Foreshadowing II[1]

What Is Foreshadowing?

Foreshadowing is a literary device used to give an indication or hint of what is to come later in the story. Foreshadowing is useful for creating suspense, a feeling of unease, a sense of curiosity, or a mark that things may not be as they seem.

In the definition of foreshadowing, the word *hint* is key. Foreshadowing does not necessarily mean explicitly revealing what will happen later in your story. In fact, when it is used effectively, many readers may not even realize the significance of an author's foreshadowing until the end of the story.

For example, in a story where the main character keeps seeing ghosts, there can be multiple events that foreshadow, or give hints, that the character is herself a ghost. The reader may not understand those foreshadowing examples until the very end, when this major plot twist is revealed.

While foreshadowing is a common tool in mystery novels, which rely on building suspense, it is not exclusive to that genre. In fact, foreshadowing can be used successfully in any type of book.

Why Is Foreshadowing Important?

Foreshadowing is a key tool for writers to build dramatic tension and suspense throughout their stories. Foreshadowing makes your reader wonder what will happen next, and keeps them reading to find out.

Foreshadowing is also a great tool to prepare your reader emotionally for big reveals. For instance, if an abrupt revelation or twist ending is not adequately "set up" via foreshadowing, your reader may come away from your story feeling annoyed, disappointed, or confused, rather than surprised and satisfied.

Two Types of Foreshadowing

There are two basic types of foreshadowing:

1. **Direct foreshadowing (or overt foreshadowing)**: In this type of foreshadowing, the story openly suggests an impending problem, event, or twist. Direct foreshadowing is usually accomplished through the characters' dialogue, the narrator's comments, a prophecy, or even a prologue. For instance, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses direct foreshadowing when the witches predict that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and, later, king.

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2. **Indirect foreshadowing (or covert foreshadowing)**: In this type of foreshadowing, the story hints at an outcome by leaving subtle clues throughout the story. With indirect foreshadowing, readers likely won't realize the meaning of the clues until they witness the foreshadowed event. A great example of indirect foreshadowing occurs in *The Empire Strikes Back*: In a mysterious vision, Luke Skywalker sees that the face behind Darth Vader's mask is his own. Later, the audience understands the significance of this foreshadowing when it is revealed that Vader is, in fact, Luke's father.

5 Foreshadowing Examples and Techniques

There are various techniques and methods for foreshadowing in your writing. Here are some of the most popular methods, along with famous foreshadowing examples in literature.

1. **Dialogue**: You can use your characters' dialogue to foreshadow future events or big reveals. This foreshadowing may take the form of a joke, an offhand comment, or even something unsaid that adds personality to your characters while planting the seed for later revelations. A prime example of dialogue foreshadowing occurs in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when Romeo says, "My life were better ended by their hate, than death prorogued, wanting of thy love." This line foreshadows Romeo's eventual death over the loss of Juliet.

2. **Title**: The title of a novel or short story can be used to foreshadow major events in the story as well. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" foreshadows not just the destruction of the physical house, but the demise of an entire family.

3. **Setting**: The choices you make about the setting or atmosphere of your story can foreshadow events as well. In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens uses descriptions of weather to foreshadow the dark turn Pip's story will take: "So furious had been the gusts, that high buildings in town had had the lead stripped off their roofs; and in the country, trees had been torn up, and sails of windmills carried away; and gloomy accounts had come in from the coast, of shipwreck and death."

4. **Metaphor or simile**: Figurative language like similes and metaphors can be effective foreshadowing tools. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens uses simile to foreshadow the betrayal of David by his mother, comparing her to a figure in a fairy tale: "I sat looking at Peggotty for some time, in a reverie on this suppositious case: whether, if she were employed to lose me like the boy in the fairy tale, I should be able to track my way home again by the buttons she would shed."

5. **Character traits**: A character's appearance, attire, or mannerisms can foreshadow that character's true essence or later actions. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, for instance, author J.K. Rowling makes a point of describing Professor Quirrell's turban

and noting Harry's curiosity about it. Only later, at the end of the story, do we discover that Quirrell's turban conceals his possession by the evil Lord Voldemort.

4 Tips for Using Foreshadowing in Your Writing

Foreshadowing can be a tricky technique to get right. Give away too little, and you may confuse readers or lose their interest. Give away too much, and you take away your story's suspense. Here are some tips for achieving the perfect balance of foreshadowing.

1. **Plan your story**. You need to know exactly where your story is going before you can decide which events you can foreshadow, and how to do so. You may need to wait until your second draft to properly incorporate foreshadowing into your work. Take as much time as you need to work out every detail before dropping hints. Plan, outline, revise, and plan more.

2. **Plant seeds as early as possible**. The closer to an event foreshadowing is placed, the less effective it usually is. In fact, foreshadowing immediately before an event can act as a "spoiler" for the reader. Instead, make sure foreshadowing takes place long enough before the event or ending that it is not fresh in your readers' minds. This will give your readers even more joy when they comb back through your story to find the breadcrumbs you left.

3. **Scatter those seeds**. When choosing where and when to foreshadow in your story, be as sly as possible. Think of it as a scavenger hunt: you wouldn't hide all of your treasures in the same place. Instead, distribute your foreshadowing evenly throughout the story for maximum enjoyment.

4. **Foreshadow in moderation**. Don't wear your reader out. Add too much foreshadowing, and your readers will feel as though they're getting all "setup" and no "payoff." Not enough foreshadowing, and your readers may be frustrated by an unexpected resolution. Craft the right balance, and your readers will find themselves re-reading your stories to find all of your clues.