

ENGLISH

Soban Singh Jeena University, Almora, Uttarakhand

Introduction to English Prose

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Content Writer:

Dr. Pradip Mondal, Asstt. Professor of English, Govt. P. G. College Munsyari, Pithoragarh,

Uttarakhand

Course Introduction:

The present Unit will discuss about the a few literary genres in prose. The students undergoing this course are sure to acquire a comprehending understanding of select literary forms in prose. Each of the select literary genres will be defined with ample examples from across the globe. They will also learn about three types of prose, namely, descriptive, narrative, and expository. These will be explained with adequate references.

Outcome of the Course:

- i) After the successful completion of the course, students will be able to develop an understanding of the diverse techniques of prose writing.
- ii) The students will be able to comprehend the various forms of essay writing.
- iii) The students will be able to compare and contrast the different prose forms and their characteristics.
- iv) The students will be able to understand the prescribed prose styles through select readings of representative texts.
- v) The students will be able to describe non-fictional prose such as the essay, travelogue, biography, autobiography, and diary.
- vi) The students will be encouraged to read different non-fictional prose among adequate examples given under the definition and description of each non-fictional genre.

Unit-1: Forms of Prose

Essay: The term “essay” comes from the French root word “*assayer*”, which means “to attempt,” or “to try.” An essay is a form of writing in paragraph form that uses informal language, although it can be written formally. Essays may be written in first-person point of view, but third-person is preferable in most academic essays. An essay “undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject, or simply entertain” (Abrams 82).

Much before the French essayist Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580), Classical writers like Plutarch, Cicero, and Seneca wrote essays, though the term “essay” as a genre was not invented at that time. Later in the 17th Century, the English writer Francis Bacon perfected the essay form and it was given a wide publicity. Most of Bacon’s essays are shorts discussions such as “Of Studies”, “Of Great Place”, “Of Travaile”, “Of Love”, “Of Truth”, “Of Garden”, “Of Adversity”, and “Of Marriage and the Single Life”.

Broadly, an essay can be of two types: informal essay (also called “familiar” or “personal essay”), and formal essay (also called “article”). The formal essay is relatively impersonal: the author writes as an authority, or at least as highly knowledgeable, and expounds the subject in an orderly way. In the informal essay, the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience, tends to deal with everyday matters rather than with public affairs or specialized topics, and writes in a relaxed, self-revelatory, and sometimes whimsical fashion.

The essay is generally addressed to the general readers rather than a specialized audience. The essayists often liberally use such devices as anecdote, striking illustration, and humor to prove their points. Some of the famous English essayists are Francis Bacon, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, Thomas de Quincey, Aldous Huxley, G. K. Chesterton, Robert Lynd, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Major American essayists include Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, James Russell Lowell, and Mark Twain.

Biography: The term “biography” is formed by adding “bio” (“life”) and “graph” (“written”). So, it is a person’s life story, written by somebody else (generally of his/her generation). Late in the seventeenth century, John Dryden defined biography neatly as “the history of particular men’s lives”. The term now stands for “a relatively full account of a particular person’s life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject’s activities and experiences” (Abrams 22).

Both the ancient Greeks and Romans wrote terse and formal life-narratives of famous individuals. The most famed surviving example is *Plutarch’s Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, commonly known as *Parallel Lives* or *Plutarch’s Lives* (c. 2 C. AD). It is an amalgamation of 48 biographies of noted personalities, arranged side by side to put forth their common moral virtues or vices. In England, the fairly detailed secular biography appeared in the seventeenth century; the most distinguished instance is Izaak Walton’s *Lives* (1640-78). The eighteenth century in England is the age of the full-fledged emergence of biography, and also of the theory of biography as a special literary *genre*. Some of the best-known biographies of this

period are Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-81), and James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

Some of the literary biographies that came out in the 20th and 21st centuries include *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (1953) by Andrew Wilson, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974) by Richard Holmes, *Tolstoy* (1989) by A. N. Wilson, *Dickens* (1990) by Peter Ackroyd, *The Imperfect Life of T S Eliot* (1998) by Lyndall Gordon, biography of the Bronte sisters *The Brontë Myth* (2001) by Lucasta Miller, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004) by Stephen Greenblatt, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (2005) by Julia Briggs, *Tête-à-Tête: The Lives and Loves of Simone de Beauvoir & Jean-Paul Sartre* (2005) by Hazel Rowley, and the biography of V. S. Naipaul *The World Is What It Is* (2009) by Patrick French.

