What is a short story?

A short story usually doesn't have many characters slowing down the action and lengthening the story. Quite often, a short story has just one or two central characters with a few minor characters. The characters themselves are usually described only to the extent that the story requires and the writer keeps the action moving. The climax of the story is often found near the end.

The plot of a short story usually focuses on a main event where some problem or complication occurs, preventing the main characters from reaching their goal or goals. Because short stories are brief, there is usually only room for one main theme to be developed. Nor can there be lengthy descriptions or masses of detail as in a novel. The action of the short story usually takes place in a single setting over a short period of time.

Reading a short story

Here are some questions to ask yourself when you are reading a short story.

- **Title:** How does the title relate to the story?
- **Purpose:** What is the writer’s purpose? Is it merely to entertain, or is it to make the audience think?
- **Setting:** Where and when does the action take place? Is the setting important for the action taking place?
- **Characters:** Who are the characters? Are they true to life? Why are they important?
- **Conflict:** What struggle or problem occurs between the characters or what inner conflict does a character need to resolve?
- **Narrator:** Who is telling the story? Is it a character in the story, an observer or the writer?
- **Plot:** How are the events of the story arranged? Are they interesting or exciting?
Orientation: How does the beginning arouse your interest?

Complication: What are the problems that hinder the main characters from achieving their goal? How does the writer build up the suspense?

Climax: What is the most exciting point in the story?

Resolution: Is the ending of the story a surprise? How are the problems solved?

Read the short story ‘Smart ice-cream’ and answer the questions that follow.

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Smart ice-cream

Well, I came top of the class again. One hundred out of one hundred for Maths. And one hundred out of one hundred for English. I’m just a natural brain, the best there is. There isn’t one kid in the class who can come near me. Next to me they are all dumb.

Even when I was a baby I was smart. The day that I was born my mother started tickling me. ‘Bub, bub, bub,’ she said.

‘Cut it out Mum,’ I told her. ‘That tickles.’ She nearly fell out of bed when I said that. I was very advanced for my age.

Every year I win a lot of prizes: top of the class, top of the school, stuff like that. I won a prize for spelling when I was only three years old. I am a terrific speller. If you can say it, I can spell it. Nobody can trick me on spelling. I can spell every word there is.

Some kids don’t like me; I know that for a fact. They say I’m a show-off. I don’t care. They are just jealous because they are not as clever as me. I’m good looking too. That’s another reason why they are jealous.

Last week something bad happened. Another kid got one hundred out of one hundred for Maths too. That never happened before—no one has ever done as well as me. I am always first on my own. A kid called Jerome Dadian beat me. He must have cheated. I was sure he cheated. It had something to do with that ice-cream. I was sure of it. I decided to find out what was going on; I wasn’t going to let anyone pull a fast one on me.

It all started with the ice-cream man, Mr Peppi. The old fool had a van which he parked outside the school. He sold ice-cream, all different types. He had every flavour there is, and some that I had never heard of before.

He didn’t like me very much. He told me off once. ‘Go to the back of the queue,’ he said. ‘You pushed in.’

‘Mind your own business, Pop,’ I told him. ‘Just hand over the ice-cream.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I won’t serve you unless you go to the back.’

I went round to the back of the van, but I didn’t get in the queue. I took out a nail and made a long scratch on his rotten old van. He had just had it painted. Peppi came and had a look. Tears came into his eyes. ‘You are a bad boy,’ he said. ‘One day you will get into trouble. You think you are smart. One day you will be too smart.’

I just laughed and walked off. I knew he wouldn’t do anything. He was too soft-hearted. He was always giving free ice-creams to kids that had no money. He felt sorry for poor people. The silly fool.

There were a lot of stories going round about that ice-cream. People said that it was good for you. Some kids said that it made you better when you were sick. One of the teachers called it ‘Happy Ice-cream’. I didn’t believe it; it never made me happy.
All the same, there was something strange about it. Take Pimplies Peterson for example. That wasn't his real name—I just called him that because he had a lot of pimples. Anyway, Peppi heard me calling Peterson 'Pimplies'. 'You are a real mean boy,' he said. 'You are always picking on someone else, just because they are not like you.'

'Get lost, Peppi,' I said. 'Go and flog your ice-cream somewhere else.'

Peppi didn't answer me. Instead he spoke to Pimplies. 'Here, eat this,' he told him. He handed Peterson an ice-cream. It was the biggest ice-cream I had ever seen. It was coloured purple. Peterson wasn't too sure about it. He didn't think he had enough money for such a big ice-cream.

