

Does Size Matter?

Writing Fiction of Different Lengths

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Does size matter? Not as much as knowing what to do with it!

During our careers, many of us will write fiction of different lengths. Switching lengths is an adventure and a learning experience, and can be highly rewarding.

Experiments With Size

When I took the plunge into writing fiction, I was naïve. A pantsner of the first order, I let the characters and story take me wherever they would, without regard to word count. I had fun writing both stories and novels, then decided it was time to get professional and learn about the markets.

I learned that size matters. No matter what the project or who the targeted publisher, length is critical.

One of my first targets was *Woman's World* magazine. At that time, their short romances were 1500 words. For a wordy pantsner, telling a satisfying story in so few words was a challenge. I stuck with it, though, honing my skills and learning how to make each word matter. After several rejections, I did sell to *Woman's World*, then to other magazines. I was still writing novels too, experimenting with different styles and lengths, and ultimately sold single titles to Kensington Aphrodisia. Then I was given my next size-related challenge: my editor asked me to contribute a novella to an anthology. I'd never written a novella, so, again, it was a learning experience.

I have canvassed a number of authors who have been published in more than one length, and in this article offer our combined wisdom: the benefits and challenges of different lengths, and tips on how to write each.

Short Can be Fun

The big benefit to writing a short story is almost immediate gratification.

A story doesn't take as long to plan, write or polish. You can hold the details in your head and don't need to make copious notes. Even if you delve into angsty personal issues, you won't be dwelling on them for weeks, months or years, so there's less emotional drain.

I love the smaller scope of stories. I can examine moments in people's lives, points of transition, things that are important but not meaty enough to form the backbone of a novella or novel. "Writing short fiction is like taking a photograph, a perfect moment in time," says Kate Austin, author of women's fiction novels, novellas and stories.

Writing stories can be a welcome break from a novella or novel. Some authors create short stories for fun--to play and feed their muse--either while we're working on a longer project or when we've finished one.

Short Doesn't Mean Simple

Being short doesn't mean, however, that stories are easy to write. The limited word count and restricted scope are challenges, especially for a writer who thinks on a grand scale. You need to find an idea that is interesting and substantial enough to make a meaningful story, then tell that story in the prescribed number of words. For a very short format, you will typically have a straightforward plot, no subplot, a small cast of main characters, no secondary characters, a limited time frame, faster pacing and no chapters. You might have only one point of view. First person and present tense may also draw your readers in more quickly and help them identify with the protagonist.

As Jenna Black, paranormal romance author, says, "You have so much less time to hook your reader and so much less room for character growth that it's really hard to get in that emotional punch."

Yes, there are challenges, but don't set your sights too low. "I think it's a mistake when people think short fiction can't be complex," says Jo Beverley, five-time RITA winner and NYT best-selling author. "There are some sorts of complexity that won't work--long time line, cast of thousands etc., but there can and should be complexity of character and idea, and short stories and novellas can be epic. That's not uncommon in SF&F and there's no reason it can't be there in romance."

To Plot or to Pants?

Should you plot or "pants" a short story? It depends on the writer. Many let a short story happen, rather than plotting it out. This often results in considerable revision, honing the story to its essence. However, some natural pantsers turn to plotting, feeling they don't have the room to let the characters and story unfold willy-nilly.

Every word must be effective. Of course we all try to make our writing tight and clean, no matter what length we're writing. But it's especially important when you have 1000 words versus 100,000. Some feel that, the shorter the work is, the more any errors will stand out.

Short Has Benefits

Writing short stories can be fun and liberating, a way of refreshing your creativity so you can return to your longer works with more focus. Also, as Kate Douglas, author of paranormal erotic romances, says, "Writing short reinforces the basics of good storytelling by forcing you to use all your skills in a smaller, faster format."

Diane Whiteside, author of short stories and steamy historical novels and novellas, agrees. "I love the sheer precision of writing a short story--of expressing the character and

his/her conflict accurately and concisely. The sheer delight of plotting a story arc that's so tight it's like riding a rollercoaster. The necessary precision of the word choice when there's rarely room for even an extraneous clause... I am regularly grateful that I learned my craft in short stories, not in novels, difficult though it was. The skills have come in very handy since then, such as when I'm tightening a novel, to meet page count. I advise every author to try short stories, whether or not they're published, if only as an exercise."

