
Submitting Short Stories

A Practical Guide for Adult & Emerging Fiction Writers

How to prepare, place, and track your short stories and flash fiction — plus a curated list of welcoming journals, contests, and tools for 2026.

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Part One — How to Submit Your Short Fiction

Submitting fiction is a craft of its own. The story matters most, but editors also notice whether a writer follows guidelines, writes a clean cover letter, and behaves professionally. None of it is difficult — it simply rewards patience and a little organization.

01

Before You Send

- Revise, then rest — read the finished story aloud after a week.
- Open strong; editors often decide within the first page.
- Cut everything the story can live without.
- Keep a master file and a status spreadsheet.

02

Choosing Where to Submit

- Read an issue first — fit matters more than prestige.
- Check the reading period before submitting.
- Mind the word-count limit (flash, short, standard).
- Note the fee; many fine journals are free.

03

Formatting Your Story

- Standard manuscript format: 12-pt serif, double-spaced.
- Header with your name, title, and page number.
- Title and word count on the first page.
- Send .docx unless a journal requests otherwise.

05

Simultaneous Subs & Etiquette

- Submit to several journals at once unless forbidden.
- Withdraw everywhere the moment a story is accepted.
- Don't query before the stated response time.
- Send one story per submission unless flash allows more.

06

Using Submittable

- Free for writers — one account tracks everything.
- Any fee shown belongs to the journal, not the platform.
- Follow each form's exact instructions.

- Withdraw from the dashboard when accepted elsewhere.

08

Handling Responses

- Expect rejection — it's about fit, not worth.
- Take a personal 'please send again' seriously.
- Read the contract; note rights and reprint terms.
- Submit steadily to build a publication record.

Writing the Cover Letter

A cover letter is short, warm, and professional — three or four sentences. It does not explain or defend the story. A reliable template:

Dear Editors,

Please consider my short story, “[Title],” (about [word count] words) for publication in [Journal Name].

[One sentence of bio: recent publications, or simply that this would be among your first. If you have none, say so plainly — editors publish new writers every issue.]

Thank you for your time and for the work you do. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmly,

[Your Name]

Do not: apologize, summarize the plot, list every credit you have, or address editors by the wrong journal name. Always double-check you have the right journal in the greeting.

What Every New Fiction Writer Should Know

Rights & What Editors Actually Buy

When a journal accepts a story, it does not own it forever. Most acquire **First Serial Rights** (often First North American Serial Rights) — the right to be the first to publish it. After publication, those rights return to you, and you keep the copyright throughout. You are then free to reprint the story in a collection or, once it counts as a reprint, submit it to venues that accept previously published work. Always read the acceptance note to confirm what rights are taken and when they revert.

“Published” Is Broader Than You Think

Nearly all journals want **unpublished** stories, and many define “published” to include your personal blog, a public social-media post, a contest anthology, or a piece posted in an online workshop. If a story has appeared anywhere public, treat it as a reprint and look specifically for journals that accept reprints. When in doubt, ask the editor before submitting.

Reading Fees — and the No-Fee Philosophy

Some journals charge a small fee (often \$2–\$3) to submit, usually to cover their submission platform. This is normal and not a scam. But you never need to pay to build a serious publication record: the majority of respected journals are free, and many paying journals offer **fee waivers** on request. Reserve paid submissions and contest fees for venues you genuinely want.

Avoiding Vanity Presses & Scams

Legitimate journals and contests never ask you to *buy* your way into print.

“You’ve been selected!”

Unsolicited emails congratulating you and then asking you to buy an expensive anthology or “certificate.” Real acceptances don’t require a purchase.

Everyone wins

“Contests” that accept virtually everyone and profit by selling the anthology back to contributors. A real contest has genuine selection and named judges.

Rights grabs

Terms that claim *all* rights or ownership of your work in perpetuity. Legitimate journals take first or one-time rights, then return them.

