

Allusion



DEFINITION

What is an allusion? Here's a quick and simple definition:

In literature, an allusion is an unexplained reference to someone or something outside of the text. Writers commonly allude to other literary works, famous individuals, historical events, or philosophical ideas, and they do so in order to layer associations and meanings from these sources onto their own work. Allusions can also occur in media other than literature, such as film, visual arts, or even casual conversation. If you've ever responded to betrayal with a dramatic cry of "Et tu, Brute?" ("You too, Brutus?"), then you've made an allusion—to a famous line from Shakespeare's [Julius Caesar](#).

Some additional key details about allusions:

- Allusions can be direct or indirect, meaning that they might explicitly state the name of the thing they're referring to, or they might hint at it in other, subtler ways.
- Allusions to other works of literature are often harder to identify and understand than allusions to events or people, since they require a reader to have familiarity with the text being referenced.
- Many phrases used in everyday speech are actually allusions to works of literature. For example, the use of "catch 22" to describe a situation with no good outcome alludes to Joseph Heller's [Catch-22](#). To use "Cassandra" to refer to someone who correctly predicts a bad outcome alludes to Aeschylus's *The Orestia*. And using "big brother" to refer to governmental surveillance alludes to George Orwell's [1984](#).

Allusion Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce allusion: uh-**loo**-zhun

Understanding Allusions

Imagine if every time someone used the expression "it was a real Cinderella story," they had to retell the entire story of Cinderella to explain exactly what they meant. By using an allusion to a classic fairytale that a majority of people will already know, a speaker can dramatically shorten what could have been a much lengthier explanation. However, in order for an allusion to achieve its intended effect, the person making the allusion needs to make accurate assumptions about what knowledge their audience already has. A few key things factor into whether someone will or won't catch an allusion included by a writer:

- **Cultural or historical familiarity:** A reader's ability to understand a given allusion depends strongly on their cultural background. For this reason, it can be particularly difficult to identify and understand allusions in texts that are from different historical periods or other cultures. So an allusion that would have been easy to understand for readers who lived two-hundred years ago in China may be exceedingly difficult for a modern American reader to grasp without the help of an editor's footnote.
- **General knowledge:** Take the following scene from *The Sopranos* as an example. In the 28th episode of the HBO series *The Sopranos*, there's a scene in which Tony Soprano eats a slice of capicola (a type of salami), and the taste of it induces a flashback to a panic attack he had in early childhood. It's a direct allusion to a famous passage from Marcel Proust's canonical book *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the taste of a *madeleine* (a type of French tea cookie) sends the narrator down a rabbit hole of early childhood memories.
- **Subtlety of the allusion:** Even readers who might have the cultural or general knowledge to catch an allusion might not always catch it, based on how subtle the allusion is. The example from *The Sopranos*, for instance, never explicitly refers to *In Search of Lost Time*. Rather, it just echoes events from that other work of art, and it doesn't even do so with the same good (it uses capicola rather than a *madeleine*). Even someone who knows *In Search of Lost Time* might have missed this allusion.

In the example above, the scene would still make perfect sense to anyone unfamiliar with Proust's madeleines. But to those "in the know," the fact that this scene parallels such an important moment in French literature has the effect of elevating Tony Soprano to equivalence with distinguished literary figures and heightening the resonance of the flashback.

How Are Allusions and References Different?

There's a lot of confusion, particularly online, about what kinds of references count as allusions, and which are merely references. There are two different ways that people draw a distinction between allusions and references:

- **Allusions must be indirect while references are direct.** This school of thought holds that an allusion can only be an allusion if it is indirect, in the sense that what is being alluded to is not explicitly named. So people who believe this would say that the example "it was a real Cinderella story" that we gave above shouldn't count as an allusion because it names the thing it's referencing directly. Under this definition, for the previous statement to be an allusion it would have to be something like: "It was a glass-slipper ending" (a reference to Cinderella that doesn't explicitly use the main character's name).

