

## Basic Definitions of Writing Forms

Since *Acting on Words* may represent the core text of your course in the writing of prose non-fiction-- specifically forms of academic analysis and argument—you will gain considerably by clarifying from the outset the essential differences between prose non-fiction and other forms. You have likely been asked to write essays for several years now, but can you define what an essay is or describe a little of its history? The following definitions should be of help.

**Prose** is a broad label for all speech or writing that is conversational (rather than patterned into lines or rhythms or verse, like poetry). Prose usually consists of complete sentences, and the lines of written prose run fully across the page. Orderly prose arranges its sentences into clearly unified paragraphs. Prose may be used for non-fiction or for fiction. Your letter or email to a friend is prose, as is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms or Lucy Maude Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*.

While some experimental or alternative prose flouts or plays with the grammar, word order (syntax), and visual presentation of orderly language, learn to control your prose before you depart from the rules and your reader's basic expectations.

**Non-fiction** encompasses the large realm of prose that is not fiction (see "fiction" below). The defining feature of non-fiction prose is its loyalty to actual facts, knowledge, and experience in the world outside the text, as opposed to those aspects invented or creatively amplified. Non-fiction subdivides into numerous categories such as biography, autobiography or memoir, the essay, and any number of works in specialized fields, such as history, psychology, and other disciplines and genres.

Despite its standard definition, should "non-fiction" be accepted at face value as faithfully representing truth? (For one opinion, see "Non-fiction Isn't Fact—Read With Care," *Acting on Words*, 485-86). The supposed clarity of non-fiction as a category of "pure fact" has come under increasing pressure recently through theoretical questions about the powerful influence of personal perspective (subjectivity) on the representation

of raw events, cause-effect relations, and outcomes. A rich person and a poor one, for example, would probably write very different books on the same subject, though both works are non-fiction.

The pervasive influence of the writer's perspective on any set of facts—what is “actual”—is not as simple as determining whether those facts are “true” or “false” (see more on fact and opinion, *Acting on Words*, Chapter 3, 35). The impact of perspective can be as subtle as the *arrangement* of the facts and the presence or absence of *context* for the facts, or the *absence* or *omission* of certain facts. For example, Pierre Trudeau's views about the nature of Canadian society and identity were utterly opposed to those of the Quebec nationalists, though we could say that both were working (at least in some cases) with the same basic facts.

**The essay** takes its name from the French word *essai*, meaning an attempt or an effort toward something. This form of non-fiction writing therefore concentrates on a concerted movement toward meaning, through observation, memory, and reflection, by uniting ethics, emotion, and logic. The essay has about it a connotation of some serious purpose, even when it adopts a stance of humour or frivolity (think of Jonathan Swift's classic “A Modest Proposal” [1729]). Characterized by this seriousness of purpose, the essay is otherwise a broad-ranging form encompassing many variations of length, structure, and method. Chapters 8-12 of *Acting on Words* survey the array of styles.

The term “article” sometimes is used interchangeably with the term “essay.” However, an “article” suggests a piece of writing more specific to a technical field, subject, or market, with less emphasis on any particular literary intention. Journalistic pieces are commonly referred to as articles.

**Fiction** refers to narratives created through the reconstruction of reality, experience, and imagination. (See “Narration” in *Acting on Words*, Chapter 8, “The Personal Essay,” for a fuller definition and discussion.) In some cases, the story may closely resemble events and characters in the world of facts, what most people call “real life.” But if alterations occur in the re-telling, we say the narrative is fictionalized. Whether a real-life story can

be represented in fictional form yet remain faithful to actuality has been publicly debated in North America since the 1966 publication of *In Cold Blood* (see “Creative Non-fiction” below).

Fiction subdivides (rather imperfectly, like most subdivisions) into the broad genres of “literary” (e.g. the novels of Thomas Hardy, Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker) and “popular,” works understood to be shaped to firm market demands. “Popular” includes an abundance of subcategories, such as mystery, horror, speculative, historical romance, etc. The three most common prose fiction lengths (whatever the genre or level of literary aspiration) are the short story, the novella, and the novel (see below). Written fiction drew and draws from oral traditions, and despite our emphasis on writing, not all fiction is expressed in written prose; think of Hollywood films or a community rumour, for example.

