

Narrative and Narratology

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

What is a narrative?

A narrative is simply a story, told either in prose or in poetry that involves events, characters, and what those characters say and do.

Some literary forms are explicit narratives, meaning they're told to us by a narrator: novels and short stories (in prose), and epics (in poetry) all work this way. Drama is different: there's no narrator explaining things to us. Instead, we simply watch (or read) the characters act and speak directly, without anyone standing between us and the events.

Here's something you might not expect: even a short lyric poem, which doesn't set out to "tell a story" in an obvious way, can still carry a hidden narrative. Take Wordsworth's poem "The Solitary Reaper." The poem never explicitly announces "here is a sequence of events", but as we read, we can piece together a small implied story: the speaker is walking through the Scottish Highlands, unexpectedly comes across a girl singing while harvesting grain, stops to listen, reflects on the moment, and then continues on his way. We infer this sequence of events purely from what the speaker tells us about his experience, even though the poem's real focus is the feeling of the moment, not the "plot."

What is narratology?

Narratology is the theoretical, systematic study of how narratives work in general, across all kinds of stories, regardless of their specific content. It became an especially important area of study in the mid-1900s.

Here's an important distinction: narratology usually isn't trying to tell you what a particular story means. Instead, it's trying to describe the underlying structures that make storytelling, and story-meaning, possible in the first place.

Think of the difference between a literature teacher asking what a novel's ending means and narratologist asking what structural techniques novels use to build tension toward an ending. Both questions are valuable, but they're asking different kinds of things.

A key distinction: fabula vs. syuzhet

A group of critics called the *Russian Formalists* introduced a very useful distinction that's still used today:

Fabula: the raw, basic events of a story, in the order they actually happened, chronologically (first this happened, then this, then this...).

Syuzhet: the way those events are actually arranged and presented to the reader or audience, which might be completely different from strict time order. A story might start in the middle, use flashbacks, or reveal things out of sequence for dramatic effect.

A simple way to remember this: fabula is "what happened, in order." Syuzhet is "how the story chooses to tell it to you." A detective novel is a great example: the fabula includes the murder happening near the beginning of the timeline, but the syuzhet (the way the novel is actually structured) usually starts after the murder, slowly revealing what happened through investigation and flashback. The French critic Gérard Genette did especially influential work in this field, in books like *Narrative Discourse* (1980). He studied, in great detail, the complicated relationships between a story and the way it's actually told, and he significantly refined our understanding of point of view.

Narratology beyond literature

Interestingly, the tools of narratology have been applied outside of literature too. The historian Hayden White argued that even history books, which we might assume are simply neutral, factual accounts, are actually shaped by narrative patterns, the same way fiction is. In other words, historians make choices about how to structure and tell the "story" of the past, and those choices affect how we understand historical events. Some psychologists have gone even further, suggesting that telling stories, connecting one event to the next in a meaningful way, is simply how humans naturally make sense of the world, both in literature and in everyday thinking.