- **Allusions must not be further explained.** This second position holds that it doesn't matter if an allusion is direct or indirect, but rather that an allusion is only an allusion if it's not followed by further explanation that tries to make the allusion's meaning or source clear to the reader.

While either definition of an allusion is valid and defensible, we tend to lean toward the second interpretation because in some cases the line between whether an allusion has been provided in a way that is direct or indirect can be so subtle that it's actually difficult to tell if it's indirect or not. For that reason, it seems simpler and easier to just go with the second definition.

Intertextual and Autobiographical Allusions

Allusions can be made to all sorts of things: history, sports, pop culture, and so on. There are two types of allusions that can be more difficult for readers to notice than other kinds, simply because these allusions require that the reader have more specialized knowledge in order to be able to spot them. These two types of allusions are intertextual allusions and autobiographical allusions.

Intertextual Allusions

Intertextual allusions—that is, allusions to other texts—are often more difficult to identify and understand than allusions to historical events or popular culture, because intertextual allusions require a knowledge of other works of literature. A writer may use intertextual allusion to invoke a character or plot that they see as having relevance to their own work. Intertextual allusion can also be a tool for writers who want to put their work in dialogue with a particular literary tradition, or signal who their influences are without stating them explicitly.

For example, in his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T.S. Eliot makes an intertextual allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Prufrock, the narrator of Eliot's poem, speaks at length about his own emotional paralysis, but in this passage he makes a decisive shift and declares himself to be different from Hamlet, who is a famously conflicted and indecisive character. Prufrock then compares himself to one of the play's "attendant lords," who are presented as figures with seriousness and a sense of purpose.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince...

Autobiographical Allusions

Autobiographical allusions, or allusions to events in the life of an author, may go over the heads of all but the most familiar readers—such as the author's friends and family—but they can add a deeply personal dimension to the text. For example, in "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison," a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet

makes indirect reference to an injury that prevented him from joining his friends on a hiking trip. To readers unfamiliar with Coleridge's injury, it may be unclear why he compares a shady spot under a lime tree to a prison.

Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity!

In addition, though Coleridge addresses his friend "Charles" by only his first name, he is alluding to Charles Lamb, a famous English essayist. Readers likely would have made the connection from the name alone (if Matt Damon wrote a poem referring to "Ben," you'd probably guess that it was Ben Affleck, since they're notoriously close friends), but Coleridge underscores the allusion by referring to the "great City"—Lamb spent much of his life living in London.

Allusion vs. Similar Terms

Allusion is similar to several other literary devices that link a text with an external person or thing. For that reason, it's worthwhile to understand what makes each device unique. Here are three devices that are similar to allusion:

- **Citation:** Quoting a relevant author or source by name.
- **Parody:** Imitating an author or style with the intent to ridicule.
- **Pastiche:** Imitating an author or style with the intent to celebrate.

Though citation, like allusion, links the author's work with an external text, the reference is not indirect. In citation, unlike in allusion, the name of the author or source of the reference must be explicitly mentioned. Further, citations are almost always further explained, meaning that when a writer includes a citation they go on to describe why they've included it and how it relates to what they are writing.

Parody and pastiche are genres of writing that indirectly refer to the the general styles of other writers or genres. Unlike allusions, which generally function by referring to specific events, characters, or sentences or lines from another work, parody and pastiche do not operate so specifically. Instead, parody and pastiche require a thorough imitation of an author's tone, plot, or diction—as opposed to a simple reference to just a word or phrase, as in allusion.

Other Devices Used in Making Allusions

Sometimes, other literary devices are used in the process of making an allusion. For that reason, these devices are closely linked to allusion, though they are not the same thing. Below are some literary devices that are often—though not always—used when making an allusion.

