

Novel

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

Definition

Put simply, a *novel* is an extended work of fiction, written in prose (ordinary, non-rhyming sentence structure, not poetry).

That's it, that's the whole formal definition. Everything else about "what a novel is" comes from history and convention, not from a strict rule.

What makes a novel different from similar forms

I. Compared to a short story: A novel is much longer, which allows for more characters, a more complicated plot, and deeper development of setting and character over time.

II. Compared to a novella/novelette (to be defined later): This is a form of middle length, longer than a short story, shorter than a full novel. Examples: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

III. Compared to older long narrative poems: Before the novel existed, long stories were often told in verse (poetry). Think of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Starting in the 1700s, the novel gradually took over this role, becoming the main form for telling long, complex stories.

Etymology

Most European languages use the word *roman* for "novel" (related to the word "romance"). In English, the word "novel" actually comes from the Italian word *novella*, meaning "a little new thing," which originally referred to a short prose tale. (This is why the word "novella" today refers to something of middle length: a bit of a historical irony, since "novel" originally meant something short!)

Emergence of the Novel: Ancestors and Evolution

I. Ancient Greek prose romances (from roughly the 2nd–3rd century AD): These were stories about two lovers who get separated, go through dangerous adventures, and are finally reunited at the end, a pattern you'll still recognize in many modern romantic stories and films.

II. The picaresque narrative: This form began in 16th-century Spain. "*Picaro*" is the Spanish word for "rogue" or "rascal." A picaresque story follows a clever, roguish character through a loosely connected series of adventures, usually realistic in style,

and often satirical (making fun of society along the way). This character type survives today, for example, in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*.

III. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605): This book is often called the single most important ancestor of the modern novel. It follows an eccentric, delusional man who tries to live out the ideals of old chivalric romance stories in the real world, and through his misadventures, the novel explores the difference between illusion and reality, a theme many later novels return to.

IV. The English novel is usually said to have truly begun in the early 1700s, and two writers are especially important here: Daniel Defoe, with *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). These are often called the first "novels of incident", meaning that what interests us most is what happens next in the plot, rather than deep psychological exploration of character. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) is often called the first English "novel of character" (also called a psychological novel), meaning what interests us most is why the character behaves as she does, and how her inner life develops. *Pamela* is also an epistolary novel: the entire story is told through letters written by the characters, rather than through a narrator describing events.

Realistic Novels vs. Romances

The realistic novel tries to show believable, complicated characters: people with mixed motives, who exist within a clearly defined social world, and who go through experiences that feel plausible and true to everyday life. This tradition includes writers like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, and Gustave Flaubert.

Romance (in this specific technical sense, different from just "a love story") instead uses: i. characters more sharply divided into clear heroes and villains, ii. protagonists who are often somewhat isolated or alone, iii. settings that are often in the historical past, or somewhere unfamiliar, and iv. plots built around adventures or quests, rather than everyday realistic experiences. Examples of romance-type novels include Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*.

A few more important types of novel

I. Bildungsroman (a German term meaning "novel of formation" or "novel of growing up"): This type of novel follows a character's development from childhood through experience, often including some kind of crisis, into adulthood and self-understanding. Examples include Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

II. Social novel: This type emphasizes how social and economic conditions shape people's lives and choices. Examples include John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel about a family suffering through the hardship of the Great Depression. If a social novel also pushes explicitly for political change, it's sometimes called a sociological novel.

III. Historical novel: Set during a real historical period, using history as more than just background, this type properly began with the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott in the 1800s.