Tips on Writing about Short Stories

1. Avoid a dropped quote. Introduce quotes with a signal phrase and follow up with explanation, evaluation, or commentary.

   “Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village” (420).

   Hawthorne’s story is set in Salem, Massachusetts where the witch trials and executions took place: “Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village” (420). The historical significance of this setting foreshadows Brown’s meeting with the devil and his followers later in the story.

2. Avoid the vague or broad reference error with this, that, or it. Avoid the mixed construction of “is when,” “is where,” “is what,” etc.

   The narrator tells readers that Brown “beheld a pink ribbon” (425). This is when Brown loses his faith. Revised: At this moment, Brown loses his faith.

3. Avoid thesis statements that are too broad, too vague, or too factual. Topic sentences also need to be focused and make claims that call for support. Identify the problem with the following topic sentences:

   Both of these stories tell about a conflict.
   Something happens to both of the main characters, but something different.
   Both stories use a third person point of view.

   Revised: While both authors use a third person narrator, Hemingway’s narrator is more objective, relying on dialogue to tell the characters’ thoughts, in contrast to Oates’ narrator who shares the thoughts and feelings of the main character.

4. Avoid plot summary, simply retelling what happened in the story. Watch phrases like “This story is about,” “In the beginning of the story…. Later in the story…. At the end of the story.” If you are citing too much, you are probably writing a plot summary with quotes.

5. Translate first person comments into third person: I felt more sympathy toward Connie at the end of the story. Revised: Readers may feel more sympathy toward Connie...