

Writing Short Stories for Magazines

by *Chris Sutton*



Writing stories for magazines is great fun. You create the characters, decide what happens to them and how their problems will be resolved. Nothing could be simpler. Except that it's not quite that easy.

A decade ago the UK short story market was thriving, with *Woman's Own*, *Chat*, *Bella*, *Woman*, *The Lady*, *Best*, *Woman's Weekly*, *Take a Break*, *Yours*, *People's Friend* and *My Weekly* all accepting short fiction. Today almost half of those titles have dropped their fiction slots, meaning that the rest receive an even greater number of submissions. Your

manuscript has to sparkle if it is to stand any chance at all.

Those new to writing often go about it very formally, paying too much attention to 'proper' speech and using words that aren't in everyday use. The results can be as musty as an Agatha Christie drawing room. When writing for the women's magazine market do so as though you're chatting to a friend, or dropping them a line about some recent event that's too good not to pass on. If appropriate to the storyline, try to inject a note of humour. Editors up to their ears in submissions say it helps a story's chance of acceptance no end!

It goes without saying that your story should be well written, proofread, and free of all those little glitches that somehow manage to sneak through when the muse is upon us. It also needs to be properly presented, with wide margins, double line spacing and, for work submitted by post, printed on one side of A4 paper only. Above all, it needs to be right for the publication. Trendy though they are, Botox treatments, fish pedicures, and trips to the tanning salon are unlikely to feature in the average *People's Friend* reader's day. Similarly, those who buy *Take a Break's* Fiction Feast probably won't be baking cakes for the village fete any time soon. Generalisations, I know, but you get the point. Submit appropriately by familiarising yourself with your target magazine's guidelines. Most major titles provide them, either online or by post upon provision of an SAE. Guidelines can be just a couple of paragraphs long, or page after page of detailed direction. Either way, they should be followed carefully as they will outline the magazine's preferences as to word counts and genre - romance, humour, twist-in-the-tail, and so on.



Whereas short story competitions usually have a fairly open remit, women's magazine stories should not be depressing, horrific, or overtly sexual. The fiction page is intended to divert the reader, not distress her. Tackle the big issues by all means - family break ups, illness and bereavement are all part of everyday life. But do so sympathetically and in a way that implies a better future for your heroine once the story is over.

As well as the UK market, you might consider submitting work overseas. Australia, America, Canada, India, Scandinavia, South Africa, all have their own women's magazines, many of which take fiction. If writing for the USA, bear in mind that Americans use cell-phones not mobiles, go to the drug store not the chemist, have sidewalks not pavements, and buy gas not petrol. And make sure your spell check is set to American English; it's color not colour, favorite not favourite, etc.

It used to be that work previously published in the UK could later be submitted overseas but that's rapidly becoming a thing of the past. That's Life and Fast Fiction in Australia, for example, now consider only previously unpublished work, so check those guidelines carefully prior to submission.



Submit your story with a brief covering letter, where possible addressing the fiction editor by name. Open by saying that you are enclosing a story for their consideration and state the title and word count. It is perfectly acceptable to mention any previously published work or competition successes you have to your credit but telling an editor how much your mother loves this story isn't going to earn you any brownie points. If submitting by post, always enclose an SAE. They didn't ask to see your work, so don't expect them to pay for the privilege of telling you whether they liked it or not. Most likely you just won't hear back.

If your story is returned - and the chances are it will be, at least once - don't throw it in a drawer and forget about it. Stories get turned down for any number of reasons; could be they've recently published a similar one, or perhaps it just didn't suit their current needs. Go back over it, make any changes you feel are necessary, then try it again with a fresh market. Rejection is all part of what we do and every time a story is returned it gives you the opportunity to make it even better before trying it elsewhere.

Finally, if you haven't already done so, consider treating yourself to a subscription to a writers' magazine. Writers' Forum and Writing Magazine are invaluable sources of information, advice, competitions and support.

Good luck and I hope to see your work in a magazine very soon.

Christine Sutton

Essex born Chris Sutton's work has been published in magazines in the UK and around the world. A former veterinary nurse, she had her first story, a competition entry called A Stranger Calls, published in Woman's Own's Summer Special in 1993. It was swiftly followed by the publication of children's stories in DC Thompson's Twinkle and the BBC's Playdays and Pingu magazines.

She enjoys entering competitions and has twice won Writing Magazine's prestigious Ghost Story Competition. She is a great believer in not giving up. It took her nigh on eighteen years to get a story into Woman's Weekly but that just made the acceptance all the sweeter when it came!

Christine can be contacted via WritersReign

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