- **An epithet** is a word or phrase that describes an important characteristic of someone or something and is often used in the place of a name (e.g., calling Abraham Lincoln "Honest Abe" or "The Great Emancipator"). Because epithets can be used to refer to people or things without naming them directly, they can be a helpful tool for making allusions. For example, if a writer described a character as "The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up," readers might understand that the writer is making an allusion to the character of Peter Pan by using a widely-recognized epithet instead of naming him directly.
- **Euphemism** is the use of a polite or indirect word in the place of a harsh, improper, or explicit term when referring to something troubling, uncomfortable, or offensive. The indirect nature of euphemism makes it a helpful tool in making a subtle allusion to something uncomfortable. For example, in one of the examples below, a character uses the term "big bang" as a euphemism for the atomic bomb. This euphemism is one of the passage's key clues to the reader that the writer is alluding to the Second World War.



EXAMPLES

The use of allusion is widespread—in literature, in other disciplines, and even in conversation—because it is an effective way of establishing a relationship between different ideas, time periods, or works of art.

Allusion in Literature

Because most writers are active readers, many works of literature are full of allusions to other texts. Allusions to current events and major political developments are also quite common in poetry, prose, and drama.

Allusion in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In this example from Act 3, Scene 4 of Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), Prince Hamlet **alludes** to several of the Greek and Roman gods while describing a portrait of his late father.

See what a grade was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's curls, the front of **Jove** himself,
 An eye like **Mars'** to threaten and command ...

Instead of describing his father's appearance and personality outright, Hamlet uses allusion to communicate more poetically: his father has the god Hyperion's curly hair, the strong forehead of Jove (also known as Jupiter or Zeus), and the commanding presence of Mars, the god of war. As Shakespeare's audience would have been familiar with the physical appearance of these gods (as depicted in paintings), as well as their backstories, these allusions invoke a whole range of images, stories, and historical periods (the Greek and Roman empires, most notably). These allusions add to the descriptive power

of the passage, and they also make Hamlet's father seem powerful and noble by describing him as a composite of several major deities, and associating him with a lineage of historical power.

Allusion in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

In John Osborne's 1957 play [Look Back in Anger](#), the character Jimmy alludes to the Second World War in order to contrast his generation's perceived lack of purpose with the sacrifice and duty his parents' generation demonstrated in fighting the spread of fascism in Europe.

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you.

Note that Osborne never mentions the war outright. Instead, the audience is expected to piece together the subject of the allusion from contextual clues, such as the reference to dying for a good cause, or the "thirties and forties." In addition, Osborne also alludes to the line "brave new world," which Miranda says in Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#) when she first encounters other people after her lifetime of growing up alone with her father on their island. (The title of the novel [Brave New World](#) also alludes to Miranda's lines.) Here Jimmy alludes to Miranda's lines in order to invoke the idea of a Brave New World—some miraculous possible place full of noble ideas—and then deny any such thing exists for him. Jimmy is saying that he has been forced to live in a world without any big noble ideas or bright hope for a future, and so his words "Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you" alludes to the idea of those bright ideals and future in order to deny them.

Allusion in Speeches

Allusion is a powerful tool for speechwriters, because the device creates a sense of community between the speaker and their audience. Many of the most persuasive speeches make listeners feel that they have shared experience with a speaker, who seems to be speaking "their language."

Allusion in the Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

As Martin Luther King, Jr. began to deliver his ["I Have a Dream" speech](#) in front of a massive audience at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., he made an allusion to Abraham Lincoln.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation. **Five score years ago** a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Rather than mention Abraham Lincoln by name, King alludes to him by imitating the opening of the historic "Gettysburg Address" ("Four score and seven years ago..."). Through this use of allusion, King establishes a link between his vision of liberty and Lincoln's, and he suggests that he and his fellow Americans are taking a step that is connected to and as equally historic as Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

Allusion in Barack Obama's Second Inaugural Address

In his Second Inaugural Address, president Barack Obama fostered a sense of community and inclusiveness by alluding to important moments in the history of American civil rights.