High fees, no pay

Large submission or “editing” fees with no payment to writers and no track record. Check a venue’s reputation before paying anything.

When unsure, look a venue up on Poets & Writers, check whether respected writers have published there, and search Writer Beware for warnings.

Payment: What to Expect

Short fiction pays a wide range. Many fine journals pay in contributor copies or a token amount; stronger-paying markets offer anywhere from \$50 to several hundred dollars per story, and a few pay more. Publishing for little or no pay is normal early on; the value is in readership, credits, and building toward a collection or a novel.

Flash, Short, and the Path to a Collection

Most fiction writers build in stages. Place **flash** (usually under 1,000 words) and **short stories** in journals first. Over time those credits accumulate into a **collection** you can submit to contests and small presses, and they strengthen a query when you have a novel to sell. Every published story is a brick in that foundation.

Patience & Persistence

Response times commonly run one to six months, and rejection is the norm even for accomplished writers — acceptance rates at good journals are often under five percent. A “no” usually means the story didn’t fit that issue, not that it lacks worth. Keep a steady rhythm of submissions, celebrate personal notes from editors, and treat each rejection as one step closer to the right home for the story.

Part Two — Beginner-Friendly Literary Journals

These journals publish short fiction and either welcome emerging writers explicitly or keep barriers low. Most are free to submit to. Every venue was verified on its own website in July 2026 — always confirm current guidelines before submitting.

JOURNAL	WHAT THEY PUBLISH	FEE	READING PERIOD	PER SUB
One Story	Literary fiction — one story per issue	Free (no fee stated)	Cyclical/capped; spring 2026 period closed at cap; next period opens June 8, 2026	3,000–8,000 words; one story per submission period
The Sun	Emotionally honest short stories (plus essays, poetry, photography)	\$2.50 online processing fee (free by mail with SASE)	n.a. (not stated on page; accepts year-round via Submittable)	No formal word limit, rarely publishes over 7,000 words; pieces-per-sub not stated for fiction
Ploughshares	Fiction, poetry, and nonfiction	Free (\$0.00)	June 1 – November 15	Word limit n.a.; one submission per reading period
SmokeLong Quarterly	Flash narratives (flash-only)	Free-submission windows each period, then small fee; always keeps a free window	Rolling by issue (e.g. Nov 16–Feb 15; May 15–Aug 15; Aug 16–Nov 15); closed Feb 16–May 14 for the Award	Up to 1,000 words; one piece (or up to three via multiple-sub option). Flash-only.
Wigleaf	Stories under 1,000 words (flash-only)	Free (no fee stated)	Final 7 days of Aug, Sep, Oct, Jan, Feb, Mar; the 8th–14th in Nov and Apr; closed in Dec	Under 1,000 words; pieces-per-sub not stated on page. Flash-only.
matchbook	Short fiction, creative nonfiction, and indeterminate prose (brief)	Free (no fee stated)	Open May 25 – June 2, 2026	Prefers under 1,000 words; up to three pieces if longish, five if shortish
CRAFT	Fiction (flash and short) and creative nonfiction	Free (no submission fees)	n.a. (not stated on page)	Flash up to 1,000 words; short fiction up to 6,000 words; one piece

