Fiction and Nonfiction: Is It Real or Make-Believe?

Fiction is writing based on imagination. Short stories, novels, Stephen King movies, and science fiction TV shows are fiction because someone made them up out of her imagination. A dead giveaway that something's fiction is that it has things you don't find in everyday life—like leprechauns, superheroes, vampires, and spaceships.


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Nonfiction is based on a "true story"—something that really happened: a biography about Thomas Jefferson, Dennis Rodman's autobiography, essays you write for your history class, newspaper articles, diaries of pioneer women, Martin Luther King's speeches, the 6 o'clock news—even a Betty Crocker cookbook is nonfiction.

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We can learn a lot about American history and culture from fiction as well as nonfiction. We can learn how pioneer women in the West wanted schools for their children from their diaries (nonfiction) and we can learn about how the Puritans had to live their lives according to very strict rules from a short story (fiction) by Nathanial Hawthorne.

Sometimes it's easy to tell the difference between fiction and nonfiction. When Superman saves the earth yet again, it's definitely fiction. But what if Ernest Hemingway exaggerated a little bit in his memoir? And sometimes a short story is largely based on the writer's personal experience. Fiction or nonfiction? A lot of times, there's a thin line between the two. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is nonfiction, yet when Spike Lee makes a movie of it, he fictionalizes it somewhat. The movie, starring Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, should not be mistaken for a documentary of real black and white footage from Malcolm X's life. The movie *Malcolm X* is fiction (though based on fact) and the autobiography and the documentaries are nonfiction.

Poetry: Is It Fiction or Nonfiction?

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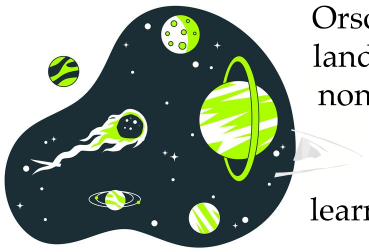
Poetry is usually in a category by itself, but a lot of poetry is based on real life. The poem "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow tells the famous story from American history about how Paul Revere warned the sleeping revolutionaries that the British were coming. Longfellow uses some fiction in the poetry and describes the event differently from how it happened.

In her poem, "The Colonel," Carolyn Forché writes about eating dinner with a leader of a Latin American country and how in anger, he took a bag of severed human ears and spilled them onto the table in front of her. She wrote about it, and though she uses poetic language, her story is nonfiction—it really happened to her.

Why does it matter if a story is fiction or nonfiction? When fiction pretends to be nonfiction it can be very misleading. In 1929, Orson Wells did a radio show about Martians landing on the Earth. Many people thought it was nonfiction and were panicked that Martians were attacking. It's good to know whether something is fiction or nonfiction, but we can learn from and be entertained by both.



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Common Literary Elements: The Ingredients of Literature

Literature has certain common ingredients that make a story, poem, or drama interesting to read. These common ingredients are called *literary elements*. Not all of these elements appear in every genre. Knowing the terms will help you to discuss the forms of genre in the selections of American literature in this unit.

Narrator: The **narrator** is the speaker in a literary work and may be a main **character**, minor character, or someone not involved in the story. The writer's choice of narrator helps to determine the point of view of the literary work. Depending upon how the story is told, there will be either a **first-person narrator** or a **third-person narrator**.

Point of View: The point of view is the perspective from which the story is told. There are three commonly used points of view: first-person, omniscient third-person, and limited third-person. In the *first-person point of view*, the narrator is a character or observer in the story and speaks in the first-person using *I* or *we*. (Example: I want to forget the day I met Jim.) There are two kinds of third-person points of view, omniscient and limited, and the narrators speaks in the third-person using *he*, *she*, or *they*. With the omniscient *third-person point of view*, the narrator knows everything that is happening in the story and tells what each character thinks and feels. (Example: They were truly in love, and whatever compliment she gave him he cherished.) In the *limited third-person point of view*, the narrator knows and tells about only one character's thoughts and feelings, and everything is viewed from that character's perspective. (Example: Shelby walked through the hospital and checked on her patients; she was especially eager to check on the progress of the young child that had just been admitted that day.)

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Theme: The **theme** is the main idea of the story. It is the message or central idea that the writer hopes to convey to the reader. Some themes addressed in literature are about love, loneliness, courage,

grief, and greed. In a story, poem, or play, the theme is usually not directly stated. In an essay, the theme is often directly stated in the thesis statement.

Mood: The **mood** is the feeling or atmosphere that a writer creates. The writer can suggest the mood by the physical **setting**, the events, or by the choice of words. The mood may be spooky, lighthearted, or even whimsical.

Tone: The **tone** of a literary work is the writer's attitude toward the subject, characters, or audience. The writer's tone may be sarcastic, pompous, playful, happy, personal, formal, informal, friendly, or distant.

Irony: Irony is a contradiction or the difference in how something appears and what is really true. In *verbal irony*, there's a difference between what characters say and what they mean. In *dramatic irony*, there a difference between what a character thinks and what the reader knows to be true (because the reader knows more about the situation than the character). In *irony of the situation*, there's a difference between what the reader expects to happen and what really happens.


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Dialect: Dialect is the different ways of speaking by people in a particular region or group. Dialects differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. *Examples:* accent and pronunciation—"Ah'm sleepy"; vocabulary—"That varmint got away"; expressions—"He thinks he's all that" ; and grammatical constructions—"I ain't about to help." Writers use dialect to make characters seem real.