We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still, just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall, just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone, to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth.

President Obama's speech begins with an allusion to some of the most memorable passages from the Constitution ("We, the people, of the United States of America") and the Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident"). The speech then goes on to refer to Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall—an [alliterative](#) list of major moments in the history of American civil rights movements for woman, African Americans, and gay rights. By referring to these historic moments without explicitly describing what they achieved, the president suggests that the activists' achievements are widely known among Americans, which is itself a marker of success. Finally, Obama refers to Martin Luther King by calling him "a preacher" and "a king," punning on King's name. With this series of allusions, Obama implicitly likens his historical moment to other moments of social progress in America.

Allusion in Film and Television

Directors and screenwriters often incorporate allusions to other films in their work, particularly if they want to subtly acknowledge the films that inspired them. Since film is a multimedia form, allusions in film can be visual (as in architecture), verbal (as in literature), or even *musical*, as seen below.

Allusion in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*

In an iconic [scene](#) from John Hughes's film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Cameron drops his father's priceless Ferrari off at a parking garage in Chicago. Unbeknownst to Cameron, the valet promptly takes the Ferrari for a joy ride. As the Ferrari speeds down a hilly street, it takes flight to the tune of the Star Wars theme—a musical allusion to George Lucas's groundbreaking series of science fiction films. John

Hughes gets a lot of mileage (so to speak) out of this allusion. It nods to his love of George Lucas, it heightens the sense of the valet's childish glee, and it enhances the scene's humor, since the triumphant theme is at odds with the horror that Cameron would feel if he knew what was happening to his dad's car.

Allusion in *500 Days of Summer*

In this [scene](#) from *500 Days of Summer*, the film's lovestruck protagonist plays a game of chess against Cupid. Unlike the rest of the film, this scene is shot in black and white and uses an aged film effect. The style and content of the scene make it a not-so-subtle allusion to Ingmar Bergman's classic film, *The Seventh Seal*, in which a knight plays a game of chess against Death. This nod to a classic film not only introduces an element of melodrama at a point in the film in which the protagonist is suffering from heartbreak, but it also puts the film in direct dialogue with the work of a distinguished and revered filmmaker.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers or speakers may use allusions for a wide variety of reasons:

- To create a sense of cultural kinship between storyteller and listener, since those who pick up on allusions have a sense of being "in the know."
- To efficiently convey big ideas, or refer to stories that would take too long to explain.
- To deepen and enrich the meaning of a text by adding a layer that may not be obvious to all readers.
- To add dimension to a work by relating it to other texts.
- To invite readers to reflect on the similarities between their own lives and the lives of authors or characters being alluded to.
- To place their work in dialogue with the work of those who influenced them.
- To demonstrate their own cultural literacy, or test that of their readers or listeners.

However, when a writer makes use of allusion too frequently, or without making accurate assumptions about whether their audience will understand, it can have the negative effect of alienating readers, or making the writer seem like a show-off.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Allusion](#): a somewhat threadbare and also jargon-y entry on allusion, but it has some good examples.
- [The Wikipedia Page on Intertextuality](#): Though the discussion can be full of jargon at points, the page provides an overview of the tools authors use to "link" their texts with other works. It also

discusses some of the theoretical concerns that allusions raise (e.g., what happens when readers fail to notice an allusion).

- [The Merriam-Webster definition of allusion](#): includes a note on the term's etymology, along with discussion of its relationship to a similar sounding term, illusion.
- [Chungdahm Learning's "What is Allusion?" Video](#): a fun animated video on the definition and uses of allusion.
- [Paste Magazine's List of Movies that Pay Tribute to Other Movies](#): While Paste doesn't use the word "allusion" outright, that's what they're talking about—each of the movies on the list makes a visual, verbal, or musical allusion to another classic movie, and Paste magazine explains it.

HOW TO CITE

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