

# THE SHORT-STORY DAY TRIP



WHICH WOULD YOU  
RATHER DO THIS WEEKEND:  
BANG OUT A BRAND-NEW  
STORY OR SET OUT TO DO  
SOME SIGHTSEEING?  
GOOD NEWS—YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO CHOOSE.

By Doug Crandell

I love road trips. I also treasure my time off to write. Like most writers, I hold down a day job, so it's difficult to find time to write unless I plan for it. So I've learned to combine my two loves: I embrace my vacation sprees and turn them into fiction.

That doesn't mean you have to spend a week in an RV tooling through the wine country, trolling for colorful characters and story ideas. Actually, just a day will do. You don't even have to go far. By following the hourly schedule below, you can turn a brief expedition into a great short story.

**9:00 a.m.** It's time to pack lightly and get on the road, bus or train. Here's where your first characters are sitting, just waiting to be plucked from the real world and put onto the page. **FIND YOUR PROTAGONIST.** Is he passing you on the shoulder, driving like he's en route to something critical? Or is your leading lady the off-duty waitress sitting cheerfully in the seat across from you, her makeup smeared and her clothes smelling of fresh bread? The important thing here is not to overthink it. Take a mental picture, then take a break and enjoy the scenery.

**10:00 a.m.** You arrive at your destination. Perhaps it's a tour through a candy factory or a stroll along the

state's largest man-made body of water; it could even be the local strawberry festival. I once visited the first electrically lighted city in the world, and it became the **SETTING FOR MY STORY** "Colored Glass" (first published in *Glimmer Train* and later anthologized in *Mother Knows*). The point is, this is your background, or at least a portion of it. Get your notepad out. Imagine your protagonist in this setting. What's she doing here? Does she have familial ties in this place? You're not writing yet—you're simply getting to know your characters, the people you care about.

**11:00 a.m. CONFLICT AND ACTION ARE ESSENTIAL TO A STORY.** A day trip is similar to a short story in its narrative arc. You start out, get lost, find your way again and conclude the day, all while having encountered numerous moments of tension. There are all kinds of situations that provide for friction and opposition. Your job now is to move from your day trip's locale to its intrinsic operation, the heartbeat of its comings and goings. With "Colored Glass," I found the essence of the town revolved around its annual light festival. This provided a moment to place my protagonist in an action sequence where opposition would be found. Take in what's happening around you. Look for routines, casual interactions and then think: What's the worst thing that could happen here?

**12:00 p.m.** You'll be starving by now and need to find a place to eat. This is your chance to try new things and to create excellent descriptions within your narrative. There's one

rule: You must order a meal you've never tried and, like an expert food critic, write down your thoughts as you savor the smells, textures and sights of a wholly new dish. Trust me, at least one of these notes will make it into your short story.

**1:00 p.m.** Now that you've found your protagonist and thought about how she'll be affected by opposition, it's time to fiddle with the **POINT OF VIEW**. At this stage in your day trip, sit and listen to people talk—or, rather, tell stories, which is really what most people do in conversation. Let your hearing be your guide. Dig out your notepad once again. Find a bench near the town square or simply stay put after lunch and listen to other diners. Hear how they tell stories in first person (what's happened to them) or third person (what's happened to others). Try to meditate on how your protagonist wishes to talk.

**2:00 p.m.** Your day trip is winding down and you now have some time **TO THINK ABOUT THEM**. With several hours under your belt pursuing new experiences, you should be able to sort through what connects your location and its people together. Once again, in "Colored Glass," I was fortunate. The idea of a story set in a place known for being the first electrically lighted city in the world

As adults, we're best able to use our creative thinking and childlike imaginations, not to mention our powers of description, when our environment is totally different.

begged a theme that dealt with "what we can see and what is shrouded in darkness." Let's say your day trip took you through a local winery. Think about vines, fruit and the time needed to mature. Now, play around with those themes in your head. Once you've latched onto a theme, write it down in bold letters.

**3:00 p.m.** In this hour, take the time to record the **TIME AND PLACE** you want to plop your character into. Sure, your trip will be in the present, but if you're interested in writing a short story set in the 1940s, go to the local library and do a little research. This is the easiest part of the process, and it can truly enrich your trip and the story.

**4:00 p.m.** Your day trip is over—time to head home. Your notebook should be filled with scraps of dialogue, points of view, conflict, new sensory experiences and some notions of theme. Take some deep breaths and just let your mind baste in all of it. Tomorrow, you'll start writing, hopefully 500 or 1,000 words a day. Future weekends hold the possibility of another trip, where your next new story is just waiting to be discovered. [WD]

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