WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES
OF SHORT STORIES?

1. They are short: While this point is obvious, it needs to be emphasised. Short stories can usually be read at a single sitting. This means that writers have to curtail description and ensure that the action moves swiftly. Unnecessary words are simply omitted – they are a luxury that the short story writer cannot afford. In this collection of short stories, each story can be read in less than thirty minutes.

2. They tend to have a single focus: Writers of full-length novels can allow characters to develop and change as time passes. They can develop a complex plot and include some interesting sub plots. They can elaborate on the setting or atmosphere, and pay attention to background details. Characters, action, setting, themes, atmosphere – all of these can be developed in a novel.

   However, with a short story the focus is usually on only one of these aspects.

3. Characters are few in number: Characters have to be introduced sparingly into short stories because each new character usually requires background information and at least a brief explanation of his or her presence. No unnecessary character can be introduced in the short story. He or she would only take important space and time from the essential action.

4. There is often a surprise ending: Short stories frequently have an unexpected twist at the end. If the story has been well written there is often much satisfaction from the way the threads have been pulled together to complete the story, even if we find ourselves completely caught by surprise. Many of the most satisfying short stories have the most unexpected, but plausible, endings.

5. They usually end at or soon after the climax: While a novel may reach its climax and then take a chapter or two to tie up all the loose ends, the short story will often leave much to the reader’s imagination. The writer usually ‘springs’ the surprise ending on us, leaving us to reflect on the unexpected twist and its ongoing significance for the characters and action. Quite often the story is only truly completed as we think out the ongoing effects of the events that have occurred at the story’s end.

How is this different to writing for an examination?

Writing for an examination is not really writing a short story.

1. It is even more condensed and you need to show your skills of thinking and writing.

2. You have to follow instructions.

3. You may not be able to start where you want to.

4. You don’t always have a choice of point of view – it may have to be in first person or third person depending on the stimulus.

5. You don’t have much time for editing or building up slowly.

6. You may not be able to look at all the elements of a short story: it may just be about character; or just setting or just creating a mood.

RULE:
AN ANALYSIS OF PLOT

An excellent plot gives life and vitality to a story without it a good story remains dull and unappealing.

Plot: The sequence of events or actions described in the story. An orderly sequence of events carefully structured so that events fit in such a way as to sustain maximum reader interest. All plots will have some form of conflict or crisis and ultimately a climax.

Conflict: Struggle of some kind.

Crisis: Point at which the two forces are evenly balanced and the advantage could go either way.

Climax: The point at which the winner of the conflict is finally made clear.

The two devices commonly used by short story writers to gain and maintain reader interest are suspense and surprise.

Suspense: The quality which makes you ask ‘How will this turn out?’ It is greatest when the reader’s curiosity is combined with anxiety about the fate of a sympathetic character.

Surprise: Involves the unexpected, a sudden new turn or twist. In using the unexpected the author will generally avoid the overuse of chance and coincidence.

AN ANALYSIS OF SETTING

The setting is the backdrop of a story. It can define the actions of the characters, as well as paint an inspiring canvas against which the characters relate, move, and deal with their conflicts and problems. The setting transports readers to places only in their imaginations, including exotic locales and periods of the past. The setting considers location, time, atmosphere and culture.

TASK

Examine the passage below and answer the following four questions.

Pierre has worked for many years as a milkman in Montreal, making deliveries to his long-time customers. His milk wagon is drawn by a horse named Joseph, who has learned the route so well that he stops by instinct. Together, Pierre and Joseph demonstrate a love, trust, and efficiency that is compelling to all.

One morning, Pierre learns that Joseph has died. Distraught by the news, Pierre stumbles into the street, where he is hit and killed by a truck. Only then do we learn that Pierre has been blind for years. Because Joseph knew the milk route so well, Pierre’s blindness was a secret between the two.
1. **Location:** In which country does this story take place? How does this add to the story?

2. **Time Period:** Does this story take place in the past or the present? Why could it not take place in the present? How does the time period add to the story?

3. **Atmosphere:** How would you describe the atmosphere of the story? For example, is it friendly? Kind? Frightening? Anxious?

4. **Culture:** To make a setting come alive, stories often include words that reflect a culture, such as simple phrases in foreign languages and food names. Character names may also reflect ethnic background. What can you tell about the culture of the people in the passage above?

**AN ANALYSIS OF THEME**

Sometimes what interests a reader about a short story is its meaning or theme, i.e. its controlling idea or central insight into life. Not all stories have a theme. The purpose of a story may be simply to scare the reader, to mystify him or to make him laugh.

In many stories, however, the reader feels that the events are not only interesting and exciting in themselves, but are the representatives of events in real life. He feels he can identify with the hero in his fight for some cause. This happens because the hero is associated in our minds with something larger than themselves. It is these associations between the concrete events of the story and more universal, general ideas that constitute the story’s themes.

The main objective in writing a short story is not to ‘say’ anything, not even to make the story seem believable, although most readers prefer ‘realistic’ stories. It is to create a satisfying design, an enjoyable work of art.
AN ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERS

There is a direct relationship between the story and the characters in it. Since the short story by its very nature cannot develop the complexity of character found in a novel, its characters do tend to be flat (one or two traits) and static (same at the end as the beginning).