**The prose fiction short story** <PARA>in Western culture traces back to oral tales (narratives—long as well as short-- were recited, sometimes in rhymed poetry, in places as remote from each other as Greece and west-coast North America) and early recordings of oral tales, such as those incorporated in the Bible. Scholar Bart Ehrman points out that Christianity (which significantly influenced the shape of prose fiction) sprang from Judaism and that Judaism “was the first ‘religion of the book’ in Western civilization (18). The Torah, incorporated into Christian Bibles as The Old Testament, is believed by some scholars to date back to the Persian period of 539 to 334 BCE. Secular writings in verse also laid groundwork for prose fiction, for example, *The Decameron* (1353 CE), and *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400 CE). In short, the roots of prose fiction are ancient and partly oral. As a formal genre in current mainstream society, however, the short story emerged in the nineteenth century, through the works of writers such as Guy de Maupassant in France, Anton Chekhov in Russia, and Edgar Allen Poe in the United States.</PARA>

<PARA>In contrast to the longer fictional form of the novel (equally related to ancient oral storytelling traditions and early written sources), the short story typically concentrates on one plot line or incident, within a contained time frame, concerning a

limited number of characters. Since the form is so brief, all the elements in a short story resonate with particular meaning. The art of the story, therefore, is one of great clarity, but also one of impressions and suggestions.

The word **novella**, used to mean “tale” in *The Decameron* (1353), came in the nineteenth century to refer to prose fiction narrative midway between the short story and the novel in length. Novellas concentrate on one event or closely related series of events and usually on one character. Subplots, common to most novels, do not appear to any significant extent. Examples of novellas are Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* (1902) and John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937).

**The novel**, loosely understood as an extended fictional prose narrative of at least 50,000 words featuring character, realistic settings and situations, and a unifying plot (though often including subplots), came into prominence in the eighteenth century. Though its roots extend back to prose fictions of ancient times and more recently to works of the Middle Ages and sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the word likely evolved from “novella,” meaning tale in *The Decameron*), it became shaped by the emerging middle classes in the Age of Enlightenment, Baroque and Victorian periods. In other words, it grew up in hand with a general belief in humanism, science, progress, and free enterprise. Novels since the modernist movement beginning a little before the First World War have increasingly departed from the narrative conventions of logic and social outlook that characterized much mainstream fiction of the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

**Creative non-fiction** is a term used in North America (but generally not the UK) for various forms of prose that share the reportorial or essayistic goals of non-fiction while applying some of the narrative techniques of fiction. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), which uses novelistic methods to recount the story of an actual murder case, is often cited as a founder of creative non-fiction, though critics argue that the form easily predates the twentieth century. For an interesting paper on ethical and philosophical questions raised by Truman Capote’s so-called “novel of non-fiction” and the movement of literary journalism it ushered in, see Elliott Parker’s “Capote’s Legacy” at <http://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0101b&L=aejmc&T=0&P=7693>

</PARA></PARA><PARA><KT>**Poetry**</KT>, it is often said, requires a lifetime to be defined and re-defined. Simply speaking, it offers thoughts, feelings, and insights through carefully crafted language that heightens the reader’s awareness of sound and image. Lines of poetry do not run right across the page in the standard form of prose; they may be very short or they may vary in length. Like music, poetry specializes in intensity and compression of expression, so the average poem is much shorter than the average essay or article. Critic Harold Bloom defines poetry as “figurative language, concentrated so that its form is both expressive and evocative” (1).</PARA>

<PARA>Many readers would say that poetry challenges the conventions of expression and communication far more than most prose does, since prose, by definition, works within a stricter—or, at least, more clearly definable—framework of language and rules. Certain creative works also deliberately cross the border between prose and poetry, such as Elizabeth Smart’s *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945), Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), Kristjana Gunnars’ *The Substance of Forgetting* (1992), and Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* (1996).</PARA>

### ***For Further Practice***

Work with a course-mate or course-mates on the following activity. First, do some reading on your own with intent to find examples of the forms of writing defined above. Choose samples from at least two or three works (find illustrative excerpts of one or two paragraphs). When your pair or group has found sufficient samples, read your selections to each other without giving away the work in question. See if the listener(s) can identify the genre of each work after it is read. Try to refine your definitions to be as precise as you can make them.

### **Work Cited**

Ehrman, Bart. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.  
New York: Harper, 2005.