JOURNAL	WHAT THEY PUBLISH	FEE	READING PERIOD	PER SUB
				per genre at a time
The Masters Review – New Voices	New writing by emerging writers (fiction and CNF)	Free (New Voices free to enter; pays \$100 flash / \$200 longer)	Open year-round	Under 7,000 words (up to three flash pieces in one document); eligibility: no novel-length work with a major press
Split Lip Magazine	Flash, fiction, memoir, poetry, art, interviews	Free in Jan/Mar/May/Sep/Nov; Tip Jar (optional) other months; \$5 expedited	Year-round except closed July 1– Aug 15 and Dec 15–31	Flash under 1,000 words; fiction 1,000–3,000 words; one submission per writer at a time
Fractured Lit	Microfiction (up to 400 words) and flash fiction (401–1,000 words) (flash-only)	\$20 reading fee (limited free entries for historically marginalized writers, cap 25)	Cyclical opens (e.g. 2026 Flash Fiction Open May 11 – July 12, 2026)	Up to 1,000 words per story; up to two stories per entry. Flash-only.
Flash Frog	Flash fiction only (flash-only)	Free (no fee stated; pays \$25/story)	Open year-round (Jan = contest only; July = ghost stories only; general reopens Aug 1)	1,000 words maximum; one story at a time (no multiple subs). Flash-only.
Wildness	Poetry, fiction, and non-fiction	Free (no fee stated)	Rolling; reading for the next open issue (Autumn 2026)	Fiction/nonfiction limited to 1,000 words; one prose submission (up to 5 poems)
The Threepenny Review	Short stories and memoirs (plus essays, poetry, Table Talk)	Free (no fee stated; pays \$400/story)	Reads Jan 1 – Apr 14 only (non-reading period Apr 15 – Dec 31)	Stories/memoirs 4,000 words or less; a single story per online submission
Hobart	General fiction and nonfiction (email submissions; e.g. sports	Free (email submissions)	Open (email to a specific editor or hobartsubmissions@gmail.com); SF/LD book subs closed	Word limit n.a.; put title and genre in subject line

JOURNAL	WHAT THEY PUBLISH	FEE	READING PERIOD	PER SUB
	fiction, essays, reviews)			
X-R-A-Y	Prose only — short stories, flash fiction, CNF, and micros (no poetry)	Free (no fee stated)	Opens the 1st of each month (micros the 21st); closes when monthly cap is reached	Short stories 2,000–7,500 words; flash 300–2,000 words; micros up to 300 words; one piece per submission
Passages North	Fiction, poetry, short-stories, nonfiction, and hybrid	Free up to a monthly limit; small-fee 'Rocket Fuel' option when free cap is hit	Fiction usually open Sep 1 – Oct 15 and Jan 1 – Feb 15	Word limit n.a.; pieces-per-sub n.a. (not stated on page)
CHEAP POP	Flash fiction and CNF, 500 words or less (flash-only)	Free (no fee stated)	PAUSED — 'Submissions will be closed until further notice'; normally cyclical (June and November)	500 words or less; one piece at a time. Flash-only. Currently closed.
No Contact	Art, fiction, CNF, humor, poetry, and fusions	n.a. (not stated on page)	CLOSED — 'currently closed for General Submissions' as of July 2026	Under 1,200 words; up to two pieces at once. Currently closed.

Flash-only markets are noted in the description. A few venues are cyclical or briefly paused — confirm the live status on each journal's own site before submitting.

Contests for Emerging Fiction Writers

Contests can bring larger prizes and visibility. Several below are reserved for writers without a book from a major press — a genuine advantage for newer writers. Deadlines rotate annually; the dates shown reflect the 2026 cycle unless noted.

