

Writing by the Numbers

Ian Sulam

May 29, 2015

What makes for good short story writing?

What makes for good short story writing?

- 81% of Americans ‘feel they have a book in them’
- just over 300,000 books published each year
- short stories are where authors ‘learn to write’

No shortage of advice

Proof-By-Google:

how to write a short story:

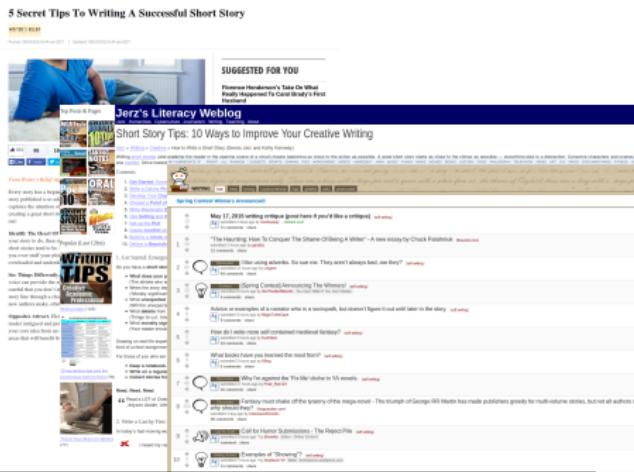
170 million results

Kim Kardashian:

190 million results

cat photography:

98 million results



Advice (implicitly empirical?):

He gave me various simple rules, of which I remember only two: “Put a comma every four words”, and “never use ‘and’ except at the beginning of a sentence”.

Bertrand Russell, *How I Write*

Data: /r/WritingPrompts

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Image prompt from AuSpotlessEternalSun

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The subreddit where it's all made up and the points don't matter.

WEEKLY (1) THEME: High Fantasy
Theme Thursday Archive

Weekly Schedule:
[#/W] = Most Recent by Date || [A] = Archive
SUNDAY Sunday Free Write - [5/10] [A]

1. **[WP] Goug Immortal** | PROMPT INSPIRED
4 4 submitted 2 days ago by stielingfan · stickied post
comment

1 833 [WP] A soldier in the heat of battle suddenly hears a voice that says "I am your child's imaginary friend. They have sent me to protect you in your greatest time of need."
1 WRITING PROMPT
submitted 10 hours ago by TheTrueFlexKavana
89 comments

2 198 [WP] "do you still believe in God?" said the Creature to the astronaut. | WRITING PROMPT
submitted 8 hours ago by atmastojan
35 comments

3 204 [EU] Frequently, children's movies will be remade to be much darker or in the horror genre. Do the opposite: take an existing horror movie and make the child-friendly original before it was "remade." | ESTABLISHED UNIVERSE
submitted 10 hours ago by xanthippe5
34 comments

4 114 [WP] A drunk fairy godmother gave a baby the worst possible blessing: everything he touches becomes flawless. 35 years later, he has gotten fired for the third time this year.
1 WRITING PROMPT
submitted 10 hours ago by wrestles_beans
25 comments

5 27 [WP] Poor people are able to pawn off their memories. | WRITING PROMPT
submitted 3 hours ago by lyckedes145
13 comments

6 65 [WP] A vain obsessed alien species intercepts our old tv broadcasts and desperately attempts to emulate us as a new form of beauty. | WRITING PROMPT
submitted 3 hours ago by kicivan
9 comments

7 109 [WP] Magic tomes are brought and sold on street corners, in book stores, and coffee shops. Magic has become an art form. Spells are ripped, pulled apart, and slapped together like CD tracks. Programmers have become artist, architects, DJ's. The world is now a stage. | WRITING PROMPT
submitted 12 hours ago by violetbird07
9 comments

8 32 [WP] At the biggest party of the year, you and your friends spike the punch with tachyon particles. The drunker people get, the more they skip unpredictably through time.
1 WRITING PROMPT
submitted 5 hours ago by apolic
10 comments

9 92 [TT] A very powerful solitary mage meets his match in a young student. | THEME THURSDAY
submitted 8 hours ago by steetbro_300
12 comments

Navigation icons: back, forward, search, etc.

Data: /r/WritingPrompts

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253 points (84% upvoted)
submitted: http://redd.it/36u5

[WP] An alien civilization declares war on humanity. They soon realize that humans have invented weapons that no other civilization they know of has: firearms. | WRITING PROMPT
253 submitted 16 hours ago by onerustybuckett
63 comments

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sorted by: best ▾

[...] mrbobwearspants 399 points 13 hours ago
We are the Kal'te'nan, those who conquer. We are counted among the greatest warriors in the universe. We've conquered and subjugated thousands of civilizations across the galaxy. Each one has taught us new ways to kill and destroy our enemies. From the concentrated fire of c-beams to the wide scale destruction of the dark matter arrays we've mastered and learned to counter every weapon type known to the Risen civilizations. The Terrans should have been no different; if anything they should have been easier than others. After all the Terrans are a frightfully unimaginative race. Even as they first pierced the FTL barrier to join the Risen their ships and engines still relied almost entirely on fire. Granted, their knowledge of how to harness and control fire far exceeded any other civilization; but still, this was a technology most had abandoned long before their Rise for reasons that should be obvious. That really should have warned us what the Terrans were capable of, but we just saw them as fools for still using such old ways. So we ignored the signs and recklessly declared war. Certain this would be our easiest conquest yet. However we soon learned that this "unimaginative" trend had led them to take the most primitive ideas far beyond what any other race would have considered possible. Their weapons, unlike anything we've ever encountered before, tear through our ships like they're nothing. Even our ground troops, feared throughout the universe, are almost entirely helpless against the "firearms" and "missiles" these Terrans bring.