Autobiography: Autobiography (Auto = self, Bio = Life, Graph = written) is “a biography written by the subject about himself or herself” (Abrams 22). The first fully developed autobiography is *Confessions* of St. Augustine, written in the 4th century. It is one of the influential texts of those times. From 1950s, autobiography started to proliferate on a huge scale. Some of the famous autobiographies of the 17th and 18th centuries include are Rousseau's *Confessions* (1764-70), Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1766), Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1642), John Bunyan's spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666).

Some of the notable autobiographies of the 19th century are Goethe's *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Ger., meaning “From My Life: Poetry and Truth”, originally published in 1811), Wordsworth's autobiography in verse, *The Prelude* (posthumously published in 1850),

Thomas Carlyle's *Reminiscences* (1881), Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Darwin's *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (1887).

Some of the noted autobiographies of the 20th and 21st centuries are *Mein Kampf* (1925) by Adolf Hitler, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1925) by Mahatma Gandhi, H. G. Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), George Bernard Shaw's *Sixteen Self-Sketches* (1948), Stephen Spender's *World Within World* (1951), *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) by Nelson Mandela, Graham Greene's *A Sort of Life* (1971), V. S. Naipaul's *Finding the Centre* (1984), *Moonwalk* (1988) by Michael Jackson, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, *Wings of Fire* (1999) by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, and *Playing It My Way* (2014) by Sachin Tendulkar.

Diary: Diary is a day-to-day record of the activities or reflections in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication. The term "diary" comes from the Latin word "*Diarium*", meaning "daily record". Diary as a literary type came into prominence in 17th Century. Examples of noted diarists are Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn, James Boswell, and Fanny Burney. The all-time favourite diary is *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (first print edition in 1825) by Pepys. Dorothy Wordsworth's remarkable collection of diary entries *Journals* (written 1798-1828) was published long after her death. In the 18th century, a diary of extraordinary emotional interest was kept by Jonathan Swift and sent to Ireland as *The Journal to Stella* (published 1766–68). This work is a surprising amalgamation of ambition, affection, wit, and freakishness. As a genre diary writing has been practiced for over five hundred years. The diary is also an important historical document of a person's life and gives us a vivid picture of

the social, historical, and political milieu of a specific era. The most notable English diary of the late 18th century was that of James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), *Journal* by Sir Walter Scott (published in 1890).

In the 20th century, *Journal of Katherine Mansfield* (1927), the two-volume *Journal* of André Gide (1939, 1954), Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), and the five-volume *Diary of Virginia Woolf* (1977–84), *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (1976), and *Conversations with Myself* (2010) by Nelson Mandela are among the most notable examples.

Memoir: Memoir (from Latin “*memoria*”, meaning “memory”) is a kind of biographical writing or historical account in which the “emphasis is not on the author’s developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed” (Abrams 22). The assertions made in memoirs are not fictional but factual. Memoir generally narrates a particular event or time, such as ‘spots of time’, i. e., touchstone moments and turning points from the memoirist’s life. Memoirs have been written since the ancient times, as shown by Julius Caesar’s *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, also known as *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* (58–49 BC). In the memoir, Caesar delineates the battles that were waged during the time that he engaged himself fighting the local armies in the Gallic Wars.

In the 21st Century, memoirs are generally written as a way to pass down a personal legacy, rather than as a literary work of art or historical document. Most of the memoirists think that it is their personal and family responsibility to write memoirs for the descendents. Some of the well-known memoirs of the 19th and 20th centuries are Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *The Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), Henry David Thoreau’s memoir *Walden* (1854), George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Virginia

Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* (1953), *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) by Sylvia Plath, *A Story of My Life* (1902) by Helen Keller, *A Moveable Feast* (1964) by Ernest Hemingway, and *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) by Barack Obama.

Travelogue: A travelogue is a truthful account of an individual's experience of traveling, usually told in the past tense and in the first person. The word "travelogue" supposedly comes from a combination of the two words *travel* and *monologue*. In turn, the word *monologue* comes from the Greek words *monos* (alone) and *logos* (speech, word). So, a travelogue is, in its most basic form, a spoken or written account of an individual's experiences of traveling. As a travelogue aims to be a true account of an individual's experiences traveling, descriptions of what the traveler sees, hears, tastes, smells, and feels in the external world while traveling are essential components. Of course, the traveller's thoughts, feelings, and reflections are important parts of the experience of travel.

A travelogue can exist in the form of a book, a blog, a diary or journal, an article or essay, a podcast, a lecture, or a narrated slide show. This literary type "subsumes works of exploration and adventure as well as guides and accounts of sojourns in foreign lands" (Cuddon 937). Travelogues are written in a style that is both interesting and informative. The passion for knowledge and about other countries has always driven men to embark upon land travels and sea-voyages to distant lands, the accounts of which have been left by them for posterity. Hence the history of travelogues is as old as the history of man's travels. These accounts serve as an important source of life, culture, and history of the places that these are dealt with. For the most

part travelogues were written by diplomats, scholars, missionaries, soldiers of fortune, doctors, explorers, and navigators.