CONTEST	TYPE	FEE	PRIZE	DEADLINE / CYCLE
The Masters Review Short Story Award for New Writers (Winter cycle)	Short story (fiction or narrative nonfiction, under 6,000 words)	\$20	\$3,000 + online publication + agency review (2nd \$300, 3rd \$200)	February 1, 2026 (bi-annual; also a Summer cycle Jul 1 – Aug 30, 2026)
The Masters Review Flash Fiction Contest (Spring Small Fiction Awards)	Flash (microfiction ≤500, flash 501–1,000, sudden 1,001–1,500 words)	\$20 (allows up to two stories)	\$1,000 + publication per category (runners-up \$200)	n.a. for 2026 (page shows prior cycle 'Submissions Close June 1'); confirm current dates
Ploughshares Emerging Writer's Contest (Fiction)	Short story (fiction, up to 6,500 words)	Free for subscribers; \$30 for non-subscribers	\$2,000 + publication in Ploughshares + conversation with Aevitas Creative Management	February 1 – March 31, 2026
Boulevard Short Fiction Contest for Emerging Writers	Short story (fiction)	\$18 per story (includes a one-year print subscription)	\$1,500 + publication in Boulevard	2026 cycle opens Sep 1, 2026; entries by Dec 31, 2026 (postmark) / midnight CT online
Fractured Lit Anthology Prize	Flash fiction (up to 1,000 words per story)	\$20 reading fee	\$5,000 awarded among 20 finalists	n.a. for 2026 cycle (page shows prior cycle Sep 24 – Nov 19, 2023); confirm current dates
The SmokeLong Quarterly Award for Flash Fiction ('The Smokey')	Flash fiction (1,000 words or fewer)	\$15 one entry (Feb 1–Mar 31) / \$17 (Apr 1–May 10); multi-entry bundles available	Grand \$2,500; 2nd \$1,000; 3rd \$500; finalists \$150 + publication	May 10, 2026
Bath Flash Fiction Award	Flash fiction (max 300 words)	£9.00 for one entry (early-bird/multi discounts)	£1,000 first; £300 second; £100 third; two £30 commendations + anthology publication	Three rounds/year; 2026 rounds closed Feb 1 and June 7; next round opens July 1, 2026 (closes early Oct)

CONTEST	TYPE	FEE	PRIZE	DEADLINE / CYCLE
Bristol Short Story Prize	Short story (max 4,000 words)	£14 per story (250 free entries for those facing a cost barrier)	1st £1,500; 2nd £500; 3rd £250; 12 more shortlisted £50 each + anthology	January 31, 2026 (2026 prize year now closed; annual)
Narrative Story Contest (Spring 2026)	Short story / short-shorts / other prose (up to 15,000 words)	\$27 per entry	1st \$2,500; 2nd \$1,000; 3rd \$500; up to ten finalists \$100 each	June 26, 2026 (Spring cycle; contests run seasonally)

A few 2026 deadlines have passed or were still showing a prior cycle at verification — they illustrate the annual pattern; check each site for the next opening. UK contests (Bath, Bristol) are priced in GBP.

Submission-Tracking & Discovery Tools

Submittable — *Free for writers/submitters (create a free account; you only pay any fee the venue itself charges)*

Industry-standard submission-management platform where writers submit to and track applications; Discover marketplace lists open calls.

Chill Subs — *Most features free; paid memberships (Chill Subs Better, Sub Club, Forever Workshop) \$10/month each, or 'Best' bundle \$20/month*

Free database of 3,000+ literary magazines and 1,200+ contests plus a submissions tracker and discovery tools.

The Submission Grinder — *Free (donation-supported)*

Donation-supported submission tracker and market database for fiction, poetry, and nonfiction writers with a powerful market search.

Duotrope — *Subscription: USD \$6.00/month or \$60.00/year (with free trial)*

Award-winning database of publishers and agents with submission trackers, custom searches, deadline calendars, and statistics.

Poets & Writers — *n.a. (free to browse; no fee stated on page)*

Editorial-vetted database of nearly 1,000 literary magazines with policies, guidelines, contacts, and open-reading-period filters.

On a budget? Submittable + Chill Subs (or the Submission Grinder) + Poets & Writers is a complete, no-cost toolkit.

Glossary of Submission Terms

Simultaneous submission. Sending the same story to more than one journal at once. Standard practice, but withdraw immediately anywhere it is accepted.

Multiple submission. Sending more than one separate story to the same journal in one reading period. Usually discouraged unless the journal allows it.

First Serial Rights. The right to be the first to publish a story. Reverts to you after publication; you keep the copyright.

Reprint. A story published before (including on a blog or social media). Only certain journals accept reprints — check first.

Flash fiction. Very short fiction, usually under 1,000 words; 'micro' is often under 300.

Reading period. The window when a journal accepts submissions. Many open only a few months or weeks a year, or close at a monthly cap.

