

What to Call the Things You Read

In college, you hear people talking about all kinds of texts--poems, plays, essays, articles, biographies, and so on--but you may not be sure what they all are exactly, so I've listed and defined them in very general terms below.

A "**text**" is any piece of writing. It doesn't have to refer to a book. The writing on the back of a cereal box, for example, is a text. So is the writing on the back of a toothpaste tube or a pack of gum.

More broadly speaking, a text is anything that can be "read" or examined. There is, for instance, the text of any social situation, in which we can read the codes for appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Consider the text of the classroom, with the teacher up front and the students sitting in rows, in a windowless, well-lighted room: after reading this "text," what can you determine about the nature of education in this culture?

In talking about written texts we point to two major designations: fiction and non-fiction.

Fiction literally means "falsehood": a fiction is a lie, something feigned or made up. The word comes from fictio a Latin word for "counterfeiting." In modern usage, then, fiction is "imaginative" writing that deals with make-believe people and events. While some fiction, like "Little Red Riding Hood," is clearly make-believe, other fiction, like Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms, seems as if it were about real people and real events. Since this has confused some people (and even caused some readers to sue a writer whom they think has slandered them) almost all works of fiction include a disclaimer that says something like this: "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental." (You see this at the beginning or end of movies too; movies of course are another form of fiction.)

Nonfiction is writing about actual people, experiences, and events. It can be very creative, interesting, and colorful, but it must also be true. By "true" I mean it must have happened in just this way to this person on this date etc. If a story is based on a true story, it cannot be non-fiction. Close doesn't count. To be non-fiction, the story (news story, essay, anecdote, etc.) must as accurate as possible; otherwise, it is a form of fiction.

All fiction and nonfiction is either poetry or prose.

Poetry is usually writing in **verse**, a deliberate arrangement of lines that create certain effects of sound and image through rhythm, rhyme, diction (word choice), syntax (word order), and other devices. Rock songs are a kind of poetry, for example. Not all poems use rhymes, however, and not all have a definite rhythm. But almost all poems make heavy use of images. A familiar poetic image is the poet's comparison of his loved-one to a flower: "Oh my love's like a red, red rose. . . ."

What makes poetry difficult is that it is almost always a compressed or condensed

expression of a thought, event, or experience whose significance is only hinted at. The poet, for example, doesn't just come out and say, "I really like my girlfriend a lot." Instead, he says, "My love is like a red, red rose. . . ."

NOTE: *Virtually all poetry is fiction.*

Prose is everything that isn't poetry. It is "regular" writing. Whereas poetry is usually lyrical (song-like), prose is usually conversational (talk-like); consequently, prose has wider use, since we don't usually sing a history report, for instance, or instructions on how to repair a car.

The Names of Different Texts

Kinds of Fiction

Novels are book-length, prose narratives (tellings) about people and events that are not real, though these make-believe things may seem real. There are many kinds of novels: romance, science fiction, mystery, adventure, horror, fantasy, and novels about every day life.

Short stories, like novels, are prose narratives about make-believe people and events. The difference is that stories are much shorter, usually no longer than 100 pages, and so cannot cover as wide a territory as novels. Short stories, then, often deal with shorter periods of time, fewer people, and fewer events than do novels. A book of short stories is not called a novel, even though it's a book of fiction. It is called, instead, a short story collection.

Plays are dramatic stories written either in verse (poetry) or prose. They are dramatic because they are made for the theater, where people act out (dramatize) the parts of the characters. All this acting demands speaking as well, so plays are distinguished by dialogue, conversations between characters. While some plays are based on actual people and events, all plays are necessarily fictitious since no one can re-create exactly what was said and done in the past.

Poetry is a kind of fiction because it is writing that does not worry about telling things as they actually are. Instead, the poet transforms reality to suit his or her poetic needs: it is more imaginative than factual. Poetry can be narrative (it tells a story) or dramatic (to be acted out), as well as lyrical (song-like or musical).

POETRY

Poetry is the oldest form of verbal art. In its most basic form, a poem is a song. The first songs were probably either prayerful or celebratory. Imagine a tribe of prehistoric people chanting to their gods for rain and food and heat, then later singing thanks for what they believe their gods have given them. When one of their loved-ones died, such peoples no doubt sang both in grief and in prayer.

