Short Story Terminology

Characterization: The methods a writer uses to communicate information about characters to readers.

Direct Characterization: When an author tells the reader directly about a character.

Indirect Characterization: When the author shows the character in action and lets the reader draw their own conclusions.

Climax: The moment when the action comes to its highest point of dramatic conflict. Most often, the climax occurs before the actual ending of the story.

Complication: Any obstacle that increases tension of the story conflict.

Conflict: The central source of tension and drama in the story. Conflict is sometimes referred to as the story problem.

Description: Verbal representation of characters, scene, or action, used to make the story more vivid for the reader.

Dialogue: The actual words that characters speak. Authors use dialogue skillfully in the short story to portray character to dramatize conflict.

Diction: The author’s choice of word’s, the vocabulary level of the story.

Dramatic Irony: A technique that increases suspense by letting readers know more about the dramatic situation than the characters know.

Exposition: Background material about the characters, setting, and dramatic situation with which the author introduces the essentials of the story to the reader.

Falling Action: The part of the story, following the climax and leading to the resolution, in which there is a sharp decline in dramatic tension.

Foreshadowing: A writing technique that gives clues about events that will happen later in the story.

Hyperbole: An exaggerated statement used to make a strong effect.

Imagery: The use of selected details to describe one thing in terms of another. This helps suggest additional meanings and feelings.

Verbal Irony: A particular tone created when the speaker intends a meaning that is opposite to the words he or she says. Hyperbole and understatements are figures of speech used to create an ironic effect.

Mood: The overall feeling—light and happy or dark and brooding, for example—created by an author’s choice of words.
Narrator: The speaker who tells the story. If the narrator is also a character who participates in the story, it is important not to confuse the narrator with the author—who may, in fact, hold a different attitude toward the story.

Point of View: The perspective from which the story is told. Point of view is said to be omniscient if the author is outside the story and presents the thought of all the characters. Point of view is called limited when the story is told from the viewpoint of one character who can see only a part of the whole story.

Protagonist: The central character of the story.

Resolution: The conclusion of the story. The resolution includes the story’s action after the climax until the end of the story.

Rising Action: The part of the story, including exposition, in which the tension rises. Rising action builds to its highest point of tension at the story’s climax.

Setting: The environment in which the story takes place.

Structure: The framework that determines how a story is put together—its “skeleton.” The structure of many stories includes four basic parts: exposition, complication, climax, and resolution.

Style: The characteristic ways that an individual author uses language—including word choice, length and complexity of sentences, patterns of sound, and use of imagery and symbols.

Suspense: Techniques used by the author to keep readers interested in the story and wondering what will happen next.

Symbol: An image, object, character, or action that stands for an idea (or ideas) beyond its literal meaning.

Theme: The story’s main ideas—the “message” that the author intends to communicate by telling the story. Themes are often universal truths that are suggested by the specifics in the story.

Tone: The clues in a story that suggest the writer’s (or narrator’s) own attitude toward elements of his or her story.

Understatement: A figure of speech in which the speaker says less than what he or she actually feels.