'Go on,' said Mr Peppi. 'Eat it. I am giving it to you for nothing. It will get rid of your pimples.'

I laughed and laughed. Ice-cream doesn't get rid of pimples, it gives you pimples. Anyway, the next day when Peterson came to school he had no pimples. Not one. I couldn't believe it. The ice-cream had cured his pimples.

There were some other strange things that happened too. There was a kid at the school who had a long nose. Boy, was it long. He looked like Pinocchio. When he blew it you could hear it a mile away. I called him 'Snozzle'. He didn't like being called Snozzle. He used to go red in the face when I said it, and that was every time that I saw him. He didn't say anything back—he was scared that I would punch him up.

Peppi felt sorry for Snozzle too. He gave him a small green ice-cream every morning, for nothing. What a jerk. He never gave me a free ice-cream.

You won't believe what happened but I swear it's true. Snozzle's nose began to grow smaller. Every day it grew a bit smaller. In the end it was just a normal nose. When it was the right size Peppi stopped giving him the green ice-creams.

I made up my mind to put a stop to this ice-cream business. Jerome Dadian had been eating ice-cream the day he got one hundred for Maths. It must have been the ice-cream making him smart. I wasn't going to have anyone doing as well as me. I was the smartest kid in the school, and that's the way I wanted it to stay. I wanted to get a look inside that ice-cream van to find out what was going on.

I knew where Peppi kept his van at night—he left it in a small lane behind his house. I waited until about eleven o'clock at night. Then I crept out of the house and down to Peppi's van. I took a crowbar, a bucket of sand, a torch and some bolt cutters with me.

There was no one around when I reached the van. I sprang the door open with the crowbar and shone my torch around inside. I had never seen so many tubs of ice-cream before. There was every flavour you could think of: there was apple and banana, cherry and mango, blackberry and watermelon and
about fifty other flavours. Right at the end of the van were four bins with locks on them. I went over and had a look. It was just as I thought—these were his special flavours. Each one had writing on the top. This is what they said:

HAPPY ICE-CREAM for cheering people up.
NOSE ICE-CREAM for long noses.
PIMPLE ICE-CREAM for removing pimples.
SMART ICE-CREAM for smart alecs.

Now I knew his secret. That rat Dadian had been eating Smart Ice-cream; that’s how he got one hundred for Maths. I knew there couldn’t be anyone as clever as me. I decided to fix Peppi up once and for all. I took out the bolt cutters and cut the locks off the four bins; then I put sand into every bin in the van. Except for the Smart Ice-cream. I didn’t put any sand in that.

I laughed to myself. Peppi wouldn’t sell much ice-cream now. Not unless he started a new flavour—Sand Ice-cream. I looked at the Smart Ice-cream. I decided to eat some; it couldn’t do any harm. Not that I needed it—I was already about as smart as you could get. Anyway, I gave it a try. I ate the lot. Once I started I couldn’t stop. It tasted good. It was delicious.

I left the van and went home to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. To tell the truth, I didn’t feel too good. So I decided to write this. Then if any funny business has been going on you people will know what happened. I think I have made a mistake. I don’t think Dadian did get any Smart Ice-cream.

2 It iz the nekst day now. Somefing iz happening to me. I don’t feal quite az smart. I have bean trying to do a reel hard sum. It iz wun and wun. Wot duz wun and wun make? Iz it free or iz it for?

from Funniest Stories by Paul Jennings

Exploring the short story

1 Why does the title attract the reader’s attention?

2 What does the narrator reveal about his personality in the orientation?
3 Why don’t the other kids like the narrator?

4 Why did the narrator consider Jerome Dadian to be a threat?

5 Why did the narrator clash with Mr Peppi the ice-cream man?

6 What comments would you make about the character of Mr Peppi?

7 ‘I won’t serve you unless you go to the back’. How did the narrator take revenge on Mr Peppi on this occasion?

8 ‘It will get rid of your pimples’. How does the narrator react to this advice from Mr Peppi to Pimples Peterson?

9 How did the narrator ridicule the kid with the long nose?

10 What effect did eating the small green ice-cream have on the kid with the long nose?

11 Why did the narrator decide ‘to put a stop to this ice-cream business’?

12 ‘I decided to fix Peppi up once and for all’. How did the narrator do this?