

# TOWARDS A DEFINITION

- Although it is clear that the formal elasticity and freedom which has characterised short forms in their various formats makes it difficult to put forward a SINGLE definition of short forms, it remains clear that brevity is its one defining feature across genres and different media.
- Brevity endows short forms with a flexibility and elasticity which longer forms cannot possess; on the one hand, brevity accounts for the short forms' protean nature and, on the other, explains their success through time and cultures in their capacity to naturally adapt to different cultural contexts and in efficaciously responding to social demands in a progressively globalised and digitalised society.
- Short forms have historically and culturally evolved from ancient oral tales to contemporary TikToks, for example, yet they continue to perform a transformative role in accordance with varying cultural and social needs.



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# WHAT are


# SHORT FORMS?

## Definitions & examples



# INTRODUCTION

The short form, understood in all its complexity, occupies an ever-central position in the many debates springing from the academic and public consideration of the fast-paced societies of today. The discussions around “shortness” often result in semantic conundrums, with **specificity recurrently sacrificing broadness and utility**, and descriptivist approaches struggling to do justice to the contextual uses of the adjective “short,” which sometimes go so far as to seem potentially contradictory. **Is the short form to be defined as “short” because of how much space it occupies or time it takes to consume, or should it instead be argued to respond to a history of contrasts, or perhaps, even, one of specific functions and capabilities that set it apart from other cultural units?** Its intersection with other notions devised to measure spatiotemporal length and style —as might be “brevity,” “conciseness,” “density,” or “simplicity”— contributes yet another source of complication to an already multidimensional problem. The same is true of the short/long binary, which results in the quality of shortness sometimes being attributed to cultural units by way of contrast with surrounding elements, or, more generally, as the result of their being directly opposed to longer units—be it by cultural allusion, genre inscription, or any given particularity of the communicative context in which the adjective “short” may appear. The short form’s propensity to the **integration of disparate elements** also contributes to its recalcitrant resistance to onefold definitions, with short cultural products often appearing in ensembles, prompting patterns of interrelation that result in a spatiotemporal politics where possibility is both constrained and enabled by the short form’s relationship with its specific dimension.



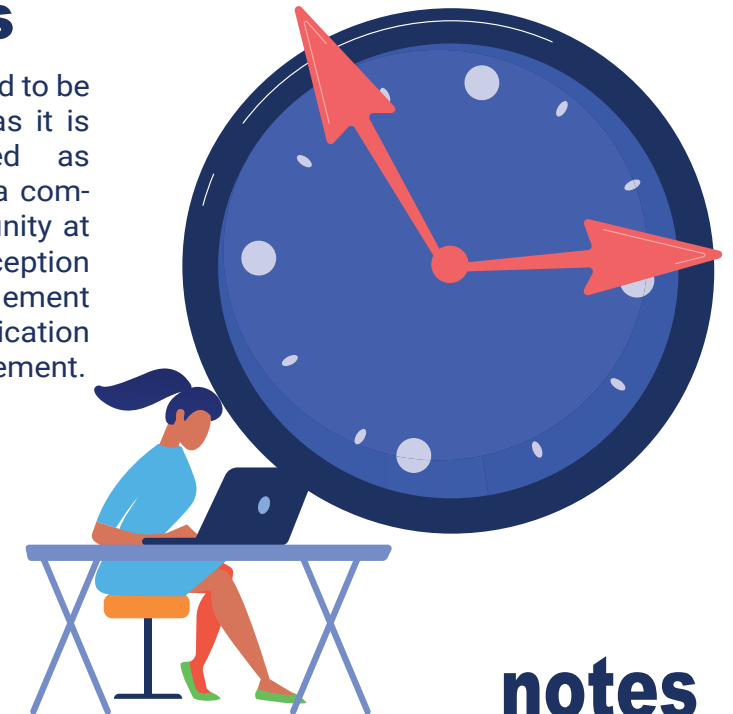
These longstanding issues have not been alleviated by the sociocultural reality of the twenty-first century, where immediacy plays such an important role in the dissemination of cultural data that it might even be argued to have become the central, most valuable feature that a cultural unit may possess in order to reach its intended audience(s). Considering these complications and developments, the present booklet aims to **compile different approaches** to the definition of “shortness” in cultural terms, hoping that their introduction may encourage further conversation on the topic and bring awareness to the centrality that length has earned for itself in the sociocultural reality we all inhabit.

# RELATIVISM

**Shortness is the quality to be attributed to those forms which are perceived as such by an individual or a community because of their recognition of, and response to, a series of examinable patterns on which they base the applicability of the notion.**

## examples

Any form can be labelled to be short or brief insofar as it is descriptively perceived as such by a member of a community or the community at large. (Cultural) perception becomes the central element to the study of the application of spatiotemporal judgement.



## notes

Relativism contributes the descriptive specificity that results from examining the conceptual life of the notion of “shortness” in the minds of the subjects within a given cultural scenario. As happens with most subjectivist approaches to semantics, however, the focus on the individual sacrifices all hopes for generalisation, with the definition pointing beyond the form for an answer on what the form itself is. Because of this, the subjectivist approach might be criticised for gathering its accuracy from its essential vacuity, deferring its responsibility to account for the phenomenon under scrutiny to its cultural experiencers.

