

Foreshadowing



Article derived from;

"How to Use Foreshadowing" <https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/how-to-use-foreshadowing/>

"Foreshadowing: The Art of Hinting at What's to Come" <https://loveenglish.org/foreshadowing/>

"Foreshadowing" <https://literarydevices.net/foreshadowing/>

"Foreshadowing in Writing: Definition, Tips, and Examples" <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/foreshadowing/>

Foreshadowing is a necessary part of any well-executed story. So what is it and how to use foreshadowing to best effect in your story? If we sift foreshadowing down to its simplest form, we could say it prepares readers for what will happen later.

At first glance, this may seem counter-intuitive. Why would we want readers to know what's going to happen later in the story? If they know how the book turns out, doesn't this mean they'll have no reason to read on?

Actually, finding out "what happens" is only one reason readers keep reading (and, of course, this desire is no longer a factor at all when it comes to re-readability.) Rather, one of the most crucial incentives for a reader is the *promise of a good journey*. Therefore, the point of foreshadowing is to prepare readers for what happens later in the story. Not tell them, just prepare them.

Foreshadowing's great strength lies in its ability to create a **cohesive and plausible story**. For example, if readers understand it's possible someone in your story may be murdered, they won't be completely shocked when the sidekick gets axed down the road. If, however, you failed to properly foreshadow this unhappy event, readers may feel unpleasantly jarred. They can feel the author has cheated them out of the story they thought they were reading. They would think your foreshadowing had, in essence, lied to them so it could trick them with this big shocker.

Readers don't like to be cheated, lied to, or tricked. And that's where foreshadowing comes into play.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary technique that involves hinting at future events in a story. It is a tool that writers use to create suspense and build anticipation in their readers. Foreshadowing can be subtle or overt, and it can take many forms, including *dialogue*, *setting*, and *symbolism*.

One of the primary purposes of foreshadowing is to prepare the reader for what is to come. By dropping hints about future events, the writer can help the reader anticipate what will happen next. This can create a sense of tension and excitement as the reader tries to guess what will happen next.

Foreshadowing can also be used to create a sense of irony or dramatic irony. Irony occurs when the opposite of what is expected happens. Dramatic irony occurs when the reader knows something that the characters in the story do not. By using foreshadowing, the writer can create these types of situations, which can add depth and complexity to the story.

There are many different ways to use foreshadowing in a story. Some writers use it to create a sense of foreboding or to hint at danger that is to come. Others use it to create a sense of mystery or to hint at a surprise twist that is coming up. Whatever the purpose, foreshadowing is a powerful tool that can help writers create engaging and memorable stories.

What Foreshadowing is Not

Foreshadowing is not a spoiler

Foreshadowing is meant to inflate suspense, not stamp it out. Foreshadowing hints at what will happen in the future, but a spoiler tells the reader explicitly what happens. With a spoiler, the reader has no surprises to look forward to.

Foreshadowing is not a red herring

A red herring in storytelling is a hint placed deliberately to mislead the reader. You can find examples of red herrings in crime novels and TV shows. When a character is acting a little bit too guilty, they are probably a red herring.

Types of Foreshadowing

There are different types of foreshadowing that authors use to hint at events that will occur later in the story. In this section, we will discuss the various types of foreshadowing.

Direct (Overt) Foreshadowing

Direct foreshadowing is explicit about what it is. When a narrator says something like, "Little did I know . . ." the character is about to divulge something that happens later.

Direct foreshadowing might also show up in an introduction, a prelude, or even a title. *Murder on the Orient Express*, a detective novel by Agatha Christie, directly foreshadows that there will be a murder on a train called the Orient Express. It doesn't take a lot of sleuthing to figure that out.

Indirect (Covert) Foreshadowing

Indirect foreshadowing is more subtle and requires the reader to pay attention to details. This type of foreshadowing is often used to create suspense and intrigue. For example, if a character mentions that they have a fear of heights, it may foreshadow a future event where they will have to face their fear. Oftentimes

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indirect foreshadowing can be so understated that it goes unnoticed by the reader until after the later event has happened, which leads to that light-bulb moment.

Prophecy

Prophecy is a type of foreshadowing where a character predicts a future event. This type of foreshadowing is often used in fantasy and science fiction genres. For example, in the Harry Potter series, the prophecy made by Professor Trelawney about Harry and Voldemort's fate is a significant foreshadowing element.