Standard manuscript format. 12-point serif, double-spaced, with a header carrying your name, title, and page number.

Cover letter. A brief, professional note accompanying your story — not a place to summarize the plot.

Contributor copies. Free copies of the issue your work appears in, often given in place of (or alongside) payment.

Slush pile. The stack of unsolicited submissions editors read through. Yours starts here — that's normal.

Fee waiver. A free pass around a submission fee, offered by many journals on request or for writers facing financial barriers.

Tiered / expedited response. An optional paid upgrade some journals offer for a faster reply. Never required.

A Simple Starting Plan

If this feels like a lot, start here. This four-step rhythm will place you on a professional footing within a single afternoon.

- 1 Pick three free journals whose fiction you admire and whose reading period is open now.
 - 2 Polish one story in standard manuscript format, opening as strong as you can.
 - 3 Write one short cover letter using the template above, tailoring the journal name for each.
 - 4 Log each submission in a spreadsheet or free tracker, then set a reminder to submit again next month.
-

Stories live when they find readers. Send them out, keep good records, and let each "no" move you toward the right "yes."

FROM THE PUBLISHER

A Personal Note to You

First, let me say how glad I am that you are here, and how much your writing has come to mean to me. Whatever happens with any single submission, please know that I believe in you and in the work you are doing.

I want to tell you something before you begin, because I wish someone had told me plainly when I was starting out: this was hard for me too. For years I sent my work into the quiet and waited, and what came back, again and again, was *no*. The rejections arrived in bundles — some gentle, most simply silent — and every one of them asked whether I was willing to keep going. I decided that I was. Not because I felt sure of the work, but because I had come to believe that the writers who make it are rarely the most gifted in the room; they are the ones who keep sending, who let each *no* be a comma and never a period.

What carried me through was not confidence — it was persistence, and the quiet discipline of returning to the desk: revise, submit, write down the date, begin the next story, and send again. And I promise you this: the acceptances, when they finally came, did not cancel the rejections. They grew out of them. Every *no* was teaching me something, even when it didn't feel that way.

I care very much that you get published — not someday, but truly, and not because publication is the only measure of a writer, but because your work deserves to be read, and because I know how much it means to hold that first acceptance in your hands. So I'll ask of you the same thing I once had to ask of myself, and I'll ask it gently: choose a story you believe in, find two or three journals from the lists in this guide, and submit it today. Not tomorrow. Not when it feels perfect — it never will. Today. The waiting is part of the work, and you are more ready than you think.

And let me say this plainly, because I mean it: I think of you as my peers — fellow writers, not students beneath me. I respect every one of you. It has been one of the great joys of my life to witness your talent up close and to sit with you in conversation about writing and literature, and I have come away from those hours happier and richer for them. I am confident — genuinely, not politely — that you will be published if you persist.

One last thing. Other writers were generous with me when I was starting out, and that generosity is a debt I can only repay forward — so on the pages that follow, I've shared a little of my own work with you: what I believe about writing, and two introductions from books I'm still making. They are not offered as the best of anything, only as honest examples, one writer to another.

I'm rooting for you — always. Be gentle with yourself, keep going, and know that I am in your corner every step of the way.

— *James Mulhern, Silver Current Press*

A GIFT, ONE WRITER TO ANOTHER

An Artistic Creed

Over the years, so many writers generously shared their work with me — their drafts, their beliefs, their hard-won lessons — and I would not be where I am without that generosity. So let me share some of mine with you in return. I do not offer these because I think they are the best; I don't. I offer them simply as honest examples you can look at, learn from, and then set aside to write something that sounds like no one but you.

I write as a Transcendentalist — in sensibility and in spirit. I came to this not as a doctrine to be argued but as a way of seeing I could not put down. Emerson taught me to trust the inner light and to call the great current of things the Oversoul. Thoreau taught me to look long and closely at the near and the small until they open. Whitman taught me that a single life, honestly told, contains multitudes and belongs to everyone. I am in their debt, and I do not pretend otherwise.

