

LESSON 1 WHAT IS A NOVEL?

All novels are stories, but not all stories are novels. Humans have been telling stories since the dawn of time but the advent of the novel (as we know it) came much later in our development and is quite new when compared to the history of story-telling.

THE ORIGINS OF STORYTELLING

Before stories were written down people just talked to each other about what had happened around them. They were relating or retelling descriptions of events. Since an event doesn't have to have a resolution this type of 'story-telling' is classed as an anecdote.



There were also people that were 'storytellers'. Their role in life was to tell stories and this dates back to the time when people still dwelt in caves. The stories people told may have been about actual events, but they also included mythology and religion or ways to make sense of the complexities of nature and the world around them.

Not all storytelling was oral. Some stories were told through pictures and drawings. For example, Egyptian hieroglyphics (the earliest Egyptian mythology was recorded before 4000BCE), drawings on clay tablets, or the cave paintings of our ancestors. Stories were also told through dance, music or singing. Later, in countries such as England (during the 18th century) news was often relayed by town criers; town criers made public pronouncements in the streets.

Written collected histories of people and the world around them, although short, were some of the first writings. Then there were plays and dramatic arts and poetry. For a long time, poetry was the longest form of story. One of first was Homer's Greek epics (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* written 800-700 BCE). There was also *Beowulf*, a 3000 line poem of the battle between the hero Beowulf and his nemesis, the monster known as Grendel, which dates somewhere between the 8th and the 11th centuries and is written in Old English. There are many other early examples of early poetic writings.

The (longer) prosaic short stories or novellas appeared in what we now consider Italy, around the 14th century. All this writing came before what is regarded as the modern novel in the West. Perhaps the first known recorded

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.

novel dates back to 11th century Japan. Called *The Tale of Genji*, it was written by Lady Murasaki Shibu.

Aside from Lady Murasaki's efforts, however, the novel as we know it appeared quite late. Indeed, novels are the 'newest' form of storytelling but a lot of the techniques we use in writing them have their roots in earlier stories in the sense that every kind of story influences the next. Narrative arc for example, a way of mapping the story in a novel, was originally based on plays.

The skills you learn in developing your novel can be applied to any kind of story. What you learn from watching a movie, reading a poem, reading other novels and listening to people telling stories, can all be applied to writing novels. Remember that as you read through this course.

Presentation formats of novels:

Printed paper

Electronic/kindle, etc.

eBooks

CD audio

Braille

a 'Kindle' or other electronic book reader, or presented as eBooks and read on computers, tablets and other electronic devices.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A NOVEL?

Most novels are fiction. How they are fiction can vary. Some are very experimental and include images which are essential to the story, like Brian Selznick's children's novel, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Some newer novels are hypertext works, which link back and forth within themselves in digital formats, to create a new kind of story. Some novels, however, fit into what's now called 'creative non-fiction' – novels which create a story around facts and research. It's hard to define what makes a non-fiction book a creative non-fiction novel, though, and it's something critics, reviewers, and literary theorists are still arguing over. There is, however, one type of creative non-fiction novel that most people do agree should be classed as a novel, and this is novels which fall within the genre of 'true crime'.

Finally, there are novels which are fictionalised accounts. These are usually fictional biographies where the author researches the period and the person, and writes a story about how things may have happened. You can often identify these texts from their jacket copy, which may include descriptions like 'inspired by true events'. These novels can give the reader insight into a particular piece of history, but it's important to remember that they are not actually history. Examples of these include

LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

Spend ten minutes maximum looking at books online in the genre that you are interested in writing. What options are available in terms of printed, kindle, electronic, ebooks and so on. It always pays to look at your potential competition and what they are offering.

Presumably you are doing this course to write a novel, but make a short list of different areas of storytelling that you are interested in.

PRESENTATION OF NOVELS TODAY

In the past, a novel was a book printed on paper and bound within a cover. Nowadays a novel may still be printed, but it may also be electronic – some novels are only available in electronic format e.g. to be read on

Philippa Gregory's *Boleyn* series and Hillary Mantel's Booker Prize winning novel *Bring Up The Bodies* (part of the Thomas Cromwell trilogy). Both of these are about certain characters in Henry VIII's England. Then there's Latino author Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *The Dream of the Celt*, a fictionalised biography of Roger Casement, one of the people involved in the Irish Uprising of the early 20th century.

Novel Lengths and Word Counts

Word length in a novel depends on the genre. In children's novels for readers aged 7-12, novels can be as short as 10,000 words or as long as 30,000. In science fiction and fantasy works they sometimes go as high as 45,000 words.

