

One Page Concept Review: Allusion

What is it?

An allusion is when a writer references people, places, events, literary works, myths, or works of art-- either directly or by implication. An allusion can function as either metaphor or metonymy, depending on the degree that an explicit comparison between the multiple texts is developed.

Many allusions are casual, which is to say that they are not terribly important to developing the big ideas in the text. Yes, you can write about such casual allusions in the same way that you can write about (for example) a metaphor, but a lot of the time allusions of this type are not really worth the effort, since the effort and space needed for the explanation will probably be out of proportion to its actual importance in the text. Make sure you're not wasting time on trivialities.

The important thing to understand about allusion is that it is either using the original text to make the same kind of point as the reference text (what I called single reference allusions earlier in the year), or it is opposed (on some level) to the original meaning and intentions of the reference text (what I called corrective allusions earlier in the year). Quite frankly, the exact terminology is irrelevant when writing about either kind of allusion, so don't bother memorizing either term for the test.

Why should I care?

An allusion that is developed at length might be worth talking about. To give an obvious example, *My Brilliant Friend* alludes to the story of Dido and Aeneas from Virgil's *Aeneid* at various points in the text (beginning in Chapter 18 of the "Adolescence" portion of the novel). We did nothing with it at the time (other than me pointing out that it was important, even though I was not going to do anything with it) because I was interested in more foundational literary elements at that point in the year. However, as a text about a growing love and eventual separation, the story of Dido and Aeneas has obvious parallels to the Elena/Elena friendship-- to the point of helping to explain the motivation for Lila's marriage at the end of the novel. Even the fact that Ferrante is implicitly comparing the intensity of a romantic relationship to the intensity of the friendship between the two girls is significant. There are whole bucket-loads of essays that could be written using this allusion as a springboard for analysis. (And my notes for the novel are still downloadable if you want to work something up).

The other works you may have read where the allusions are structural to the text are Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (where the protagonist is an àbíkú) and Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (where the events in Macondo allude to actual events in Colombian history). The assignments over the novel assignments should have helped to build this knowledge.

The Q3 essay prompt occasionally can be analyzed in terms of allusion (and at least once asked explicitly about allusion), but allusion poems are fairly common in the Q1 essay (especially when College Board uses the double poem format). You also can write about allusion in the Q3 essay when not explicitly prompted to do so.

How do I do it?

- **An allusion is a relationship between ideas.** That means that writing about this relationship requires an awareness of the degree of similarity to the original idea to which the text alludes.

If the text and alluding text are very similar in some fundamental way, we're talking metaphor. If there are obvious differences, chances are we're talking irony-- and if it's not irony, the alluding text is probably either critiquing something about the original text or critiquing something about the context of the alluding text that does not feel measures up to the original.

- Unless the allusion is given to you as part of the text (as in a Q1 prompt), **you have to explain the allusion**. That means you have to explain the context and meaning of the original text. Whether this is done briefly at length, in context of your analysis or as part of an introduction, all depends on context and how complicated relationship is between the original text and the alluding text. Always remember that it's your job to teach the piece. **If the reader lacks context, you have to build it.**

How do students screw this up?

Taking Things for Granted

- In a Q3 essay, **do not assume the reader knows either the details, context, or implications of the original text**. Your job is to teach this information to the reader, just like it's your job to teach the details, context, and implications of the novels and plays that you are writing about.

Overcomplicating the Task

- **When writing about allusion, it's either compare or contrast**. It's really that simple. Of course you have to draw some implication from this comparison or contrast-- which is obviously harder, but the process of explanation is just a matter of measuring similarities and differences.
- You have to build context to make the allusion clear to the reader, but **do not over-explain**. If the text is alluding to a myth (for instance), your explanation of the myth only has to cover the relevant parts. Don't waste time detailing more knowledge than the alluding text assumes.
- **If the allusion is explained in the writing task or detailed in a footnote, you do not have to reproduce this information**. This is one time you can take knowledge on the part of the reader for granted-- particularly in context of a forty minute essay.

Not Connecting to Something Important

- **When writing about allusion, focus on the why**. While it is true that an allusion is a relationship between two texts, if you do nothing else but tally these similarities and differences, you're opening yourself up to the reader asking, "So what?"
- **At its simplest level, the alluding text either approves or disapproves of something in the original text**. Figure out which of these two it is, and you're well on the way to writing something meaningful. If the allusion is the focus of your essay, this information should probably be contained in a thesis, and it should certainly be in a conclusion.
- **If an allusion is more casual, treat it like an image**. This means discussing the connotation and whatever that would imply about tone. Explaining the context and purpose of the original text should actually help you to establish this information.