We still have songs--poetry--that serve similar functions. A **hymn**, for example, is a poem that expresses religious emotion. An **elegy** is a poem that mourns the death of a person. And an **ode** is a poem of celebration. It is important to note that poetry was almost always accompanied by music; and a great deal of poetry today still is. All popular songs, whether rock or soul or jazz or

folk, are one form or another of poetry, for example. We should never lose sight of poetry's musical background, because almost all poems are still song-like in that they have a certain beat or cadence or underlying rhythm. The beat of songs two thousand years ago, say, was no less important than the beat of songs today, because their songs, like ours, were often accompanied by a dance (usually as part of a ceremony). There are three major kinds of poetry: lyric, dramatic, and narrative.

Lyric Poetry

In ancient Greece, poems were accompanied by a stringed instrument called the lyre (like a hand-held harp); hence, a poem or song became known as "lyrical," and eventually this kind of poetry--a personal expression of emotion sung by a single performer--became known as the **lyric**. The most common kind of poetry, the lyric is usually short and often more song-like than not. All popular music is lyric poetry; so is the verse on greeting cards, and the jingles on TV commercials.

Narrative Poetry

Unlike the lyric, which tells of an emotion or thought or condition, **narrative** poetry tells a story. Homer's The Iliad, about the Greeks' war with the Trojans Helen, is one of the oldest narrative poems we know. Narrative poetry is of a much greater length than lyric poetry, since it tells of many people and events. Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is a well-known example of narrative poetry; it features about twenty stories told in verse (mostly heroic couplets), each story told by a different character, as a group of pilgrims rides to Canterbury. Narrative poetry has grown quite popular in recent years, perhaps because it seems easy to write. In fact, some readers and critics have complained that much modern narrative verse, like much free verse, is no more than prose written out to look like poetry.

Dramatic poetry, like narrative poetry, tells a story, only it is acted out in scenes written for the theater. Shakespeare is considered the best dramatic poet of the English language. He wrote **blank verse**, unrhymed iambic pentameter. From the earliest days of English drama, circa 900 (and even from Greek and Roman times), until only about a hundred and fifty ago, almost all plays were written in verse. Prose dramas are a recent development.

In fact, for the longest time, prose was considered much inferior poetry. Prose was the language of business only, while poetry was the language of God, or as close as human speech could come to godly utterance. Until about 1500, all the writing we now call "creative" was poetry: stories, like plays, were written in verse.

PROSE

Kinds of Nonfiction

Essay: an extended discussion or treatment of a topic, often with an emphasis on the writer's own perspective and experience.

academic: essays that focus on a particular discipline (e.g., history, sociology) and usually are persuasive, supported by considerable research.

popular: these are usually short, informative discussions of a topic of general interest—like baseball or barbecue—and are often found in magazines and newspapers.

literary: the literary essay usually pursues an idea, often contains personal reflection by the writer, and is less direct than popular essays. By "less direct" I mean that literary fiction may be

poetic, may be more suggestive than argumentative, more ruminative than persuasive. In your course materials, you will find several examples of literary essays by the Communication faculty.

Journalism: we will discuss these types when we study journalism

- news
- feature stories
- profiles
- editorials
- columns

Reports: written on behalf of state, local, or federal government, agencies, institutions, or businesses, reports often feature data from polls, studies, surveys, focus groups, etc.

Descriptive: these are reportorial, simply outlining or explaining the subject at hand. For example, a descriptive report of college fashion trends would list the types of clothes students wear, the preferences they show for certain shoes, hats, etc. But it would make no attempt to understand these.

Analytical: explores how and why things work or operate as they do. More specifically, analysis is about taking something apart in order to understand what it contains, how it works, and how it relates to other things. Ultimately, analysis seeks to answer the question, So what? College students like to listen to hip-hop music. So what does that mean?

Blogs: are online journals that can range from diariesque confessionals (e.g., “My life as a slut”) to reportorial (e.g., “Politics in the Middle East Today”).