I believe the sacred is not far off but here — in a kitchen, a sickroom, a stretch of shoreline, the face of someone loved and lost. I believe the soul is not sealed within us but joined, through the Oversoul, to every other soul that has been or will be. And I believe that nothing true is ever finished. The Oversoul repeats and refines what it has made, never completing it, and I take my instruction from that unhurried, unfinished work.

This is why I return, deliberately, to the same scenes, the same symbols, the same kinds of people. The repetitions in my work are purposeful — they are my way of pointing to the truth I hold. I am not repeating myself; I am practicing recurrence, gathering up the same enduring truths and setting them down again in new hands, new voices, new incarnations. What is laid down is taken up. Nothing we love is lost; like water, like breath, like light, it is only changed, only carried forward, only lived anew.

So I write from mercy rather than judgment, and I extend that mercy to every character I make. I treat each story as a small act of faith — a way of summoning what is unseen and holding it in the light a little longer. If my work has one purpose, it is this: to show that the ordinary is holy, that memory is a form of love, and that we are, all of us, one people — gathered, remade, and never truly parted.

— James F. Mulhern

FROM MY OWN DESK — WORKS IN PROGRESS

Two Sample Introductions

In the same generous spirit, here are two more of mine. Writing an introduction for your own work is harder than it looks. Please don't take these as the best examples; they are simply mine, offered humbly — and honestly, as works in progress. Both books are still being made as I write this, and I am still revising these very pages. I cross out, begin again, and doubt them, exactly as you will with yours. That is the work, not a sign of failing.

Introduction — *All We Ever Needed* (a story collection)

The stories in *All We Ever Needed* move through kitchens, classrooms, beaches, bookstores, apartments, and fading neighborhoods where love and damage rarely arrive one at a time. Again and again, people try to live inside family histories that have already marked them. Some are buoyed by memory, some haunted by it, and some use wit, cruelty, appetite, or make-believe to keep from being swallowed by what they know.

A few images recur by design. Water is the constant: a seawater cure sought on the Feast of the Assumption, a pond that has kept its drowned, a bath drawn for an aging mother, a fountain, a river, and at last a rain that leaves a man drenched to the bone. I have let it move through the book as more than weather. Water is the oldest sign of the spiritual life — the water of baptism, of ruin and renewal — and it runs beneath these ordinary lives as the possibility, never quite promised, of being made clean.

I take language to be a sacred inheritance and the act of naming to be a kind of devotion. These stories are my prayers, and my prayers are my stories; the recurrences in these pages are laid there in that spirit. What remains, after the jokes sour and the illusions fall away, is the question the collection keeps returning to: what, in the end, sustains us? The answers here are partial, unruly, and deeply human.

— James Mulhern (DRAFT · IN PROGRESS)

Foreword — *Mia Bambina and Other Stories*

There is a durable American lineage of fiction that begins not with spectacle but with a room, a family car, a parish, a school hallway, a kitchen table at which someone says the wrong thing and the air changes. One hears, at moments in these stories, the grave attentiveness of Andre Dubus,

the domestic acuity of Alice McDermott, the religious pressure of Mary Gordon, the rueful comic steadiness of Richard Russo.

The five stories gathered in *Mia Bambina and Other Stories* move through Boston dormitories and beaches, old kitchens and classrooms, South Florida cafés and storefronts heavy with incense. Their geography is specific, but the territory is interior: the strange compromise by which people continue to live near shame, grief, lust, resentment, love. The sacred and the profane are not opposites here. They are neighbors. In certain families, they are sisters.

These are stories of mortality, memory, and moral compromise told without sentimentality. They ask how much harm can be done in the name of love, how much mercy can survive in a damaged person, and whether any ritual can prepare us for the final silence. The answer, mercifully, is not simplified. The stories look hard. They do not look away.

— *from the front matter of Mia Bambina and Other Stories* (DRAFT · IN PROGRESS)