Tendency towards “more palpable and extreme” kinds of plots (ibid. 91)
- Stock characters
- Intertextuality and Intermediality

➔ Flash Fiction makes use of readily available information patterns

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# 1 Flash Fiction: Definitions and Demarcations

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- Rise of interest reflected in anthologies, which have meanwhile become canonical
  - *Short Shorts* (1982, max 2500 words), *Sudden Fiction* (1986, max 1500 words), *Flash Fiction* (1992, max 750 words), and *Micro Fiction* (1996, max 300 words)
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# 1 Flash Fiction: Definitions and Demarcations

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E.g. "For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn."

Ernest Hemingway

→ series of cultural markers readers have to understand

- a) Specific notion of childhood
  - b) Discourse of advertisement
  - c) Specific notion of common-sense
  - d) Bad news is better news (tellability of a story)
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# 1 Flash Fiction: Definitions and Demarcations

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Didactic purpose of Flash Fiction:

**Concision requires precision**

- a. Level of language
  - b. Level of cultural implications
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## 2 Flash Fiction in Language Teaching – an Experiment

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© storyblocks

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# 2 Flash Fiction in Language Teaching – an Experiment

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Student Sample: LA 1: 73 students

LA 2: 53 students

Task: a) discussion of two examples of flash fiction  
with regard to language, topic, narrative  
techniques

b) follow-up: creative re-writing of one of the  
texts or creation of an individual text relating  
to one of the following titles:

*Bad news is better news*

*Only a fool can be happy*

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.1 Linguistic Features, Recurring Language Difficulties

- Noticeably fewer mistakes than in the usual starter-activity writing task
  - Course-induced focus on (LA 1+2 are grammar courses focusing on the verb system of English lang.):
    - a. tense
    - b. aspect
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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.1 Linguistic Features, Recurring Language Difficulties

### **1. Tense:**

a) Use of *historical present* but then sudden change to *past tense*

e.g. "Later on, a friend calls. By the sound of his voice I COULD tell he is angry."

"What am I going to do now? I HAD no dress."

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.1 Linguistic Features, Recurring Language Difficulties

### **1. Tense:**

b) Use of *past tense* for story telling but then sudden change to *present tense*

e.g. "There she was, standing at the train station. (...) her suitcase feeling ridiculously light since it IS half empty."

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.1 Linguistic Features, Recurring Language Difficulties

### **2. Aspect:**

a) *Simple* instead of *progressive tense* for background activities

e.g. "My feet start to run in the opposite direction of where the sounds COME from."

" (...) because this person WEARS a big white jumpsuit."

"I THINK too much."

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.1 Linguistic Features, Recurring Language Difficulties

### **2. Aspect:**

b) *Progressive* instead of *simple tense* for sequence of past events

e.g. "I WAS RUNNING straight to the bathroom and saw him, lying there (...)."

"When she entered the house, her children WERE RUNNING towards her and WERE WELCOMING her warmly."

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.2 Standardised Information Patterns, References

- a) Flash Fiction has been considered a highly interdependent genre
- b) Many texts derive their power from using various cultural references

➡ Does that also hold true for our students' texts?

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.2. Cultural Implications and Narrative Techniques

Exemplary Analysis: *Bad News Is Better News*

- Chosen by 42 percent
  - Recurring Topics:
    - Professional Life and Happiness
    - Private Crisis
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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## 3.2. Cultural Implications and Narrative Techniques

### Topic 1: Bad News Is Better News

| Topic                           | (Recurring) Standardised Information Pattern  |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Professional Life and Happiness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Myth of the happy dropout</li><li>• Myth of radical individualism</li></ul> |
| Private Crisis                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Missed flight</li></ul>   |
|                                 |   |

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# 3 Results of Experiment

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## **Example: Bad News Is Better News** (LA 2)

Carrying a cardboard box in his hand he walks down the hallway. Nearly two decades have passed since he walked these halls the first time. During the rather long walk he notices many empty desks, many of his colleagues must have walked this way, just like he is now. At the beginning of his career he was always so annoyed at how loud this place was. He could never find a quiet place to cool off a little when things had gotten too stressful. Now there is this devastating silence, only his steps echo through the empty building.

This outcome seemed inevitable, but he always brushed away the thought of it. The topic would only bring up these depressing questions. Would he be able to keep the house? Is college still an option for the kids? Where can a man his age find another job?

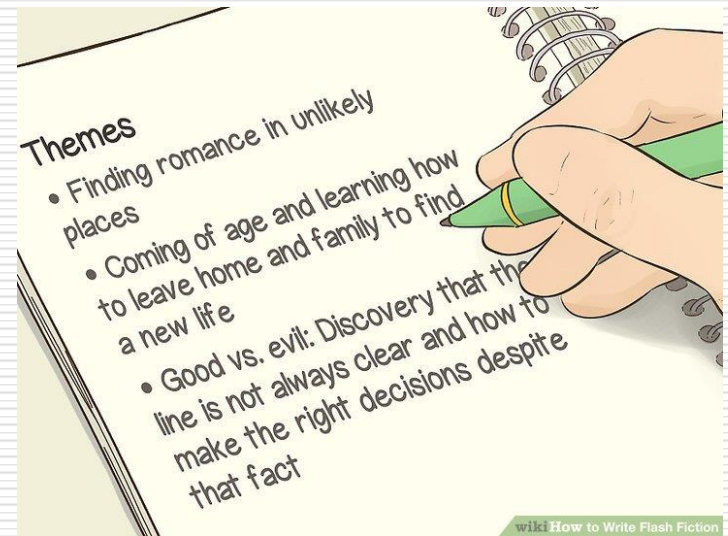
As he walks out the door, a bright smile appears on his face. "Finally", he thinks to himself. In the last eighteen years he never dared to quit and pursuit something that would make him happy. But now his chance has come.

 *Variation of the "happy drop-out"*

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# 4 Write Your Own Flash Fiction

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## 4 Write Your Own Flash Fiction

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### 1. Read the following text:

#### **The Little Girl and the Wolf**

She had approached no nearer than twenty-five feet from the bed when she saw that it was not her grandmother but the wolf, for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead.

(Morale: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be).

James Thurber, 1939

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# 4 Write Your Own Flash Fiction

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## 2. Discuss the following questions:

- Which fairy tale does this piece of flash fiction re-write?
  - What are the markers that help identify the original fairy tale?
  - Which *contemporary* cultural markers does the text contain?
  - In comparison to the original fairy tale, which ideology does Thurber's text invert?
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## 4 Write Your Own Flash Fiction

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3. Write your own piece of flash fiction (max. 100 words). You might choose one of the following titles:

1. "The Pretty Girl and the Bloody Shoe"
  2. "Beauty and the Beast"
  3. "Tales of Two Cities"
  4. "Robinson and Friday"
  5. "The Old Man and the Sea"
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