Travelogues are important as they are an easily accessible way of learning about life and developing one's identity. This is primarily due to the lucid language and narrative structure that are usually traced in travelogues. Travelogues are written in the first person narrative voice. A first-person narrative means that the reader can easily place themselves in the traveller's shoes and understand their experiences. Travelogues are therefore widely accepted to the reading public.

The first travel writer is widely viewed as being the Greek writer and historian Herodotus. His book, *Histories* (450BC-420BC) records his travels across Greece, North Africa, and East Asia. It is widely accepted as one of the early travelogues. Travelogues continued to exert tremendous effect on the readers throughout the centuries due to the explorers like Marco Polo and Captain James Cook. As globe-trotting was widely inaccessible during that time, travelogues gave golden opportunity to people to learn about varied countries without leaving the comfort of their homes. Some of the noted travelogues of the 18th and 19th centuries are Daniel Defoe's *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1744); Tobias Smollett's *Travels in France and Italy* (1766); Lawrence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768); James Boswell's *An Account of Corsica* (1768), and *The Innocents Abroad or, The New Pilgrim's Progress* (1869) by Mark Twain.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, travelogues continue to be a popular non-fiction genre. Some of the noted travelogues of this period are D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* (1923), *Journey without Maps* (1936) by Graham Greene, *When the Going Was Good* (1946) by Evelyn Waugh, *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* (1957) by Lawrence Durrell, *Travels with Charley: In Search*

of America (1962) by John Steinbeck, *An Area of Darkness* (1964) by V. S. Naipaul, *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (1975), and *Dark Star Safari* (2002) by Paul Theroux, *Falling off the Map* (1993) and *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988) by Pico Iyer, *The Jaguar Smile* (1987) by Salman Rushdie, *Down Under* (2000) and *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America* by Bill Bryson, and *Go Girl: Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure* (1997) by Maya Angelou.

Let's Sum It Up:

So, biography, autobiography, diary, and memoir—all are non-fictional in nature. While biography is written from a third person perspective, all the latter three are narrated from the first person narrative voice.

References:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Heinle & Heinle, 1999.

Cuddon, J. A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. Penguin Books, 1999.

“What is a Travelogue?”. <https://www.travelwritingworld.com/what-is-a-travelogue/> 29 Dec 2020. Accessed on 28 Nov 2022.

Model Questions:

- i) Write a note on different forms of prose.
- ii) Write a note on travelogue with adequate examples.
- iii) What is the difference between a biography and an autobiography?
- iv) What is an essay? What are the two types of essay? Explain with proper examples.

Points to Ponder:

- i) One of the all-time favourite diaries is *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (first print edition in 1825).
- ii) One of the first memoirs is Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, also known as *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* (58–49 BC).
- iii) Herodotus's book, *Histories* (450BC-420BC) is widely regarded as one of the first travelogues.
- iv) The first fully developed autobiography is *Confessions* (4th C. AD) by St. Augustine.
- v) The oldest surviving example of biography is *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, commonly known as *Parallel Lives* or *Plutarch's Lives* (c. 2 C. AD).
- vi) The “essay” as a literary genre was first used by the French essayist Montaigne in his *Essais* (1580).
- vii) Bacon is often called the “Father of English Essays” as well as “Father of Empiricism”.

Further Study:

Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. OUP, 1990.

Childs, Peter, Roger Fowler. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Routledge, 2006.

Drabble, Margaret. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Unit-II: Varieties of Prose

Course Introduction: The word “prose” derives from the Latin “*prosa*”, meaning “straightforward”. Thus, prose is a direct, unadorned form of language, written or spoken, in ordinary usage. It is different from poetry in that it does not follow rhythm, measure, or rhyme-scheme. So, it is an “inclusive term for all discourses, spoken or written, which is not patterned into the lines either of metric verse or of free verse” (Abrams 246).

Some of the famous prose writers are Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Thomas Browne, Jonathan Swift, John Locke, Dr Samuel Johnson, Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith, David Hume, T. B. Macaulay, Jane Austen, Edward Gibbon, Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Lytton Strachey, Jack London, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Graham Greene, Vladimir Nabokov, and Samuel Beckett.

There are different kinds of prose writings. The present Unit will try to define descriptive, narrative, and expository prose with adequate examples.

Outcome of the Course:

i) In this Unit, the learners will get to know about varieties of prose as well as about different prose forms.

