

Alohomora: Unlocking the Secrets of Harry Potter

Week 1: Introduction

Welcome! This class is for people who love stories: reading them, thinking about them, and maybe even writing them. In particular, it's for people who love the *Harry Potter* books. If this applies to you, you're in the right place.

There are many things that the *Harry Potter* books do really well. We'll be looking at a few of these things, and we'll be looking at them from two different perspectives: from an English literature perspective and from a creative writing perspective.

Being novels, the *Harry Potter* books can be studied just like any other book in an English literature class. The author, J.K. Rowling, uses various literary and rhetorical devices to convey themes—universal ideas and concepts about human nature—in her work. This is the same sort of stuff you learn and think about in any decent high school literature class, although you probably haven't thought of literary themes and devices in the context of *Harry Potter* until now.

Another feature of the *Harry Potter* books, though, is that they are immensely and enduringly popular. What makes the *Harry Potter* books so widely beloved? What sets these tales apart? What creative writing techniques does J.K. Rowling use to craft such intricate, original, and fascinating stories? These are the questions we will attempt to answer, and perhaps along the way, we'll learn a thing or two about writing really good stories of our own.

Notice that these two perspectives are actually closely related to each other. Both involve a close examination of the strategies the author employs, whether you call them literary devices or creative writing techniques. A story that effectively communicates powerful, relevant themes that resonate with its readers is going to be a story that readers will want to keep reading. Conversely, a well-written story with rich characters and engaging plot lines provides a platform upon which universal themes can be conveyed.

These strategies, the themes that they convey, and the effects they have on readers are what we'll be exploring in this class. Specifically, we'll study the strategies used by J.K. Rowling in the *Harry Potter* books, not only because Rowling uses them so skillfully, but also because chances are you've already read the *Harry Potter* books, so unlike most English classes, you won't need to do any extra reading outside of class.

We begin with a simple question, with answers that are far easier said than done: *what makes a good story?*

Concept Questions: These questions are entirely optional, but I recommend thinking about them and even writing a little about them in order to get the most out of this class.

1a. Give an example of a literary theme—a universal idea about human nature—from the *Harry Potter* books, and a moment or character in the series that illustrates this theme.

For example, a theme might be “the quality of a person should not be judged solely on the basis of their ancestry,” and a character that illustrates this theme is Hermione Granger, who is discriminated against because of her ancestral status as a “Muggle-born,” but demonstrates time after time that she is the “brightest witch of [her] age.”

1b. Chances are, the moment or character you picked in the answer to the previous question is a moment or character you enjoyed reading about. (Even if the character is an unlikeable one, you probably still found them interesting, or simply loved to hate them.) How might a reader’s enjoyment of the moment or character you selected relate to the theme that you came up with?

For example, one of the reasons readers like Hermione is that when people try to belittle her because of her blood status, she stands up to them and proves them wrong. Despite Draco Malfoy’s attempts to torment her by calling her a “Mudblood,” she slaps him in the face, frightens him by pretending Professor Moody is standing behind him, and still bests him in every class. This directly relates to the above theme, as people who *do* judge Hermione based on her ancestry are proven wrong.

2a. Pick a favorite character or moment from the *Harry Potter* series, and think about why you enjoy that character or moment so much. Can you trace the reason back to one or more writing techniques that J.K. Rowling employed?

For example, Luna Lovegood is a fan favorite. When she’s first introduced, she just seems kind of weird. But Luna stands by Harry even when others distrust him, joins Dumbledore’s Army, and fights alongside Harry at the Department of Mysteries. Moreover, it is revealed that Luna is often teased and bullied, but she never shows any sign of wanting to change herself to please others. By subverting initial impressions, putting Luna into a situation readers can sympathize with (being teased for being different), and giving her qualities readers will aspire to (maintaining her unique identity, despite what anyone else might think of her), Rowling makes it difficult not to like Luna.

2b. What theme might the character or moment you selected in the answer to the previous question convey, and how does this theme relate to the reason you like this character or moment?

For example, Luna embodies the theme that no one should have to change themselves just because they are teased or excluded for being different. This directly follows from the previous answer.