

Cliffhanger

Cliffhanger Definition

A cliffhanger is a type of [narrative](#) or a plot device in which the end is curiously abrupt, so that the main characters are left in a difficult situation, without offering any [resolution](#) of conflicts.

As a result of a sudden end, [suspense](#) is created at the very end of the novel, leaving the readers in such a state that they could not help but to [ask](#), “What will happen next?” This type of end is common to serially-published novels, which end at a dramatic or suspenseful moment. The cliffhanger plot device ensures readers will buy the next installment, in order to read and find out what happens.

Cliffhanger Examples in Everyday Life

Cliffhanger examples in television series are abundant. Episodes of TV series end during moments of high [drama](#) in order to ensure the following of viewers in the next episode. One famous example is the TV series *Lost*, which ended almost every episode with a cliffhanger. Commercial breaks compel writers to include a cliffhangers in the plot before each break to maintain suspense, and ensure viewership following the break.

Examples of Cliffhanger in Literature

Example #1: *One Thousand and One Nights* (By Muhsin Mahdi)

Cliffhanger has its roots in ancient oriental literature. One example is in the collection of stories known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which the king Shehreyar orders his queen Scheherzade to be hanged. She devises a plan to tell a story to the king every night, ending that story with a

cliffhanger. The king postponed the order of execution every day to hear the rest of the story.

Example #2: *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (By Thomas Hardy)

The term “cliffhanger” seems to get its name from the Thomas Hardy’s novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which was published in a magazine in a series format, with a chapter published every month. At the end of one of the episodes, Hardy left his main [character](#), Henry Knight, hanging onto a cliff, staring at the stony eyes of a fossil embedded in rocks below. Since then, every abrupt end has been termed a “cliffhanger.”

Example #3: *The Tempest* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare could not afford for his [audience](#) to be bored, and for this reason he uses a cliffhanger in Act 1, Scene 1 of his play *The Tempest*. The scene of a storm and shipwreck is depicted in a most vivid manner, but the audience is unsure if anybody on the ship has survived. The device is employed with the purpose that the audience will return to see the next act. Finally, the fate of the crew on board is revealed in Act 2, Scene 1 and the focus of the audience is ensured by that time.

Example #4: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (By J. K. Rowling)

J. K. Rowling, in her famous work *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, employs many cliffhangers. To cite an example from Chapter 3, “Letters from No One”:

“One minute to go and he’d be eleven. Thirty seconds...twenty...ten...nine – may be he’d wake Dudley up, just to annoy him – three...two...one...

BOOM!

The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.”

Obviously, you will turn the page and start reading the next chapter to know who was outside knocking at the door. The obvious reason for such endings is to create interest in the readers, so they will move on to the next chapter without the slightest hesitation.

Function of Cliffhanger

By nature, man is a curious creature. Cliffhangers in any form of literature appeal to our curiosity. The main purpose of employing this device is to maintain suspense in the plot in order to ensure the interest and focus of the readers. It acts as bait to lead the readers from one part of the text to another with more interest than before.

Cliffhangers, undoubtedly, are enjoyable to read at the end of the chapters of novels. However, it can be very frustrating at the very end of a novel, as it leaves readers discontented after all the effort they put in to read the novel.

In TV series, where the cliffhanger tool is perhaps most popular, they make use of this device to great effect. The viewers' favorite characters are left in a lurch, and the viewers yearn to know more about their fate. As a result, viewers are likely to want to keep up in the next episode.