We are the Kal'te'nan, those who conquer. We are capable of using and defending against a thousand different instruments of death and destruction. No race has ever come close to being a match for us. But these Terrans have taken an idea so primitive, so backward, that we never even considered it worthy of the slightest attention or care, and are using it to destroy us. And that is the ultimate humiliation. We are being beaten by a race that has perfected how to throw rocks.

permalink

[...] BaconPit 225 points 12 hours ago
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That line was perfect

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[...] frankysystems 32 points 7 hours ago
Agree

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Amazing line that made the rest of the story better.

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WEEKLY ITTY THEME: Scores and Symphonies
Theme Thursday Archive

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all 63 comments sorted by best ▾

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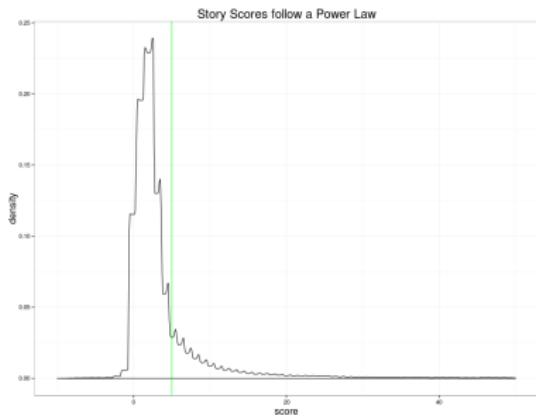
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Of Power Laws and Probits



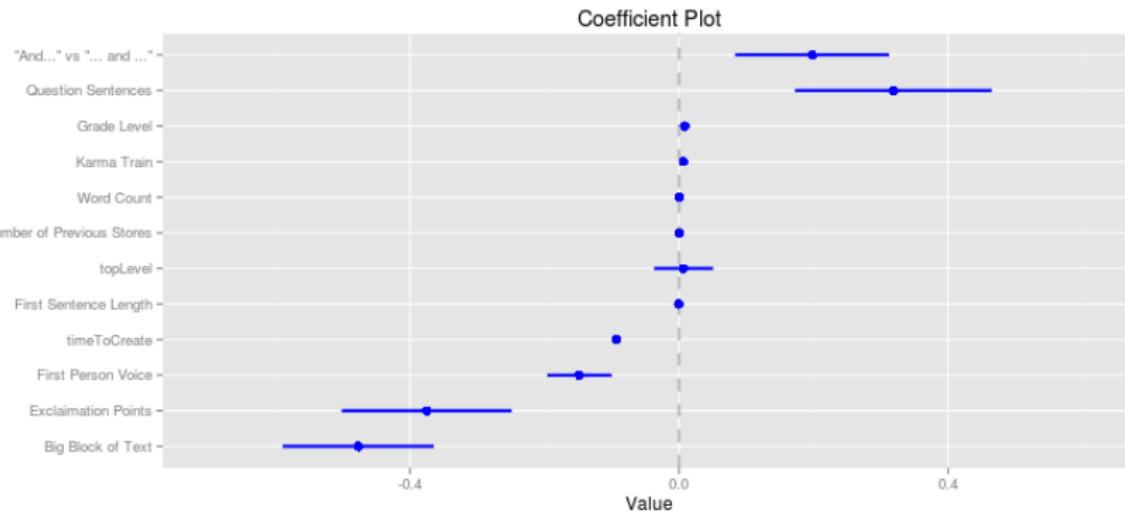
Modelling Strategy:

- Probit Regression
- Train on sample of stories
(200k stories, clustered by prompt)

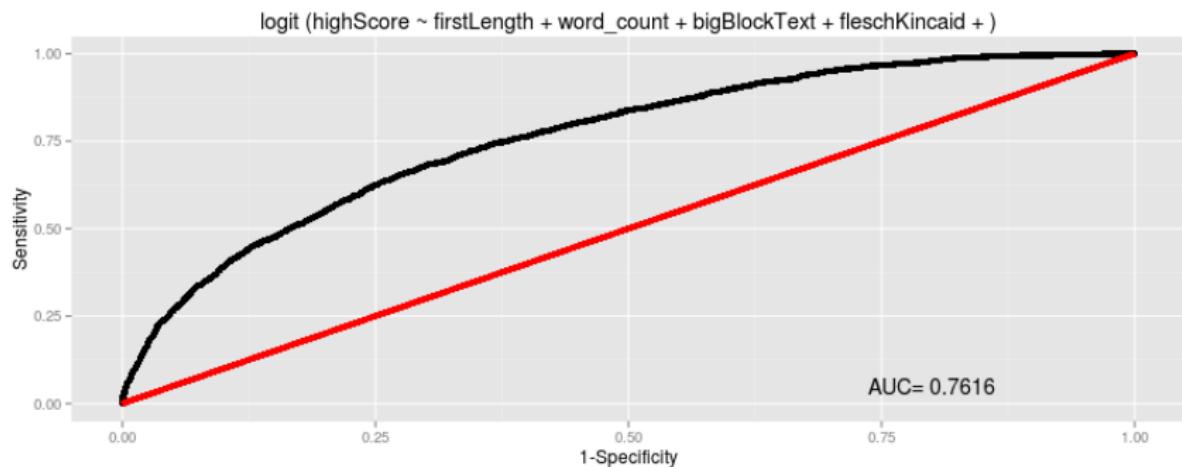
- Scores follow a power law
- Use 80-20 rule:
distinguish 'best' 20% of
stories from bottom 80%

Statistically Speaking...

Coefficient



Does it fit?



There is a time and place...



There is a time and place...



...for more, see my blog!

About me

