

Allusion: the definition and 80 common allusions with their sources and meanings

An ALLUSION is a brief, indirect reference to a person, place, event, story or work that the writer leaves unexplained because the reader is expected to recognise it: indirect, unexplained, and relying on shared knowledge. Not an illusion (a false impression). A reference or quotation names its source; an analogy spells the comparison out; an allusion compresses it into a name.

Allusion	Source	Means now
BIBLICAL		
a Good Samaritan	parable	helps a stranger
David and Goliath	the boy and the giant	underdog v giant
the prodigal son	the wasteful son welcomed home	returns and is forgiven
a Judas	the betrayer of Jesus	a traitor
the writing on the wall	Belshazzar's feast	a clear sign of the end
forbidden fruit	Eden	wanted because banned
a Garden of Eden	paradise	an unspoilt place
the patience of Job	Job's trials	patience under suffering
the wisdom of Solomon	the disputed baby	wise judgement
Cain and Abel	the first murder	deadly brotherly rivalry
Armageddon	Revelation	a final conflict
a Philistine	Israel's enemies	no interest in culture
Methuselah	lived 969 years	extremely old
a Samson	strength in his hair	strong, undone by a weakness
a Lazarus	raised from the dead	revived against odds
a doubting Thomas	needed to touch the wounds	a sceptic
the eleventh hour	labourers hired late	the last moment
a scapegoat	the goat sent away with the sins	blamed for others
a land of milk and honey	the Promised Land	a place of plenty
MYTHOLOGICAL (GREEK AND ROMAN)		
Achilles' heel	the hero's one weak spot	a fatal weakness
Pandora's box	the jar of evils	trouble that cannot be undone
the Midas touch	turned all to gold	makes money from anything
a Trojan horse	soldiers hidden in a gift	a gift hiding an attack
a Herculean task	the twelve labours	an enormous job
a Sisyphean task	the boulder rolled forever	endless pointless labour
an odyssey	Odysseus's journey	a long eventful journey
a siren song	singers who lured sailors	a dangerous temptation
an Icarus	wax wings melted by the sun	ambition that falls
a narcissist	loved his reflection	self-obsessed
a nemesis	goddess of retribution	an unbeatable rival
a Cassandra	never believed	ignored true warnings
Scylla and Charybdis	monster and whirlpool	between two dangers
Promethean	stole fire for humans	boldly creative, defiant
a muse	goddesses of the arts	inspiration
a labyrinth	the Minotaur's maze	a bewildering maze
a Pyrrhic victory	King Pyrrhus's costly win	a win that costs too much
jovial / mercurial / saturnine / martial	Jove, Mercury, Saturn, Mars	cheerful / changeable / gloomy / warlike

From

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Literary, historical and pop-culture allusions, how to write about one, and practice

Allusion	Source	Means now
LITERARY		
a Scrooge	Dickens	a miser
a Romeo	Shakespeare	a young lover
Big Brother, Orwellian	Orwell	surveillance, state control
a Catch-22	Heller	a no-win rule
Jekyll and Hyde	Stevenson	two opposite natures
a Frankenstein	Mary Shelley	a creation that destroys its maker
tilting at windmills, quixotic	Cervantes	fighting imaginary enemies; impractical idealism
a Pollyanna	Porter	relentlessly optimistic
a Peter Pan	Barrie	refuses to grow up
Lilliputian	Swift	tiny; petty
Kafkaesque	Kafka	nightmarishly bureaucratic
Dickensian	Dickens	grim poverty; caricature
a Cheshire Cat grin; down the rabbit hole	Carroll	a knowing smile; into strangeness
'Et tu, Brute?'	Julius Caesar	betrayal by a friend
a Lady Macbeth	Macbeth	ruthless ambition
a Sherlock	Conan Doyle	a detective (often sarcastic)
Humpty Dumpty	nursery rhyme	broken beyond repair
a Gatsby; a Walter Mitty	Fitzgerald; Thurber	a self-made dreamer; a daydreamer
HISTORICAL AND POP CULTURE		
to meet your Waterloo	Napoleon's defeat, 1815	a final defeat
to cross the Rubicon	Caesar, 49 BC	no going back
a Benedict Arnold	the general who defected	a traitor (US)
draconian	Draco's laws	extremely harsh
Machiavellian	The Prince	cunning for power
a Napoleon complex	the emperor's height	aggression to compensate
Nero fiddling	Rome's fire, 64 AD	a leader ignoring a crisis
'Let them eat cake'	attributed to Marie Antoinette	contempt for the poor
Spartan	Sparta	plain and tough
a Houdini	the escape artist	an improbable escape
an Einstein	the physicist	a genius (often ironic)
a Pearl Harbor	1941	a devastating surprise attack
-gate	Watergate, 1972	a scandal and cover-up
a Munich	1938 appeasement	giving in to an aggressor
a Titanic	1912	an overconfident failure
a Sputnik moment	1957	a shock that spurs action
kryptonite	Superman	the thing that disables you
a Darth Vader	Star Wars	a villain turned to the dark side
the red pill	The Matrix	waking to an uncomfortable truth
Groundhog Day	the 1993 film	the same day repeating

Writing about an allusion: three steps

1 Identify it and its source. 2 Say what the source carries. 3 Say what it does in THIS text. 'The title East of Eden alludes to Genesis, where Cain is exiled after killing Abel; the novel is about two sets of brothers, so the allusion tells the reader from the cover that one brother will destroy the other.' Step 3 earns the marks. Spotting: a capitalised name not in the story; a grand old phrase; a word made from a name (Herculean, Orwellian); a comparison that assumes a story; a title echoing another work.

Practice: name the source and the meaning

1. The new phone is the company's Achilles' heel. 2. He's no Einstein, but he works hard. 3. Opening the old files was a Pandora's box. 4. She had the patience of Job. 5. The merger was a Trojan horse. 6. Signing meant crossing the Rubicon. 7. Stop being such a Scrooge. 8. The cameras feel like Big Brother. 9. That record is his Sisyphean task. 10. Spreadsheets are my kryptonite. 11. The senator's fall was an Icarus story. 12. 'Rome wasn't built in a day, but the stadium was supposed to be.'

Answers

1) Greek myth; one weak spot 2) the physicist; a genius (ironic) 3) Greek myth; troubles that cannot be contained 4) the Bible; endless patience 5) the Trojan War; a gift hiding an attack 6) Caesar; no way back 7) Dickens; a miser 8) Orwell; a surveillance state 9) Greek myth; endless labour 10) Superman; the thing that defeats you 11) Greek myth; ambition that falls 12) the proverb, used ironically