



Ten Tips for cutting down the word count in a short story

1) Look out for repetition. Not just of individual words, which you should be editing anyway, but also phrases, sentences and even paragraphs which don't move the story forward. In a short story with a word count of 2,000 or less in particular, every word has to contribute and every phrase must drive the narrative.

Even if it's a lovely piece of writing, even if it's an amusing or pertinent aside, if it doesn't add to the story, cut it.

To make you feel better, don't delete the beloved bits and pieces, cut and paste them in a new document. That way it's not writing wasted and you have them there to use in the future.

2) Don't use multiple adjectives. One should be enough.

3) Don't use adverbs. Well, maybe one or two, but always inspect them closely in case they're not needed.

4) Get rid of qualifiers wherever you can. Words like *somewhat*, *perhaps*, *really*, *entirely*, *totally*, *rather*, *maybe*, *sometimes*. They dilute what you're saying and add horribly to word count.

5) Dialogue must also do its part in driving your story forward. It's all very well sounding naturalistic, but if that means words and speeches that don't open up and progress the plot, they're ripe for the scything!

6) If your word count is over-long you might be writing over-long sentences too. Try to avoid sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses. Read through your work and, wherever you can, replace a comma or an *and* with a full stop. This usually helps to make the content clearer, and gives prominence to individual ideas. In turn, that makes the writing easier to read. It also gets rid of superfluous *ands*.

7) Try using more verbs, and descriptive ones at that. They can help eliminate adjectives and vague superfluity as well as making your writing more interesting.

At this point, **save** the story in the form it's in now.

If you're still way over the word limit, accept a big part of the content has to go. You can get rid of maybe a quarter of those extra words by careful pruning line by line, with pointers 1-7 in mind, but the rest will have to be deleted in big chunks, substantial portions of your story. It's hard, but you'll need to do it – if you don't you'll be pruning forever.

Keep the story in the longer form though, as you might have another opportunity to use it. Then let's get down and dirty.

8. Candidates for major cutting

- a) Descriptive passages. All very nice, but they're in your way here. If you really must, leave one sentence out of five, but make sure it's short, with every word conjuring an evocative image.
- b) Passages, sections and incidents that don't move the main story forward. They might be about your character, perhaps a past incident, or even something happening now – but if they don't affect the overall outcome, cut them.
- c) Sub-plots. No space for them in a short story.
- d) Extra characters. Is he or she really necessary? For short stories you usually want only one protagonist. Even if you're writing in the third person, everything should be seen from their point of view. It makes for a much more focused, better directed story too. Assuming you've already done this, check out your extras. Can they usefully be condensed into one? This might help with characterisation too; knocking down the cardboard cut-outs is never a bad idea, and in a short story, it's hard for secondary characters to be anything else.

Once you've done all your cutting, read through your work very carefully to make sure it still follows logically and you've not cut anything integral to understanding by mistake. Sometimes we don't read what's on the page, but what we think is there. So two pieces of advice: one, leave it overnight before reading again; two, print the story out and – yes, go for it – read it aloud.

9. Still some way over the maximum? Then you need to examine your story again. Your plot might be too convoluted, or perhaps you're trying to tell two or more stories in one. Print out the story again and use different coloured highlighters to identify different aspects of the plot. You'll soon see what's going on and what you can do about it.

If you need to cut out the yellow bits and re-write around the green, **save** your story again before you do so.

10. It's still over the limit. Well, hey, your story is too long. So this is where we take drastic, do-or-die action. You won't like it. Unfortunately, the reader might not like it either; there is no guarantee this will work. This is Only A Last Resort. But...you've invested so much time now, you might as well give it a try. First, **save** your work.

Then go to the Edit menu in Word. Hit *Go to*. Hit *Line*. Put in a number – any number and click *Go To*. Where the cursor lands, highlight the next sentence, three lines, paragraph or half a page. Whatever you think equates to the number of words you need to lose. Then hit delete.

Close the story. Go enjoy your chosen beverage. Allow an hour at least and overnight if you can. Go back to it. Print it out. Read it. How much does the bit that's missing show? Could you make it work by replacing the 10 sentences you took out with one? Try.

If you really, really can't make it work, go back to your last saved version and do the experiment again at a different line. Be positive: focus on making it work rather than being sure it will fail.

When I've done this as a last resort I've been surprised at what it's made me achieve. Once the work is actually gone from my sight, so I'm not agonising over stripping out

my writing, it's easier to concentrate on writing one or two sentences to connect the story. I reiterate: this is last resort action and not to be tried unless steps 1-9 have failed. No denying, sometimes the result is unsatisfactory. But it can work.

If you've made changes under points 8 to 10 which have involved some re-working, go through the writing looking at points 1-7 again. Chances are, you'll be able to prune some more.

"Now the story's 50 words under!!"

Good! The word limit isn't a target, it's a maximum. Do not be tempted to replace 49 abandoned words! OK, you can put back one adjective and maybe one lost, short, favourite sentence. Check it still reads right in context though; your style itself will have subtly changed with all these cuts and it might sound out of place. Then take one last read through and send your story off. Good luck!