An Addendum on Dictionaries

Dictionaries (from World Book Encyclopedia, Multimedia edition, 1998)

No dictionary records all the words of our language. In fact, no one knows exactly how many English words there are. Besides ordinary words used in everyday speech, the English language includes thousands of geographical names. There are thousands of words that are no longer used. And there are hundreds of thousands of technical terms, including more than 750,000 names of insects alone. New words are coined for new scientific and technical discoveries, and slang words and special vocabularies constantly spring up. As nations draw closer together through trade and travel, satellite communication, and sharing of technology, languages tend to borrow more and more words from each other. That is why dictionary editors must be selective in the words they decide to include.

Most dictionaries tell us much more than just the meanings of words. Many list pronunciations, derivations, prefixes and suffixes, illustrative quotations, synonyms and antonyms, usage notes, and other information.

The word dictionary comes from the medieval Latin word dictionarium, which in turn came from the Latin dictio, meaning word or saying. The ancient Greeks and Romans were the first to produce these works. But most Greek and Latin dictionaries were either lists of rare and difficult words or specialized lists of words.

During the Middle Ages, scholars made much use of Latin dictionaries which explained hard Latin words in easier Latin. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, as Latin began to lose ground to English, French, German, and other national languages of Europe, scholars began to rely on glossaries to understand Latin manuscripts. The glossaries usually gave the meanings of hard Latin words in the words of the national language. As these languages became accepted in each country, people needed new dictionaries to explain the hard words of their own language in terms of simpler words in the same language.

Early English dictionaries. In 1604, Robert Cawdrey, a schoolmaster, prepared the first English dictionary. Called A Table Alphabeticall of Hard Wordes, it defined about 3,000 English words that had been taken from other languages. Larger dictionaries that offered more information about the words they contained were produced in the 1600's. In 1721, Nathan Bailey published a dictionary containing about 60,000 words. This was the first English dictionary that tried to include most English words instead of hard words only.

In the early 1700's, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson, and other literary men of England wanted to prepare a dictionary that would set the standard for good usage in English. French and Italian scholars had already published such prescriptive dictionaries in their languages, and this success influenced the literary men of England.

Samuel Johnson undertook the task of preparing an English dictionary. He spent several years selecting quotations from the best writers to illustrate the meanings of words. He came to the conclusion that language could not be "fixed" or prescribed, only described to the best of one's ability. Johnson finally published his great work, A Dictionary of the English Language, in 1755. With John Walker's Critical and Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language (1791), it served as the standard for information about English words until the mid-1800's.

In 1806, Noah Webster published a small school dictionary in the United States. Webster wanted to set up an American standard of good usage to compare with the British standard set by Johnson and Walker. In his dictionary, Webster simplified many older spellings, such as music for musick. In 1828, Webster published a dictionary containing 70,000 entries. Since then, Webster's dictionaries have been frequently revised and are widely used today.

Modern dictionaries. The period of national dictionaries gave way to scholarly dictionaries in the mid-1800's. In Germany, the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm began work on a historical dictionary of the German language. In France, Emile Littré compiled a dictionary of modern French. In England, John Ogilvie edited a dictionary that later served as the basis of The Century Dictionary. Various current English dictionaries trace their development back to The Century Dictionary.

Probably the greatest scholarly dictionary to appear in any language is A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles. It appeared in parts from 1884 to 1928 and has almost 415,000 entries. In 1933, it was published in 12 volumes, with a one-volume supplement, as the Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.). This dictionary gives a historical record of each word in

written English. No other dictionary in any language approaches the O.E.D. in wealth and authority of historical detail. In 1989, a 20-volume second edition of the O.E.D. was published that integrated the 1928 edition with four supplementary volumes issued between 1972 and 1986. The historical method used to compile the O.E.D. was also used in making A Dictionary of Canadianisms (1967) and the Dictionary of Jamaican English (1967).

Current dictionaries sold in the United States and Canada include Webster's Third New International Dictionary, with about 450,000 entries, the most complete modern American dictionary of the English language. The World Book Dictionary, which is a Thorndike-Barnhart work that consists of more than 225,000 entries, is designed for family use. It was the first dictionary especially designed to be used with a specific encyclopedia. Many dictionary publishers offer basic, intermediate, and high school dictionaries that contain from as few as 18,000 to as many as 100,000 entries. College dictionaries have about 150,000 entries. Some publishers have also adapted dictionaries for computer use.

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