For a beginner, selling short stories can be a great way to break into the publishing world and build confidence as well as skill, plus gain a nice credential to list in query letters. Before I made my first book sale, I sold a couple dozen short stories to women's, story and literary magazines. It was tremendous validation and helped me keep motivated.

The Bigger, the Better?

If you're reading this magazine, it's likely that you write novels, whether they're 50,000 words or 120,000. Of course there's a difference between books at those two extremes of length, but in general all novels share a number of features.

Why do we love writing them?

"A longer book has more scope to explore larger conflicts and complex relationships," says Nancy Warren, author of contemporary romance novels and novellas. Romantic suspense writer Melanie Atkins says, "I have more time to flesh out the plot and deepen the characters." Ann Roth, author of humorous romance and women's fiction, says, "there is room to develop the characters and let their love story unfold at a more leisurely pace."

A novel is a whole other world. "When I read, I like to immerse myself completely in another world, to be swallowed whole by my book. I want to give that same experience to my readers," Jenna Black says. It can be fun for the writer, too. "I enjoy immersing myself in my characters, their trials and their world, which I tend to make very rich. A novel provides me with a broad canvas for this--and months to enjoy my characters' company," Diane Whiteside says.

A novel allows for all of the following and, depending on its length, should use many of them: more characters, deeper and more complex issues and conflicts, depth of character and emotion, more intricate plots, subplots, more world-building and details of setting, a longer time span, back story, character development over many scenes, development of the romance and of other significant relationships, imagery and perhaps more expansive language. The authors I surveyed use words like "luxury"--i.e., the luxury of having enough words to let the story and characters develop and be expressed fully.

Novels aren't Easy

Despite the luxury, writing a novel isn't easy. P.J. Mellor, author of humorous erotic romance novels and novellas, says, "I have the time/space to paint a more complex picture, which is as much fun as it can be challenging." You're investing anywhere from a few weeks to a few years of your life--mentally, physically and emotionally. That's a huge endeavor and, while it may be exciting, it's also intimidating.

Some of the challenges include: creating characters, motivations, conflicts and a plot that are strong, complex and meaningful enough to sustain the book; developing a strong subplot and/or secondary characters without letting it/them take over; keeping the correct balance between the various elements of the story; finding and maintaining the right pacing; and not getting personally drawn into the characters' emotional angst.

Writers complain about that sagging middle, and some regularly get stuck at a certain point in each book. Often, we reach a stage where we think our characters are incredibly boring and we're insane to have ever thought this plot could make a book. Often, we feel as if the book's never going to be done (especially not by the contracted deadline date). There are "so many pages to fill and then somehow, conversely, not enough pages!" says Genie Davis, author of sexy romantic suspense and erotic romance. We agonize over how to resolve all the issues and bring the book to a conclusion that will satisfy the reader and, hopefully, resonate emotionally and be memorable.

Many people who pants a story turn to plotting when they're writing a novel. But whether you plot or pants, you still have to keep track of plot and subplot threads, the time line and character details and conversations. Many writers keep notes, either on paper or in electronic form. Computer searches are invaluable for checking details. To keep track of time, I often note each scene on an online calendar.

When it comes to editing, everything required for a story still has to be done in a novel--and for dozens of scenes and hundreds of pages. Not to mention, as RITA-nominated author Tanya Michaels says, "When you change one thing, it generally creates ripples throughout the book, necessitating other changes that can really add up over 400 pages."

What's the payoff for this huge investment of time and energy? If you're contracted to write a book, you're at least pretty sure the project will finish, the book will be published and there will be dollars in your pocket. But if you're writing "on spec," you may invest all that time and energy and never sell the manuscript. You may revise it over and over, targeting different publishers and lines, and still never sell it.

Novellas: A Happy Medium?

If short stories are too restricted and novels are too demanding, aren't novellas just about perfect? Compared to short stories, you can write "a fully realized story," points out Pam McCutcheon, author of paranormal romance, romantic comedies and fantasy short stories. Compared to novels, a novella takes less time to conceive, write and edit, so the sense of completion and gratification comes more quickly. It's easier to envision the whole story and keep all the threads and details in your mind. And you won't spend as long on copy-edits and page proofs.

"I like the challenge of developing a romance in such a short space and making the commitment believable," says Sharon Page, erotic romance author. Another erotic romance writer, Bonnie Edwards, says, "I love the pace. Fast paced storytelling is more natural to me." "Keeping the focus on the hero and heroine is a lot easier in a novella than it is in full-length romantic suspense," notes E.C. Sheedy, romantic suspense author.

