

Prologue

Prologue Definition

Prologue comes from the Greek term *prologos*, which means “before word,” is an opening of a story that establishes the [setting](#), and gives background details.

Generally speaking, the main function of a prologue tells some earlier story, and connects it to the main story. Similarly, it serves as a means to introduce characters of a story, and sheds light on their roles. In its modern sense, a prologue acts as a separate entity, and is not considered part of the current story that a writer ventures to tell.

Examples of Prologue in Literature

Example #1: Prologue on the Greek Stage

The *prologos* in Greek dramas incorporated the above-mentioned features, but it had a wider importance than the modern interpretations of the prologue. Greek *prologos* was more like a *preface* – an introduction to a literary work provided by a dramatist, to tell how the idea of the story developed. Therefore, in Greek dramas, prologue was a complete episode, or the first act, which was succeeded by the remaining acts of a play.

The invention of prologue is attributed to Euripides. He prefixed a prologue to his plays as an explanatory first act in order to make the upcoming events in a play comprehensible for his [audience](#). Other dramatists followed in his footsteps, and prologue became a part of the traditional formula for writing plays. Almost all Greek prologues told about events that happened much earlier in time than the events depicted in the play.

Example #2: Prologue on the Latin Stage

Plautus, a Latin playwright, has written examples of prologues in his plays that were more elaborate than Greek prologues. His prologues were admired for their romantic quality, and were usually performed by characters that did not make an appearance in the play.

A prologue to Plautus' play *Rudens* is a perfect manifestation of his genius in writing prologue. Later, French playwright Moliere revived prologue on the Latin stage by prefixing it to his play *Amphitryon*. Furthermore, we notice French playwright John Racine introducing his choral [tragedy](#) *Esther*, with a prologue with the [character](#) Piety as its [speaker](#).

Example #3: Prologue on the Elizabethan Stage

The early English dramatists were influenced by the traditions of prologues in Greek and Latin plays. Even the early forms of [drama](#), mystery, and morality plays always began with a [homily](#), which was a religious commentary on the biblical story that was to be performed in those plays. Elizabethan dramatists took inspiration from the Greek and Latin tradition of prologue, holding it as a compulsory ingredient of their plays.

In 1562, Thomas Norton, and Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset wrote *Gorboduc*, which is believed to be the first English play. He prepared a pantomime that acted as a prologue for his play. Later, he wrote [Induction](#), which was a prologue to his *Miscellany* of short romantic epics.

A prologue to Elizabethan plays usually served to quieten and settle down an audience before the commencement of a play. It then introduced the themes of the play and other particulars to the audience, making them mentally prepared for the events they were to witness in the performance. Also, it was considered necessary to beg their leniency for any error that might occur in the writing of the play, or in the performances of actors on stage.

Usually, the character who uttered the prologue was dressed in black, in order to differentiate him from the rest of the actors who wore colorful costumes during their performances. For instance, read the following lines from the prologue in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

“Two households, both alike in dignity

From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-marked love
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, naught could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage—
The which, if you **with patient ears attend**,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.”

The Chorus in the extract not only introduces the [theme](#), but also asks the audience to be attentive “with patient ears attend.”

Example #4: Non-Dramatic Prologue

In English literature, a prologue was employed in non-dramatic [fiction](#) as well as fiction. One of the earliest prologue examples is Geoffrey Chaucer's *A Prologue to Canterbury Tales*, which was built on the conventional pattern. He used it to introduce all of his characters, or “pilgrims,” in dramatic details before each of them told their story on their way to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Beckett.

Function of Prologue

As previously mentioned, the primary function of a prologue is to let the readers or audience be aware of the earlier part of the story, and enable them to relate it to the main story. This literary device is also a means to present characters and establish their roles.