

English 30-1

Reading Non-Fiction:

A Tutorial

What is non-Fiction?

The non-fiction genre is about real people, places, ideas, and experiences. Common forms of non-fiction are letters and journals, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, media accounts and essays.

There are two main categories in prose writing to which people often refer: fiction and non-fiction. Sometimes the distinction between these two types of writing can be confusing to students.

Let me clarify a few details about these two types of writing.

Fiction

Fiction is text that deals, in part or in whole, with information or events that are not real, but rather, imaginary; fiction is invented by the text creator or author. Normally, when we talk about fiction we generally refer to novels and short stories, but it also often refers to drama and film. What creates some of this confusion is that there can be realistic fiction which, although untrue, could actually happen. Some events, people, and places may even be real and the imagined events actually could conceivably happen.

For example, science fiction often predicts technologies that later become a reality. All these works depict a fictional but plausible story.

There is also historical fiction, which is a genre that creates fictional characters and puts them into real events which have happened. This gives the illusion that the text is non-fiction; however, even though the events may have occurred, they may also have been changed to suit the author's plan.

Non-realistic fiction is writing where the story's events really could not happen in real life. This may involve an alternate form of history of mankind other than that recorded, or it may involve those types of actions that just cannot happen in our world at this time. Many fiction books are like this.

In much of fiction it is required that the reader suspend one's disbelief, exercise poetic faith and indulge in the story's imaginative world. Even though the situation might be unrealistic, what brings value to fiction is the realism with which the characters respond to their situations, their own development and the interaction with others and the growth of their personalities.

It is an understanding that fiction enables the reader to gain a fuller understanding of what constitutes reality.

Non-fiction

Non-fiction is the other main division in prose writing and is often the description of an individual's thinking, of his/her life, or even the telling of a story that is true.

Non-fiction is a story that is based on real facts and information.

Some major examples of non-fiction texts include essays, journals, memoirs, diaries, documentaries, scientific papers, photographs, biographies, autobiographies, textbooks, travel books, blueprints, technical documentation, user manuals, diagrams, and some journalism.

Non-fiction, like fiction, can be a variety of different styles that authors choose for a particular reason. Often, a non-fiction text is a narrative account of an event; a story a friend might share with another friend using good story telling techniques. Non-fiction may also be an account of an event which is of importance to other people, like a police report of a crime.

One thing to remember about many non-fiction accounts is that the assertions and descriptions may, or may not, be accurate, thereby giving either a true or false account; however, it is *generally assumed* that authors of such accounts believe them to be truthful at the time of their composition or, at least, pose them to their audience as true.

Including information that the author knows to be untrue within any of these works is usually regarded as dishonest although at times there may be elements of fiction in non-fiction. Fiction may also include non-fictional elements.

Non-fiction can also be written about fiction, giving information about these other works. There are many critical texts written about Shakespeare's work, for example, that is classified as non-fiction.

Non-fiction need not necessarily only be written text, since pictures and film can also present a factual account of a subject.

How is reading Non-fiction different from reading fiction?

There are different skills required in order to more fully comprehend non-fiction than there are for reading fiction.

The purpose of non-fiction is different from that of fiction.

Fiction is meant to entertain a reader.

Fiction lets our imagination soar, and our hopes rise. Fiction teaches us lessons that others already know. Fiction spreads the knowledge of things people are too ignorant to speak about. Fiction, like Stephen King said, is the truth inside of the lie.

What is not always clear to students is the criteria for distinguishing between a short story and an essay.

Fiction is an opportunity, an exploration, an offering.

If not for fiction, we would only record what is, and never what could be. We would forfeit our ability to imagine, and to inspire through pure speculation.

Fiction is symbolic of some aspect of our real lives. The magic is that authors manage to disguise it as something else.

Purposes of Non-fiction

Non-fiction has quite a different purpose. The authors of non-fiction attempt:

- To explain
- To entertain
- To inform
- To persuade

The audience is an important factor in non-fiction. The type of non-fiction will be geared for a certain type of audience which is looking for information and inspiration. Some readers are looking for facts and so they go to articles found in newspapers, journals, and many readers search internet sources.

Whether a reader is reading essays, journals, memoirs, diaries, or biographies, the purpose is to seek out some of the facts or opinions on a particular topic.

Often, students will encounter essays in their high school courses and these can, at times, be easy to distinguish as some essays express strong opinions, and are argumentative, while others are personal essays which often tell an autobiographical story to demonstrate a point. Students will also encounter texts which are memoirs while still others are analogies, and magazine articles.

