

Narrative Elements

Foreshadowing

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What is it?

Foreshadowing is a way of indicating or hinting at what will come later. Foreshadowing can be subtle, like storm clouds on the horizon suggesting that danger is coming, or more direct, such as Romeo and Juliet talking about wanting to die rather than live without each other. Sometimes authors use false clues to mislead a reader. These are called "red herrings," and they often appear in mystery writing. Foreshadowing can also be considered a literary device, but we have treated it as a narrative element because of its association with storytelling.

Why is it important?

Foreshadowing adds dramatic tension to a story by building anticipation about what might happen next. Authors use foreshadowing to create suspense or to convey information that helps readers understand what comes later. Foreshadowing can make extraordinary, even fanciful events seem more believable; if the text foreshadows something, the reader feels prepared for the events when they happen.

How do I create it?

Create foreshadowing by placing clues, both subtle and direct, into the text.

To create foreshadowing in fiction or non-fiction,

- Give the reader direct information by mentioning an upcoming event or explaining the plans of the people or characters portrayed in the text:
"As the Lincolns rode to Ford's Theatre on 10th Street, John Wilkes Booth and three conspirators were a block away at the Herndon House. Booth had devised a plan that called for the simultaneous assassinations of President Lincoln, Secretary of State Seward, and Vice President Johnson. Having learned that morning of Lincoln's plan to attend the theatre, he had decided that this night would provide their best opportunity."
—Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*
- Place clues in the first few sentences of a story or chapter to indicate the themes that will be important later:
"I was six when my mother taught me the art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others, and eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games."
—Amy Tan, "Rules of the Game"

- Portray characters' subtle reactions to objects in their environment to show that those objects might play an important role in the upcoming action:
"[The men] stood together, away from the pile of rocks in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed... Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother."
—Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"
- Use changes in the weather or mood to hint at whether good or bad fortune will follow:
"The night was still. I could hear his breath coming easily beside me. Occasionally there was a sudden breeze that hit my bare legs, but it was all that remained of a promised windy night. This was the stillness before a thunderstorm."
—Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Self Check

Ask yourself these questions to recognize and understand foreshadowing:

- Are there phrases about the future?
- Is there a change happening in the weather, the setting, or the mood?
- Are there objects or scenic elements that suggest something happy, sad, dangerous, exciting, etc.?
- Do characters or the narrator observe something in the background that might be a hint about something to come later?

Example

"Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village; but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap while she called to Goodman Brown.

"Dearest heart," whispered she, softly and rather sadly, when her lips were close to his ear, "prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed to-night. A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she's afraid of herself sometimes. Pray tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year."

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"

<p>Are there phrases about the future?</p>	<p>Yes: "put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed to-night," "tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year."</p>
<p>Is there a change happening in the weather, the setting, or the mood?</p>	<p>The sun is setting, and Faith's worries create a mood of apprehension.</p>
<p>Are there objects or scenic elements that suggest something happy, sad, dangerous, exciting, etc.?</p>	<p>The "wind play[ing] with the pink ribbons" seems like a happy image, but then Faith whispers sadly, and she expresses fear.</p>
<p>Do characters or the narrator observe something in the background that might be a hint about something to come later?</p>	<p>There are no particular objects that seem significant here, but Faith's anxiety about her husband leaving on this night hints that something bad might happen while he's away.</p>

Foreshadowing Tip

Foreshadowing often appears at the beginning of a story or chapter. Keep an eye out for signs of potential conflict between characters. Look for signals that things might not be what they initially seem. Pay close attention to any details that seem unusual or have particular emotional significance. These might be clues about what is to come.