# GENRE STUDIES

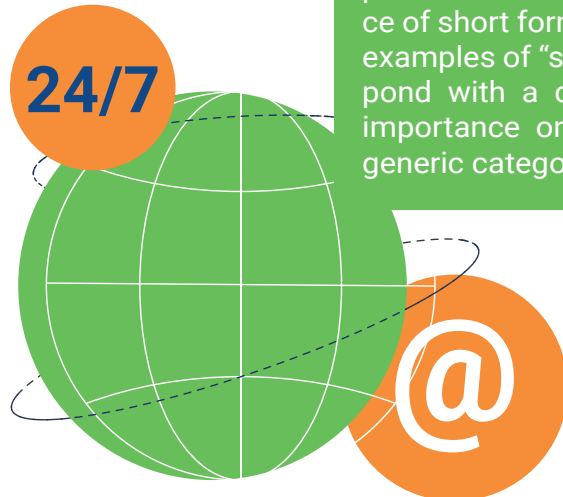
Shortness is the definitional quality of a range of cultural units which are historically brought together and epistemologically made to configure a distinct genre among whose central features is appears its treatment of spatiotemporal brevity.

## examples

The short story, the short film, sketch comedy, the vignette...

## notes

Whereas some short forms are very clearly encompassed by the generic approach, some others are further problematised by the complications inherent to defining "genre," especially those that have been comparatively short-lived (essentially, the ones which appeared as the offspring of the Internet age). Further, provided how a "genre" comes to be defined as such through cultural agreements that often escape precise transhistorical delineation, any instance of short form that escapes the more evident examples of "short genres" could fail to correspond with a definition that places so much importance on the cultural establishment of generic categorisation.



# PARATEXTUAL STUDY

Shortness is the quality to be attributed to the cultural forms which are contextually differentiated and contrastively perceived as such by a community at the synchronic moment in which they appear and by virtue of their treatment of spatio-temporal brevity within said context.

## examples

The short poem, the short play, the short tweet, the short video, the short speech, the short musical, the short album, the short essay...



## notes

A strength of the contextual definition of short forms results from its taking into consideration the individuality of each cultural unit, as well as the specificity of its response to the environment in which it was conceived. It allows for differences between cultural units belonging in the same genre or group to be paid attention to (an individual poem may be deemed "short," whereas another one may be argued not to meet the necessary requirements). However, a definition based on context and paratext alone may fail to provide measurable variables through which to conceptualise the short form as a uniform category, and therefore make it hardly possible for "shortness" to play a part in the institution of cultural genres. Further, by placing a great deal of emphasis on the sociocultural reality that the short form is perceived to be responding to, the definitional features of the cultural unit are deferred away from the unit itself and into multifaceted elements that may be deemed too complex for a functional definition to spring from their analysis.

# FUNCTIONALISM

Shortness is the quality to be attributed to those forms which exploit the rules of economy of an existing sociocultural reality in order to provide a distinct response to the environment in which they appear, be this distinctness conscious or subconscious, and do so by means of their manipulation of spatiotemporal brevity.

## examples

Much as it happens with contextual, paratextual, and relativist study, each individual cultural unit is studied separately in order to determine whether it deploys shortness in pursuit of a specific aim or effect, and is labelled accordingly.

## notes

The main shortcoming of functionalist definitions is that they might exclude short forms insofar as their deployment is dissociated from a specific function. In other words, "shortness" may risk losing its claim to be defined as such if it is not analysed and inscribed into a narrative concerning what it has been deployed to achieve. Different functionalist approaches may clash by virtue of their differing focus, resulting in kaleidoscopic approaches to identical units that sacrifice the transferability of a sweeping definition that stands the test of individual study (one short form may be argued to be articulated as such synecdochally by a given person, whereas another might look at it in terms of how it deploys silence and absence to achieve a particular effect).

# CONTRASTIVE FORMALISM

Shortness is the quality to be associated with the cultural units, be them discrete or otherwise, whose dimensions and/or extension in spatiotemporal terms are contrastively less if compared to the more widespread, standardised, or culturally influential length of cultural units of the same nature.

## examples

The short story (as opposed to the novel), the short film (as opposed to the feature film) ...

## notes

This definition only works contrastively, and therefore runs the risk of leaving out new forms of cultural communication that emerged as inherently short and without a clear tradition of length that they might be argued to oppose (e.g., the tweet, the TikTok video...). It may also be argued to potentially exclude complementary short-long units that have historically existed in symbiotic terms (e.g., the song and the album, the article and the journal, the TV episode and the TV series...) by placing the cultural importance of the long form at the heart of the short form's definition. Lastly, it responds to a tension between "short" and "long" in terms of relative cultural weight, and by deeming such a tension definitional of what it means for a cultural unit to be short, might be claimed to also frame it in a way that could be deemed reductive or undesirable.