Symbolic Foreshadowing

Symbolic foreshadowing is when an object or symbol hints at a future event. This type of foreshadowing is often used in literature to create a deeper meaning. For example, in "The Great Gatsby," the green light at the end of the dock symbolizes Gatsby's hope for the future.

Techniques for Writing Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary technique that can add depth and intrigue to a story. Here are some techniques for writing foreshadowing:

Chekhov's Gun

Chekhov's Gun is a technique where an object or event is mentioned early in the story, but it becomes important later on. This technique can create a sense of anticipation and keep the reader engaged. For example, in "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," the invisibility cloak is mentioned early in the story, and it becomes an important tool later on.

Flash Forward

A flash forward is a technique where the story jumps ahead in time to show a future event. This can create suspense and build anticipation for what is to come. For example, in "The Hunger Games," Katniss has a vision of a future where she is being hunted by the Capitol, which creates tension and foreshadows the danger to come.

Pre-scene

A pre-scene is a technique where a scene is shown before the actual event takes place. This can create suspense and build anticipation for the upcoming event. For example, in "The Lord of the Rings," the scene where Gandalf warns Frodo about the ring's power foreshadows the danger that Frodo will face later on.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a technique where an object or action represents something else. This can be used to foreshadow events or themes in the story. For example, in "The Great Gatsby," the green light at the end of Daisy's dock symbolizes Gatsby's hope for a future with Daisy.

Allusion

Allusion is a technique where a reference is made to another work of literature or art. This can be used to foreshadow events or themes in the story. For example, in "Frankenstein," the allusion to Milton's "Paradise Lost" foreshadows the themes of creation and destruction in the story.

When Does a Writer Use Foreshadowing?

Foreshadowing shows up in many ways in creative writing. Some common places to use foreshadowing are in titles, dialogue, and symbolism.

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Title

Why not begin at the beginning? The title of a book can provide a huge hint about what's going to happen in the book's plot. For example, readers of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* are primed for a return of the king. *Death on the Nile* suggests that there will be a death on the Nile, and *As I Lay Dying* does more than hint at the fate of the narrator.

Dialogue

Dialogue can also be a great way to include indirect foreshadowing in the form of a joke or an offhand comment. Let's say Mary tells Sally that she'll only get a promotion if her boss takes an extended absence, and then later in the story her boss takes an extended absence. In dialogue, it may have seemed like an exaggerated way of saying the occurrence is unlikely, but when the boss does go on leave, the reader thinks back on that moment and understands it in a new way.

Symbolism

Writers can use symbolism and motif to create more conceptual foreshadowing. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," the main character's rejection of Puritanism is foreshadowed using symbolism associated with the devil. For example, on a nightmarish trek through the woods, he meets a man with a snake-shaped staff.

The Two Halves of Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing, Part 1: The Plant

We can break foreshadowing down into two parts. The first is the plant. This is the part where you hint to readers that something surprising and/or important is going to happen later in the book. If the bad guy is going to kidnap the good guy's daughter, your plant might be the moment when your hero notices a creepy dude hanging around the playground. If your heroine is going to be left standing at the altar, your plant might be her fiancé's ambivalence toward the wedding preparations.

Depending on what event you're foreshadowing, the plant can be blatant or subtle. Subtle is almost always better, since you don't want to give away your plot twists. But at the same time, your hints must be obvious enough that readers will remember them later on.

Usually, the earlier you can foreshadow an event, the stronger and more cohesive an effect you will create. The bigger the event, the more important it is to foreshadow it early. As editor Jeff Gerke puts it in *The First 50 Pages*:

Basically, you need to let us in on the rules. If the climax of your book is going to consist of getting into a time machine and jumping away to safety, we had better have known in the first fifty pages that time travel is possible in the world of your story.

Foreshadowing, Part 2: The Payoff

Once you've got your plant in place, all that's left is to bring the payoff on stage. If you planted hints about kidnapping, jilting, or time travelling, this is the part where you now get to let these important scenes play out.

As long as you've done your job right with the plant, you probably won't even need to reference your hints from earlier. In fact, you're likely to create a more solid effect by letting readers put the pieces together themselves.

