

Allusion

... in prose and poetry



An **allusion** is a literary device that stimulates ideas, associations, and extra information in the reader's mind *with only a word or two*. Allusion means 'reference'. It relies on the reader being able to understand the allusion and being familiar with all of the meaning hidden behind the words.

Here's an example:

"As the cave's roof collapsed, he was swallowed up in the dust like Jonah, and only his frantic scrabbling behind a wall of rock indicated that there was anyone still alive".

The **allusion** in the sentence above is to Jonah. The reader is expected to recognize the **reference** to Jonah and the whale, which should evoke an image of being 'swallowed alive' ... in this case, behind a wall of dust and rock.

Allusions in writing help the reader to visualize what's happening by evoking a mental picture. But the reader *must be aware of the allusion* and *must be familiar with what it alludes to*.

Allusions are commonly made to the Bible, nursery rhymes, myths, famous fictional or historical characters or events, and Shakespeare. They can be used in prose and poetry. Here are some more prose examples:

"Christy didn't like to spend money. She was no Scrooge, but she seldom purchased anything except the bare necessities".

Did you spot the allusion to Scrooge? That name should bring to mind an image of someone who 'pinches pennies' and hoards money with a passion. But the allusion only works if the reader is familiar with Charles Dickens' story 'A Christmas Carol'.

Here's an example from Herman Melville's 'Moby Dick':

"Well," said the Lieutenant, who had listened with amused interest to all this, and now waxing merry with his tipple; "Well, blessed are the peacemakers, especially the fighting peacemakers! "

In this case the allusion is a Biblical reference to the Beatitudes ... 'Blessed are the peacemakers ...'.

Here's another Biblical allusion:

"He was a remarkable Prime Minister with feet of clay".

The reference here is to Daniel 2: 31-45, using the words 'feet of clay', which suggests the Prime Minister has roots with common people, with weaknesses just like all others.

Here's one more Biblical allusion:

"Like the prodigal son, he returned to his home town and was welcomed by all who knew him".

In order to fully appreciate the allusion to the prodigal son, the reader must be familiar with that story in Luke 15: 11-32.

In general, the use of allusions by an author shows an expectation that the reader is familiar with the references made, otherwise the effect is lost. A piece of writing with many allusions (some of which may be very obscure) will be very rich with evoked images, but will do nothing for a reader who is not well-read.

See if you can spot the allusions in this paragraph:

"Marty's presence at the dance was definitely a 'Catch 22' situation; if he talked to Cindy she'd be mad at him, but if he ignored her there'd be hell to pay. His anger bubbled to the surface. He realized that by coming to the dance he had brought his problems with him like a Trojan Horse, and he could only hope he would be able to keep them bottled up".

The first allusion is to the novel 'Catch 22' by Joseph Heller; this should suggest a situation where there is a problem with no right answer ... whatever you do will be wrong. If you have read Heller's novel, you know exactly how Marty is feeling!

The second reference is to the Trojan Horse from Virgil's Aeneid, which chronicles the Greeks conquering Troy by giving a gift of a horse to their enemies and filling the belly of the horse with warriors. A vivid image ... if you recognize it.

There is also a reference to 'hell', which evokes images from the Bible of something definitely unpleasant. Finally, there is a very subtle reference to 'bottling up' problems, which might suggest an image of tightly containing something, although there is no direct connection to anything.

You should now have a good understanding of how allusion works. Let's see if you've really got it. Below you will find some characters and descriptions which might be referred to when writing something. Have a look:

- **Hamlet** was a character from Shakespeare who had a difficulty making a decision.
- **Falstaff** was another of Shakespeare's characters who was a large jovial man with a keen wit.
- The **Three Stooges** were a comedy team of not-too-bright buffoons.
- **Benedict Arnold** was an American traitor.
- The '**cowardly lion**' from the Wizard of Oz was a coward.
- **Judas** betrayed Jesus.
- **Mother Teresa** was a nun who selflessly devoted her life to caring for the poor and sick.
- **Don Quixote** was a fictional hero; a dreamer who was always going on quests to try to accomplish impossible tasks.

Your assignment is to write a few sentences or a short paragraph (or poem) that contain an allusion to one of the characters above, or to someone or something else you choose. Enter the paragraph below and we'll post the best entries [here](#) for others to read.

The cinnamon rolls were huge and golden brown, reminiscent of the **twisted buns on the sides of Princess Leia's head**.

Tracy, teaching candidate at the University of La Verne

The romance between that man and I was no **Romeo and Juliet**, but we will sacrifice for each other in any situation.

Hieu Nguyen, in Grade 9

His life is a **Horatio Alger story**.

Harsh Gupta, in Grade 7 at Hayfield School

My brother tricked me and ran just like **Road Runner**.

Chris H. in Grade 7 at Lufkin Road Middle School

"I am afraid of spiders, but **I'm no cowardly lion!**"

from Emily in Grade 6 at Worsley School.

"The day was young and I was looking forward to the afternoon. I was suppose to go out on a date, but my plans were changed. All my sibilings were gone, but I had been in the house **slaving like Cinderella**, scrubbing the floors on my hand and knees, washing clothes and dishes and making everyones' beds".

from Crystal B. in Grade 11 at Oakland high

It has been very difficult for me to land the job of my dreams to become a teacher. Sometimes I feel like I have a huge stamp on my forehead the says '**Don Quixote**'. I won't let the job hunt defeat me, because one day I want to be known as the **Mother Teresa of education**.

Luequita Oliver, graduate student at Cambridge College

The family of three sat there **like the three bears eating their porridge**.

Arielle Avant in Grade 9 at Cheyenne Mountain H. S.

My friends and I were **the real three stooges** at Jelly Beans because we were horsing around and pushing and shoving each other.

Nick in Grade 7 at Lufkin Road Middle School

He ran down the alley as the many shadows stalked him. Forced to turn a corner, he found himself faced with more horrors. No amount of **Falstaff wit** could save him now.

Nick L. in Grade 7 at Lufkin Road Middle School

"Casual and confident, the Foremost High team started the game **that was to prove their Waterloo**".

from Tashena C. in Grade 11 at Foremost H.S.

"As I watched my mother sitting beside Uncle Aaron, a fresh pang of hurt stabbed my heart, and I remembered once again **how Hamlet must've felt...**"

Michelle, in Grade 8, homeschooling

Allusions

1. He wasn't my type, except that he had the qualities of Midas.
2. He drove like a kamikaze
3. Meeting Joe was unreal; I think I found my Prince Charming.
4. Get off that roof! Who do you think you are—Spiderman?
5. Our home was a little utopia.
6. No matter how hard my mom tries, she is no June Cleaver.
7. After high school, all of my friends moved to California like it was 1849.