- ii) If a learner reads this unit carefully, he/she should be able to distinguish between prose and poetry;
- iii) The students will be able to define descriptive, narrative and expository prose;
- iv) The learners will recognize various figures of speech.
- v) They can identify different kinds of prose while deeply reading prescribed essays in the following Units.

Varieties of Prose

Descriptive Prose: Descriptive prose refers to writing used to describe specific scenes, settings, or people within a piece of prose (not poetry) writing. Such writing is picturesque and allows readers to envision the goings on within the writing. In descriptive prose, the readers are able visualize things as they are or were as imagined by the describer. A good description translates the writer's observation into vivid details and creates an atmosphere of its own. Through his/her description, the author tries to recreate what she has seen or imagined. A fine description is a painting in words. We can find this kind of descriptive prose in the graphic description of Mr. Squeers in Charles Dickens's novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39). In descriptive prose, the details are so sharp and vivid that we can visualize the person. Successful description makes you visualize the scene or the person.

Generally, a book cannot be written totally on description. It is often used as a catalyst to narrative or expository writing. Its sole purpose is to describe a sense perception or a particular mood. In Goldsmith's essay's "The Man in Black", we find Goldsmith's fine description of the Man in Black: "The Man in Black, whom I have often mentioned, is one whose friendship I could wish to acquire, because he possesses my esteem. His manners, it is true, are tinctured with some strange inconsistencies; and he may be justly termed a humorist in a nation of humorists".

Narrative Prose: A narrative prose tells us what happens or happened. It deals mainly with events—both external and internal. By internal events, we understand the thought-processes, feelings, emotions, and passions of individuals. Narrative prose attempts to recreate a lived experience or an imaginary one in such a convincing way that the readers are able to experience it in their mindscape. We lose ourselves in the characters and events of the narrative temporarily. Narratives can deal with the facts or fiction. Autobiographies, biographies, letters, travelogues, diaries and speeches are narratives of fact. The short story and novel also come under the category of narrative fiction but these are fictions. In a narrative, we are carried along the stream of action. When we narrate a story, we concentrate on the sequence of events. It is the action that grips the attention of the reader. The great Indian epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are examples of narrative writing. Narration is concerned with action and actors, it may make use of description but description is secondary. Action, characters and setting are the elements that are woven into a pattern to make the narrative interesting.

Rudyard Kipling lists six elements of a narrative prose: what, why, when, how, where, and who. What happens? Why does it happen? When does it happen? How does it happen? Where does it happen and to whom does it happen? These are the questions that a narrative prose tries to address satisfactorily. What makes a narrative interesting is not just what is said but the way it is said. In short, what we wish to point out is that narrative writing makes use of narration as well as description. In order to dramatize a particular situation, dialogues are inserted so that the writer is able to recreate the situation and communicate the same to the readers. In Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (1837), we find good examples of narrative prose.

Expository Prose: Expository prose deals with definition, explanation or interpretation. It can include writings on science, social science, law, moral philosophy, technology, history, political science, or literary criticism. Exposition is a form of logical presentation. Its main objective is to clarify with proper explanation. It presents details concretely and exactly. Expository writing is writing that explains. But we are not interested in writing that merely explains. We are interested in expository writing that can be read as literature.

G. B. Shaw in his essay “Freedom” first talks about the natural slavery of man to Nature by giving a series of examples. He then contrasts this with the unnatural slavery of man to man. By use of contrast, this argument is further strengthened. The result is that difficult concepts like freedom and slavery are readily understood. Swift in his essay “The Vindication of Issac Bickerstaff” beautifully explains why his prediction about Mr. Patridge’s death is right. He explains this with logical explanations.

Let’s Sum It Up:

In this Unit, we have discussed:

- i) how descriptive prose describes things as they are seen or imagined;
- ii) how narrative prose recreates an actual or imaginary experience, or sequence of events;
- iii) how expository writing deals in definition, explanation, or interpretation;

References:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Heinle & Heinle, 1999.

Cuddon, J. A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. Penguin Books, 1999.

Model Questions:

- i) Write a short note on descriptive prose with adequate examples.
- ii) Write a short note on narrative prose with ample examples.
- iii) Write a brief note on expository prose with apt examples.

Points to Ponder:

- i) Descriptive writing is picturesque and it allows the readers to understand a character or event in a crystal-clear way.
- ii) Narrative prose can be both factual and fictitious.
- iii) Expository writing is a kind of writing that explains.

Further Study:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Heinle & Heinle, 1999.

Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. OUP, 1990.

Childs, Peter, Roger Fowler. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Routledge, 2006.

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