

## A. E. van Vogt's notion of how to construct a short story

I. Write in scenes of about 800 words

II. Include 5 elements in each scene

1. give setting: where the scene takes place
2. establish the purpose of the scene or the goal of the protagonist in the scene
3. show main character trying to achieve the goal
4. make it clear if the protagonist succeeds or fails in accomplishing the goal
5. for the early scenes, show that, whether or not the protagonist accomplished the goal, things get worse

III. Keep the reader reading by building a hook or a mystery (Vogt calls it a "hang-up") into each sentence so the reader will want to read the next sentence. In an interview, van Vogt illustrated this sort of on-going hook: "He hears a sound over there. And something comes in. It looks like a man wearing a cloak. You don't quite know what's going on. Then you realize this is not a human being. This creature or this being, whoever it is, has a sort of manlike shape. And this creature reaches into what looks like a fold in its skin. It draws out a gleaming metal object. It points it at you. Is it a weapon?" The writer, van Vogt says, furnishes information, but each dribble of information has a kind of hook or mystery in it.

He mentions another way to capture the reader sentence-by-sentence: put emotion into many sentences. Show a character feeling something, especially something powerful such as rage.

A. E. Van Vogt is a writer of escape fiction, so you might want to modify his advice to fit your needs, especially if you're writing literary fiction. Part III above, for example, is something you could use in action scenes. If not over-used, it can be effective in your writing. Also, the advice about emotional context needs to be modified: powerful emotion such as rage isn't necessary or even desirable for extended passages in mainstream fiction. Other emotions might be better. In *Lonesome Dove*, Larry McMurtry uses puzzlement, curiosity, consternation, irritation, amusement, etc. He makes use of the same technique Vogt recommends but in more subtle ways.