Novellas are an intriguing challenge for the writer. “What I like about novellas is that they force me to justify each page, each scene,” says Jenna Kernan, author of romantic adventures set in the American West. “I have to make scenes do triple duty, because I don’t have the luxury of time. One scene may be required to introduce a turning point, reveal backstory and illuminate the character’s motivation.”

Novellas Aren’t Easy Either

The biggest challenge with a novella arises from that pesky limited word count. It’s easy to be overly ambitious and want to squeeze in more than there’s room for. Yes, you can tell a complete story, and it should have character depth and development, plot, conflict, emotion, sexual tension and all that other good stuff, and therein lies the rub. For me, it’s easy to have the illusion I’m writing a novel and want to draw things out. I have to keep reining myself in, limiting the scope of the story and reminding myself of the word count. This is why some people who pants when they write a novel turn to plotting for a novella.

It can be harder to get readers to identify with and care deeply about the heroine and hero in a novella, because there’s less space to get to know them. As a result, it can be tougher to tug at readers’ heartstrings or create a sex scene that’s intimate and emotional.

Novella How-Tos

So, how do you write a satisfying story in 20-30,000 words? As with a short story, you need to start with an idea that can be effectively presented in that length. “To me, it’s mostly a matter of choosing the right story for the length and vice versa,” Jo Beverley says.

Once you’ve chosen that story, here are some writing tips: avoid plots that are too complicated, avoid conflicts that are too complex and angsty, restrict the time span, reduce the number of characters, have character arcs for one or two characters but not for secondary characters, introduce the main characters and conflict immediately, keep the focus on the heroine and hero, use fewer points of view, cut down on narrative and make dialogue short and punchy. Have fewer and shorter scenes and chapters--or make a few long, intense scenes serve the purpose of several scenes.

Each scene must serve more than one purpose. As Kathleen Dante, author of paranormal erotic romances, puts it, “Unlike with novels where I can just give my muse free rein, with novellas I’m more miserly since every scene has to work harder to advance the plot, build tension, reveal character motivations, foreshadow future developments, develop the romance, and all those other nifty storytelling functions.”

With a romance, it can be hard to reach a believable HEA in the space of a novella. Will a reader really believe that a couple who met 100 pages ago have resolved their personal issues and fallen in love for life? If the characters already know each other, it’s easier. Another technique is to “put them in a situation where they’re constantly in close proximity for the length of the story,” Pam McCutcheon says. Or, if the characters are strangers at the beginning of the story, maybe the novella should end with a believable commitment, but not an engagement or marriage.

If your novella is to be included in an anthology of your own work, you can determine the theme of the book, and to what if any extent the stories and characters interrelate. It's more difficult when your novella is to be included in an anthology with other writers. You may not have picked the theme and you may wonder how the stories will work together, not to mention worry which novella will get the best reviews. On the positive side, a shared anthology draws each writer's fans. It "gives you a good chance to be read by someone who hasn't read your work before," says Madeline Baker, historical and paranormal romance author.

What's the Most Comfortable Fit For You?

Short stories, novellas and novels: each is a challenge and a joy.

No one is easier to write *per se*, but some writers find one length more natural and comfortable. Experiment and see if this is the case for you. If so, likely that's where you'll build your career. But take--or make--opportunities to write different lengths. You can try different story ideas, hone your craft, feed your muse and experience a new kind of creative satisfaction.

For many of us, two or more lengths are, in general, equally comfortable. But maybe not right now. If you're worn out from finishing a long, intense, emotionally draining novel, this may not be the moment to start in on the next. A lighter novella or a couple of short stories might refresh your energy. If you've suffered a serious illness or loss, you may not have the physical and emotional resources to tackle a big book. On the other hand, if you've hunkered down for a month-long retreat in a seaside cottage with no internet, this may be the perfect time to rip into the next long, meaty project.

For some writers, it's not so much about length as about that indefinable magic that makes one project easier than another. As Kay Gregory, author of romance novels, novellas and short stories, says, "If writing is going well it doesn't matter what you're writing. If it isn't, pulling out hair and opening veins feels exactly the same." Nancy Warren speaks for all of us when she says, "The books that are easiest to write are the ones where I'm having fun!"

So, here's wishing all of us story magic and fun projects, whatever their length.

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