Young adult novels, or novels for readers 13 and up, are around 45,000 words for the low end of the age range, and 60-65,000 words for the higher end of the age range. In the case of science fiction and fantasy novels, that 65,000 can get as high as 80,000 words, and in extreme cases, even up to 100,000 words.

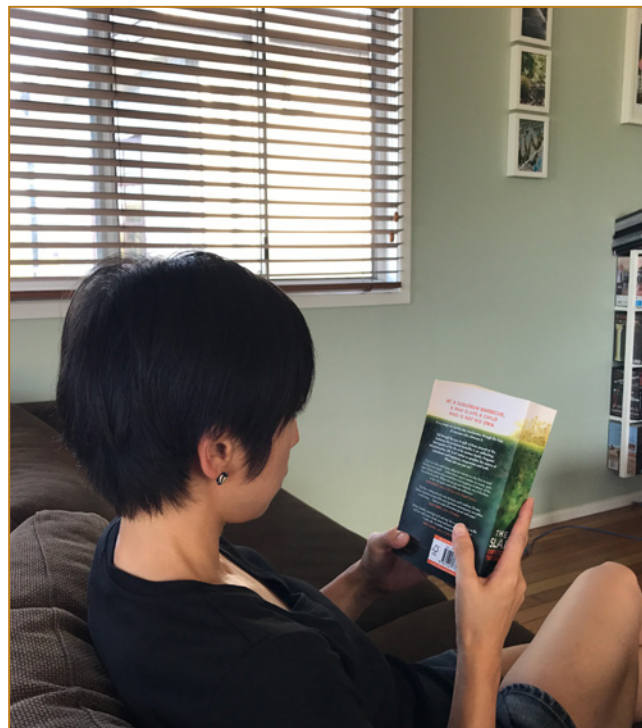
Novels for adults are usually around 80,000 words, though again, some categories go higher. Romance, historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy novels can run as high as 100,000 to 120,000 words each. Some fantasy trilogies – three books in the same series – can total close to 500,000 words.

If that sounds daunting, don't panic. It's better to have a shorter draft you can add to than a longer one you have to keep cutting down.

Novella Length

Some people call novellas 'short novels'. These are usually books for adults of anywhere from 18,000 to 35,000 words. Many of what we refer to as novels today, are actually novellas. American author John Steinbeck's book, *Of Mice and Men*, clocks in at just below 30,000 words. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is around 27,000 words, while Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is only about 20,000 words.

Many stories benefit from being shorter. Outside of word length, the major difference between novellas and novels is that novellas have fewer events and, often, fewer characters. Remember: word count isn't a measure of how good a book is. It's the story that matters.



GENRES

Novels are usually broken into genres, or general areas of interest. Most genres also have subgenres. Mystery,

LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

How many words are you intending to write? If you are not sure, visit a bookstore and look at the word length. This doesn't have to be set in stone at this stage, just give you an idea of what you are working towards.

for instance, is a genre, but it can be broken into the subgenres of crime, detective, cosy, and more. This can be a little confusing to begin with but as you develop your story, you'll spend time reading within your genre and get comfortable with all its subgenres.

The major genres as defined by publishers and reviewers:

Mystery

Romance

Crime (sometimes a subgenre of mystery)

Science fiction

Dystopia (sometimes a subgenre of science fiction)

Paranormal Romance (sometimes a subgenre of fantasy or romance)

Fantasy

Historical/Period

Young Adult

Children's

Suspense

Gothic fiction

Thriller

Horror

Contemporary/Realistic

Magic Realism

Graphic novels

Verse novels

Post-modernist

A Note on Literary Fiction

Literary fiction is not usually considered a 'genre' but a style or category of writing – most of the above genres fall into 'commercial fiction' as opposed to 'literary fiction'. This is explained in more detailed later this lesson.

If you've never heard of some of these genres, that's not surprising. This list is constantly in flux, with new things being added and old things being taken away. There was a time when 'Westerns' (as in cowboy stories) were considered a major genre. This is rarer now. Some subgenres, like 'paranormal romance', become so big and popular that they get added to the list and are considered genres in their own right.

Cross-Genre Fiction

Many novels do not fit neatly into one genre. These are usually referred to as cross-genre works, eg. a novel may be both science fiction and love story. Publishers will file cross-genre books under up to three genres, but rarely more, and one specific genre is usually picked for marketing purposes. H. G. Well's works, *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* fit into today's marketplace as both science fiction and dystopia, while Kurt Vonnegut's novels could be marketed as literary, post-modernist, or even the speciality subgenre 'absurdist'.

The best way to get a handle on genres is to read. This will help you get an idea of the conventions, or 'rules' of your genre. Of course, as an author, it's more important that you write your story first. If thinking about genres, or trying to figure out which is the best genre