Universal Themes: True Then and True Now

The *theme* of a piece of literature is an idea the writer hopes to communicate to you. A universal theme is an idea that is true in any country and at any time in history. A universal theme is something that was true in Roman Gladiator days and was still true in the Wild West. A universal theme is something the Chinese in the Tang Dynasty share even today with a student in any American high school. The power of love is a universal theme, as is choosing between right and wrong. Having to deal with nature's power is a universal theme as well.

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Think of some other universal themes. Consider fairy tales, fables or even movies from other cultures to see if there's anything familiar there that could be a universal theme.

Read the following two selections: the first is an excerpt from Patrick Henry's "Speech in the Virginia Convention" in 1775, and the second is a poem entitled "If We Must Die," written by Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay in 1919.

Speech in the Virginia Convention by Patrick Henry

Gentlemen may cry, "Peace! Peace!"—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!

The New World and the Age of Exploration: Discovering New Teachings

The land we now call North America was inhabited long before Europeans ever "discovered" it. Over three hundred different tribes of Native peoples lived here. Different tribes spoke different languages from each other and had completely different ways of living, depending on their environment—but they did share a common respect for nature. They felt themselves to be a part of nature, not conquerors of nature. This is reflected in the stories and teachings the Winnebago, an Algonkian people, passed down orally through the generations.

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The Beginning: Recorded by Word of Mouth

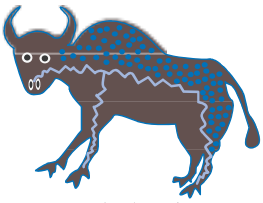
Though they didn't write their stories down in the way we're familiar with, the native peoples of America still had a literature. What we call literature doesn't just include books and poems—it can include oral stories, performances, and songs passed down through the generations. (Recently we've even begun to include film under the name "Literature." Who knows, maybe one day in the future computer adventure games will be called "Great Literature.")

American literature does not have to be written in English. The term American literature can include a poem written in the Winnebago language (of an Algonkian people) hundreds of years ago or a poem writgigigigigigigg
was written in the Winnebago language and translated into English.

> Pleasant it looked,
> this newly created world.
> Along the entire length and breadth
> of the earth, our grandmother,
> extended the green reflection
> of her covering
> and the escaping odors
> were pleasant to inhale.

When the Europeans arrived on the continent they later named "America," they thought the Native Americans were barbaric savages. We now know through oral tales and songs handed down from one

generation to the next that the Native Americans worked hard, taught their children right from wrong, and respected the earth—hardly the behavior of savages. They believed they should live in harmony with nature—that we're a part of nature, not masters over the universe. The native Americans had a special bond with the earth and all living things—even the animals they killed to eat, they respected as sacred. Read the following song, which tells about Native American tribe values.



ancient Indian bison drawing

Teacher will provide copy of

Song Addressed to a New Chief

From *Music of Acoma, Isleta, and Zuni Pueblos*
by Francis Densmore

See how rain is mentioned a couple of times? It's described as "life-giving" and the new chief, in return for the gift of rain, must love the earth and sky. This song is part of a Pueblo ritual, a sacred ceremony that honors the Pueblo gods.

The Native Americans saw their gods in nature. The European explorers (both Protestant and Catholic) believed anyone who wasn't a Christian was damned. It was a Christian's duty to persuade "pagans" to convert. This helped the Christians to justify killing and enslaving Native Americans.

Since the Christians had no moral dilemma with killing and enslaving Native Americans, then of course they had no problem taking their land, either. When they realized there was wealth in the "new world," European kings sent over their explorers. Read this passage below from Christopher Columbus' log, translated by Robert H. Fuson. It shows the European motives and love of adventure.

Teacher will provide copy of

The Log of Christopher Columbus

by Robert H. Fuson

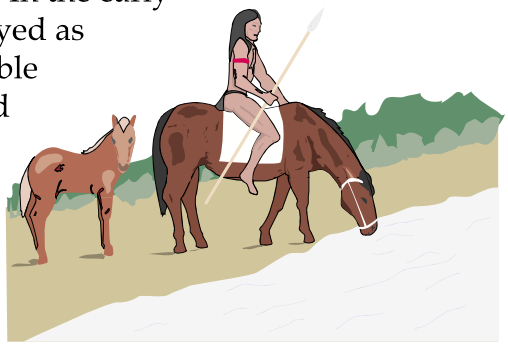
1. San Salvador: the name that Columbus gave the island he first landed on; it means *Holy Savior* in Spanish

So, to his credit, it does seem as if Columbus was certainly interested in the people, and at least appreciated their friendliness. Still, he feels the need to convert them to his own religion, and he's willing to do it by force if he has to do so. Though he's interested in the natives, he sees them as savage curiosities and casually observes that they'd make excellent potential slaves.

Does this seem different from the Pueblo song? In the song, the new chief is told he must love the land and give thanks for the rain—meanwhile, Columbus's first act is to take *possession* of the island.

Two Cultures Come Together: Alike Yet Different

How would you feel if you had been kicked out of your country, traveled across the ocean and set foot in a land you knew nothing about? How would you feel if you had lived in peace with nature and all of sudden there are these new people who want to try to control nature and convert you to their religion? Sometimes, if we imagine how we would feel having the same experience, it can help us from stereotyping. Stereotypes are preconceived ideas about what a group of people is like, often based on movies or books—and not necessarily based on history. It's easy to look at groups of people as either good or bad. In the early movies, Native Americans were portrayed as bloodthirsty and warlike or else as "noble savages." White settlers were portrayed as moral and adventurous. Lately, Native Americans have been portrayed a little more positively in the movies.



The clash between Native American culture and European-influenced modern American culture is still around. Here is an example of a modern poem by Mary TallMountain, a native of Alaska. Look for the clash between nature and modern culture.

The teacher will provide a copy of

The Last Wolf

by Mary TallMountain