

Allusion

In a short story, novel, poem, etc., an allusion is a reference to something in history, literature, the Bible, mythology, etc. used to make a larger point with fewer words.

Note that **ALLUSION** is different from **ILLUSION**. An illusion is what magicians use in their magic acts. When something appears to be one thing but is actually another, that is an *illusion*.

An example



Dr. Jekyll • Mr. Hyde

Using the allusion

The principal's Jekyll and Hyde personality made it difficult for students and teachers to work with him.

Origin of the allusion

Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was about a respected doctor who turns himself into a maniac murderer.

What point is the writer making?

The writer is trying to say that this principal was difficult because one day he might be nice, and the next day he could be very mean.

Why do writers use allusions?

Writers use allusions because allusions allow the writer to say a lot with very few words. Some allusions are easy for most people to understand (*universal*) while others are recognized by few readers (*obscure*).

Where do writers get these allusions?

Allusions can come from just about anywhere, but the most common sources are: the Bible, literature, history, Greek mythology (“*It was a Herculean task.*”), and art (“*Jane’s Mona Lisa smile gave her a mysterious look.*”).

What happens if I ‘don’t get it’?

If you don’t know the reference the writer is using in his or her allusion, all is not lost....at least some of the time. You can often figure out the *general* point the writer is trying to make even if you don’t recognize the allusion. What you will not understand, however, is the *overall effect* the writer is trying to convey. The best writing often uses allusion, and people who enjoy reading and get the most out of reading (especially literature) understand the use of allusions and find them challenging to figure them out.

Some allusions have a ‘life of their own’

Sometimes you will run into an allusion that has been used so much and for so long that it has a meaning of its own without the need to understand where it came from. An example is: “*The man who ran onto the field stark naked during the Super Bowl just wanted his 15 minutes of fame.*” We know that the expression *15 minutes of fame* means someone just wants some attention for a short time usually for something ridiculous. We don’t need to know that in an interview the famous artist Andy Warhol said that every person on earth would be famous for 15 minutes. Knowing the source of that allusion isn’t necessary to understanding what point a writer is trying to make by using it.

Allusion Exercise

INSTRUCTIONS: Read each passage below. Then do the following:

1. Underline the portion of the passage that contains the allusion.
2. Figure out what the source of the allusion is.
3. Tell what the writer was trying to say using the allusion.

1. *It was a David and Goliath matchup when I.U. played Ohio State in Bloomington this weekend. In the end, though, the unranked Hoosiers' sling shot cut down the #1 ranked Buckeyes.*

SOURCE OF THE ALLUSION: _____

What point is the writer making by using this allusion? _____

2. *The Darth Vaders of the school district, the seven men and women who make up the school board, voted last night to cut all extracurricular programs in order to balance the district's budget. That means no sports, no plays, no band.*

SOURCE OF THE ALLUSION: _____

What point is the writer making by using this allusion? _____

3. *As the group of students from Hagerstown High School got off the bus in New York City for the field trip, freshman Sally Johnson looked around in amazement and said to no one in particular, "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."*

SOURCE OF THE ALLUSION: _____

What point is the writer making by using this allusion? _____

4. *It didn't take the students long to find the new teacher's Achilles' heel. Any time one of them earned a low grade, the student would suddenly burst into tears and sob uncontrollably. The naive rookie teacher would take pity on the poor student and instantly raise the grade.*

SOURCE OF THE ALLUSION: _____

What point is the writer making by using this allusion? _____