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But you'll also find moments (usually of smaller events that were given less obvious plants) that will benefit from a quick reference to the original hint (e.g., "George, you big meanie! Now I understand why you wouldn't choose between the scarlet and the crimson for the bridesmaids' dresses!")

The most important thing to remember about the payoff is that it always needs to happen. If you plant hints, pay them off. Just as readers will be confused by an unforeshadowed plot twist, they will also be frustrated by foreshadowing that excites them and then leads nowhere.

Rules for Writing Foreshadowing

Make it relevant

Make sure the hint is relevant to the plot. There is a literary principle called "Chekov's gun" that states that every element introduced in a story must have a relevant use. For a literal example, think of the James Bond films. Every weapon that Bond is presented with at the start of his mission will likely come into play at a crucial moment of action.

Not all writers agree with Chekov's principle—in fact, some even mock it—but it's useful to keep in mind when creating foreshadowing. When you foreshadow, you are not arbitrarily placing a hint in the story; you are deliberately placing it there to generate an effect. Foreshadowing a meaningless moment will misdirect your reader's attention and leave them confused or disappointed.

Be subtle

If you're using direct foreshadowing, you want your reader to pick up on the hint. However, there is a balance between making it obvious and making it too obvious. A hint that is too obvious leaves no room for the reader's curiosity—defeating the purpose of the foreshadowing. Remember, foreshadowing is a way to engage the reader through anticipation, curiosity, or suspense.

Consider the timing

In general, it's better for an author to create ample space between elements of foreshadowing and the big reveal. The longer curiosity or anticipation is allowed to build up, the greater the payoff when it gets resolved. It can be the difference between eliciting an "oh" and an "aha!"

Challenges and Solutions in Using Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a powerful literary device that can add depth and intrigue to any story. However, using foreshadowing effectively can be a challenge for writers. In this section, we will discuss some common challenges in using foreshadowing and provide solutions to help overcome them.

Being Too Obvious

One of the biggest challenges in using foreshadowing is striking the right balance between being too obvious and too subtle. If foreshadowing is too obvious, it can ruin the surprise and make the story predictable. On the other hand, if it is too subtle, readers may miss it entirely.

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Solution: Use Multiple Techniques

One solution to this challenge is to use multiple techniques to foreshadow events. For example, you can use dialogue, symbolism, and imagery to hint at what's to come. This way, if one technique is too obvious, another may be more subtle and keep readers guessing.

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Foreshadowing Too Much

Another challenge in using foreshadowing is foreshadowing too much. If you foreshadow too many events, it can make the story feel contrived and predictable.

Solution: Be Selective

To avoid foreshadowing too much, be selective about which events you foreshadow. Focus on the most important events that will have the greatest impact on the story. Also, consider foreshadowing events that are unexpected or have a twist to keep readers engaged.

Inconsistency

Inconsistency is another challenge in using foreshadowing. If foreshadowing is inconsistent or doesn't make sense, it can confuse readers and detract from the story.

Solution: Plan Ahead

To avoid inconsistency, plan ahead and make sure foreshadowing is consistent with the rest of the story. Consider creating a timeline or outline of events to help keep track of foreshadowing and ensure it makes sense.

Foreshadowing vs. Foreboding

Foreboding—that skin-prickling feeling that something horrible is going to happen—can be a useful facet of foreshadowing. By itself, foreboding isn't specific enough to be foreshadowing. Unlike the plants used for foreshadowing, foreboding is just an ambiguous aura of suspense. Jordan E. Rosenfeld describes it in *Make a Scene*:

[F]oreshadowing ... hints at actual plot events to come, [but] foreboding is purely about mood-setting. It heightens the feeling of tension in a scene but doesn't necessarily indicate that something bad really will happen.

Foreboding is useful in setting readers' emotions on edge without giving them any blatant hints. But when it comes time to foreshadow important events, always back up your foreboding by planting some specific clues.

Most authors have so intrinsic an understanding of how to use foreshadowing that they plant it and pay it off without even fully realizing that's what they're doing. But the more conscious you are of the technique, the better you can wield it.



Writing Challenge:

Select one or two of the types of foreshadowing or techniques described above, and incorporate them into a short story, story section, or memoir. If you're short on ideas, try these prompts;

- She was sad as she watched her walk away.
- They were late. Very late.
- "I could have sworn it was this way."
- Sudden recognition
- Pull something out of "The Hotline" newsletter that takes your interest and form a story around that.