The most realistic character will be the one who is consistent in behaviour, who is clearly motivated and who is plausible or life-like. Since the short story tends to show a person at one crucial point of his life, certain stock characters frequently emerge.

The heroic or romantic character moves on a level above that of the common man, he is in many ways larger than life. He will display all or many of the virtues of courage, resourcefulness, innocence, idealism and honesty. In contrast, his opponents will be exaggerated villains.

The tragic character begins on a level above that of the ordinary man and is reduced to a state that is inferior to that of common humanity. Often in tragedy, the very qualities that make us admire the hero are the ones that cause his downfall.

The ironic hero appears inferior as a result of his status, wealth or education. Yet the quality or his deeds and actions are revealed as far superior to the assumed ‘hero’ who possesses wealth and status.

The comic hero is initially dismissed by the reader. Often he is a young man, struggling against the corrupt older generation or society as a whole. He usually believes in honesty, love and justice in a society where there appears to be none. Sometimes an extremely complicated plot is resolved by chance or coincidence.

WRITING YOUR OWN SHORT STORY

1. Limit the time span of your story. Short stories should last from a few hours to a few weeks. Because of the limited length of short stories, time is especially important. PLAN your story first.

2. Plan your story.
   - **Point of view:** Whose voice will be telling the story?
   - **Using emotion:** Brainstorm a list of words that directly describe the mood of your story.
   - **Choosing a title:** This is vital as can either entice or deter a potential reader.
   - **Word painting, Show it, and don’t Tell it:** Often drawing first will help you write later.
   - **Build suspense:** Use short, sharp sentences, dialogue, repetition, tone, pause/delay tactic to create atmosphere.
   - **The End:** Twist at the end? How does your story end? Your ending should be strong. Think about whether you will reveal all, or leave your readers guessing about the true nature of your chosen genre?
Plot Tree Summary: Use a plot tree skeleton to plan your short story.

1. Be selective with your characters: Just as you’re limited by the time span in the story, you’re also limited to a fixed number of characters. To avoid confusing your reader, limit the number of characters.

Creating Memorable Characters:

Building a character from within your mind’s eye. Physical appearance. *What do they look like? Boy or girl? How old are they? What clothes do they wear?*


Motivating your character; what makes them tick? *What are they passionate about? What are their feelings, ethics and morals? What are their desires and ambitions?*

2. Creating Settings:

Fictional vs Authentic Settings. It will make a difference to your story if it is set in a park or on planet Xeron. Think carefully where your story is taking place. Paris or Pluto? In the depths of the ocean or the living room of your own home?

Fitting your character into their surroundings. It will be important that your characters reflect the environment they are in, i.e. clothing and behaviour. One would not expect that you would have a world champion cross country skier in a swimsuit in the Simpson Desert!
3. Choose the right point of view: For distance, use the third person. If you prefer the reader to be more intimately engaged with the protagonist, choose the first personal narrative. As an exercise, try writing the short story from a number of perspectives.

4. Tense: Will past tense work best or do you require a stronger sense of immediacy for the story?

5. Avoid clichés: These can be recognised by the student through asking her/himself the question: ‘Does anything I’ve said sound familiar?’ If it does, chances are it’s because they’ve read it before and it is a tired old phrase.

6. Dialogue and Description. Use both in combination if you’re confident with them.

7. Begin with a bang! From the first sentence in the first paragraph; hook the reader's attention immediately and HOLD it! Get rid of long, boring description and put in more action or dialogue in the body of the story.

8. Show, don't tell: Instead of saying the main character is "feeling nervous," describe the feelings/emotion, for example: ‘sweat trickling down his face and the swirling in the pit of his stomach’.

9. Fill your story with conflict! The main character must struggle with obstacles one by one – this is the rising tension of a good story. He must overcome each setback in a way that makes sense to the reader. The main conflict should come from the main character's own choices or actions.

10. Use dialogue, but make it count! Don't be afraid to let your characters speak. But when they do, be sure every conversation they have moves the story's plot forward. There is nothing worse than death by 'he said', 'she said' stories. They slow the action and confuse the reader.

11. Force your character into action! When your story reaches its highest point, the main character should be forced into making a choice. Often, he must decide between the right thing to do (moral decision) versus the wrong thing.

12. End on the right note: The end of a story is called the resolution. The main character finds a way to solve the major conflict of the story. At the end, the character must show change or growth because of the course he's taken during the story. The ending isn't always perfect, but the main character is often hopeful and sees his life in a new and meaningful way.
WHAT ARE COMMON MISTAKES?

1. Running out of time during the examination.
2. Writer’s block.
3. Writing lacks originality, structure or sophistication. AVOID copying film plots.

WHAT ARE SOME TIPS FOR SUCCESS?

1. Plan your HSC Examination time (You may wish to complete question II or question III first).
2. Practise past HSC Examination questions.
3. Practise writing within time limits.
4. Seek marking, feedback and guidance on your writing – teachers, tutors, family and friends.
5. Have a study timetable. If you don’t plan to revise – you probably won’t.
6. Be courageous and daring in your practise responses. Take risks with your writing and take on board teacher recommendations guiding your drafts.

What other forms of creative writing are options for responses?