

Allusions

An **allusion** is a literary device that stimulates ideas, associations, and extra information in the reader's mind *with only a word or two*. Allusion means 'reference'. It relies on the reader being able to understand the allusion and being familiar with all of the meaning hidden behind the words.

Here's an example:

"As the cave's roof collapsed, he was swallowed up in the dust like Jonah, and only his frantic scrabbling behind a wall of rock indicated that there was anyone still alive".

The *allusion* in the sentence above is to Jonah. The reader is expected to recognize the *reference* to Jonah and the whale, which should evoke an image of being 'swallowed alive' ... in this case, behind a wall of dust and rock.

Allusions in writing help the reader to visualize what's happening by evoking a mental picture. But the reader *must be aware of the allusion* and *must be familiar with what it alludes to*.

Allusions are commonly made to the Bible, nursery rhymes, myths, famous fictional or historical characters or events, and Shakespeare. They can be used in spoken and written language and poetry.

- Here are some more examples:

"Christy didn't like to spend money. She was no Scrooge, but she seldom purchased anything except the bare necessities".

Did you spot the allusion to Scrooge? That name should bring to mind an image of someone who 'pinches pennies' and hoards money with a passion. But the allusion only works if the reader is familiar with Charles Dickens' story 'A Christmas Carol'.

- Here's an example from Herman Melville's 'Moby Dick':

"Well," said the Lieutenant, who had listened with amused interest to all this, and now waxing merry with his tittle; "Well, blessed are the peacemakers, especially the fighting peacemakers!"

In this case the allusion is a Biblical reference to the Beatitudes... 'Blessed are the peacemakers ...'.

- Here's another Biblical allusion:

"He was a remarkable Prime Minister with feet of clay".

The reference here is to Daniel 2: 31-45, using the words 'feet of clay', which suggests the Prime Minister has roots with common people, with weaknesses just like all others.

- Here's one more Biblical allusion:

"Like the prodigal son, he returned to his home town and was welcomed by all who knew him".

In order to fully appreciate the allusion to the prodigal son, the reader must be familiar with that story in Luke 15: 11-32.

In general, the use of allusions by an author shows an expectation that the reader is familiar with the references made, otherwise the effect is lost. A piece of writing with many allusions (some of which may be very obscure) will be very rich with evoked images, but will do nothing for a reader who is not well-read.