Elements of Non-fiction writing

Non-fiction writing can be characterized in a number of ways. There are a number of different types of non-fiction writing. The author's purpose in providing information is related to the author's reason for writing

1. **Argumentative** – The writer argues a particular point for the benefit of others to possibly persuade the reader that he is right! The writer presents a position on a topic and tries to persuade the reader through the use of facts, interpretations, and logic that his/her position is the most reasonable.
2. **Descriptive** – The writer describing a particular location, person, or situation which has made a significant impression on the reader.
3. **Narrative** – The writer is telling a personal story, usually for the purpose of illustrating a point. Whether it is a short story or a longer story, the story is true which makes it very fascinating for the reader. It is this type of non-fiction writing that comes close to fiction, however, through the context and the explanation of the writer, the reader understands that the story is true.
4. **Personal** – This is usually an autobiographical telling of a personal experience which has impacted the shaping of a writer's life.
5. **Expository** – An expository essay is usually one of explanation that demonstrates how something works. It could illustrate many types of situations and machines as well as the mechanics of an event.
6. **Information/explanatory writing** – this type of writing informs the reader about a particular topic. Writers may write about any topic that is of interest and readers who are interested in that topic as well will read in order to be informed. Writers will take the opportunity to explain how different processes, machines, and/or concepts work and this type of writing is a good teaching tool.

Organization of Non-Fiction

Another key element of non-fiction writing is the organizational element.

1. Information is presented clearly and logically. This is the most crucial element of non-fiction writing as the information needs to be clear and logical. If writing lacks these two qualities, the purpose of the writing will be unclear.
2. The organization needs to make sense.
 - Compare/contrast – Writers may use the technique of comparing and contrasting qualities about two different people, situations, or qualities. Through a comparison/contrast of these, the author explains in a way that is comprehensible to the reader.
 - Cause/effect – This is another effective way to discuss some types of non-fiction. The cause and effect relationship allows the writer to demonstrate a relationship between two differing events.
 - Problem/solution – An effective way of dealing with potential problems is to discuss the problem and the potential solutions to those problems.
 - Chronological order – Through the sequence of events, timing of situations, problems and events can be discussed. This is often a means for determining the sequence of events in criminal investigations, in disasters, and training manuals and sets of instructions.

Author's Viewpoint

What the author thinks and feels about his/her subject is important for the reader to understand. Every writer has his/her biases and it is important to understand what some of those biases might be in relation to the reader's biases.

- Identifying an author's viewpoint is important because the reader can understand:
 - why the author is interested in the subject
 - what the author thinks about the topic
 - what the author may want the reader to think
- Readers can often establish what the author's viewpoint is by:
 - Thinking about the facts and opinions given in the text
 - Thinking about the language used by the author
 - Determining the author's purpose for writing

- Ask yourself these questions as the reader:
 - What opinions or belief statement are evident in the article?
 - What evidence did the author include to support his/her opinions?
 - What words/phrases did the author use to present the information?
 - Why did the author write this selection?

Each type of essay has its own particular emphasis so they can often be perplexing.

As you encounter a variety of essays, you will be able to see that they often follow a particular structure, although the structure can often vary.

It is valuable to know what a traditional essay structure might look like.

Structure of the essay

The traditional essay structure is one that is most frequently used. With your experience in writing essays, you will likely understand that there is, first of all, the introduction.

The function of the introduction is to present the topic or the situation and usually it sets the tone for what will follow.

Secondly, there is the body of the essay, which is a series of paragraphs that develop the ideas or arguments that support the main idea, or the thesis, of the essay.

This is followed up by the conclusion, usually the last paragraph of the essay, which summarizes the main points and which is a logical follow up to the thesis and the argument; it is the insightful ending to the essay.

Questions to help you focus your understanding of an essay are:

- What is the main purpose of each essay?
- Who is the target audience for the essay and what clues lead you to this conclusion?
- What are some of the effective writing techniques that the author uses?
- What effective words or phrases are used by the author in explaining his/her viewpoint?

Following is a chart which provides a summary of non-fiction and how you can learn to respond to it in an effective way.

Summary Chart for Analysis of Non-fiction

Categories for Analysis of NON-FICTION (news and magazine articles, memoirs, autobiographies, etc.)	
Subject	What issue, concept, event or person is this work about?
Context	For what audience and in what situation was the work written?
Methods of Development	<p>What pattern of organization is used?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ listing of details ○ arrangement according to space ○ arrangement according to time ○ comparison and contrast ○ analysis of components ○ synthesis ○ cause and effect ○ enumeration ○ classification ○ definition ○ example/illustration/anecdote ○ other
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the title relate to the work? • How is the support selected and arranged? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - induction - deduction - evaluation - narration - description - deliberate order - other
Style	<p>a) Diction – How does the author select language? (scientific, technical, dialect, general, specific, etc.)</p> <p>b) Figurative Language and Allusions – How do these enhance meaning?</p> <p>c) Sentence Structure – What do sentence patterns indicate?</p>
Tone	What is the author's attitude about the subject and reader? (admiring, mocking, condescending, candid, sincere, intense)
Thesis	What is the central idea of the work?