Why Fiction?

Imagine a laboratory where you can test anything without limitation. Anything.

What would happen if a high-ranking politician, say a state governor or even the President of the United States, committed a murder? What if gravity could be turned off? How would human culture change if we ever “cured” death?

*Fiction*--a story born of the imagination rather than seeking to re-create or document lived experience--is a laboratory in which to test any and all of the above ideas, and infinitely more. Fiction is a realm in which literally anything can be explored, and this makes it uniquely valuable to humans trying to figure out how to exist in the world.

What is important in life? What matters? What should we accept as true or when and where should we doubt what others tell us, even what we experience ourselves? What do experiences in life mean and how might things be different?

Communication is fundamentally about these important questions. Language is a tool we use to understand, investigate, and persuade others of our thoughts and beliefs about these things that matter to us. Thus, the genres we use to communicate--whether profiles or reports, memos or resumes, ethnographies or reflections or countless others--all provide different ways to achieve goals related to these things we find important.

Yet among all these ways to communicate, fiction is unique. It is the only way to communicate--and one of the only ways to think--unfettered by the limitations of life as we know it. Fiction is thus the most rhetorical of all genres: the only consideration in creating a fictitious story is what effect the storyteller wishes to have on their audience.

The power of fiction can be expressed in a simple formula:

Fiction allows for great **clarity**, powerful **authenticity**, and infinite **possibility**.

**Clarity**

It’s hard to know what matters in life, and even harder to feel confident in that knowledge. So much of what we experience seems to be a product of chance, complex mixed causes, even deception. When we ask others why things happen or what they mean, we get as many different interpretations as individuals we ask. There’s a reason why the greatest of all human questions is “What is the meaning of life?” Unfortunately, life is rarely ever clear.

Where reality is cluttered and confusing, fiction is pristine. Nothing in fiction is included by chance; no element is present just because “that’s how it is,” as is so common in reality. Instead, everything in fiction is included for a purpose. Everything means something.

Fiction is a purely rhetorical act. Every word is chosen for effect. Nonfiction in any form, in contrast, is an impossible negotiation between two competing values: adhering to the “facts,” accurately representing what happened because it happened, and crafting the narrative so as to create a desired effect as potently as possible. But just because something happened does not mean it was important. It doesn’t mean that it *means* anything.

Fiction discards the faulty assumption that if something happened it must matter and preserves only what, to the mind of the storyteller, truly does matter. It clears out all the clutter and chaos, leaving only what the author sees as important in life.

This clarity of fiction is easily scene in the hypothetical example. A hypothetical example is a fictional example that demonstrates a complex topic in a simple, specific form easily relatable to the audience. It is used not as evidence that something actually happened but to make a complex and potentially confusing concept clear.

This clarity is an essential component of fiction’s power as laboratory, as method by which to test anything. Philosophy has long used fiction this way under a pseudonym: the thought experiment. Dr. Michael [Huemer](http://www.owl232.net/rand.htm#5.3.1), a professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado, explains fiction “provide[s] a means for conceptual *controls* that often cannot be reproduced in reality.” A classic example is Plato’s fictitious island nation of Atlantis, a construct the philosopher used to communicate his idea of an ideally structured state.

Regardless of length, all fiction works this way. By shedding responsibility to accurately represent every facet of reality--whether it be the lived experience of a person or the physical laws of matter--the storyteller gains the ability to distill and focus every concept and word purely for effect. Thus, any principle, argument, or investigation can be communicated with rare and precious clarity by focusing only on what matters.

**Authenticity**

A common critical assumption made of fiction is that it “isn’t real” and thus must not matter. Neither prove to be accurate.

Anything we read or hear is, in a manner of speaking, “not real” as it did not literally happen to us. It may have happened to someone else, but our experience is created by the language used by the communicator. That language affects our thinking (or cognition), and that thinking, in turn, determines how what we’ve read or heard impacts us.

On this cognitive level where audiences experience stories, [the “real/unreal” distinction means nothing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Oi1GWxMNDORi8sibO04dTknuQEzQqkJFIYQSurLd3g8/edit). According to Susanne Kinnebrock and Helena Bilandzik, both professors of Communication Studies, “The distinction of fact and fiction… seems next to irrelevant for story experience and effects on the audience… People learn just as much about their actual world from fictional stories as from factual stories.”

So for a reader, a fictional story is just as real as a nonfiction story--assuming each is effectively told. It’s amazing that it doesn’t matter if the story involves people spontaneously flying into the air, or talking farm animals, or a person no longer aging for no apparent cause. In all cases, the human brain reacts as if the story were real.

In effect, any story we read or listen to is a simulation for our brain. It’s a created experience. And psychology is discovering that fiction’s simulation ability is far more potent than once believed. In the last decade, research has shown that mirror neurons—neurons that fire both when an animal acts and witnesses an action—respond to fiction. Thus, [in the brain’s terms, reading a fictional action can be as real as performing that action in real life](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/is-your-brain-culture/201108/stories-and-the-mirror-inside-you).

We are just beginning to understand the implications of the brain reacting to fictional stories as if they were real, direct experience. One of the most important discoveries of recent research is that fiction makes us more humane where nonfiction does not. Fiction literally builds our ability to care about other people.

Research has shown that readers of fiction exhibit greater empathy for others than those who read nonfiction (Mar, Oatley, and Peterson). That’s right, stories of the unreal help us care about real people more than stories that actually happened. As Newbery-winning author Neil Gaiman terms it, in reading fiction “you learn that everyone out there is a me, as well.”

[Fiction also shapes how we understand ourselves. To explore this concept read: [Real Magic: How Harry Potter Changed One Life](https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-ministry-of-magic-are-morons-group-harry-potter/bellas-engilsh-essay-hp-changed-my-life/349408031744348/)]

This is just one of potentially many hugely influential results of fiction’s authentic influence on the human brain.

**Possibility**

The famous science fiction author Robert A. [Heinlein](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/01/05/done/#note-12754-8), using the voice of one of his fictional characters, once said, “Everything is theoretically impossible, until it’s done.”

All innovation, discovery, and invention is a product not of what has already happened but what might happen but hasn’t yet. Fiction unlocks these possibilities, allowing the human mind to quest out beyond personal experience, history and other cultural records, or even known scientific law to potentials not yet realized.

As already addressed, fiction’s effect on the brain makes it a simulation--a “fake” experience that we react to as if it were real. Just as a fighter pilot trains in a flight simulator before assuming the risk of actual hours in the cockpit, fiction provides the chance to experience an infinite variety of hypothetical experiences in a safe environment. It is similar to the function of dreams. Our mind plays out scenarios to help us figure out how we may respond physically, intellectually, or emotionally in situations we have never experienced.

Fiction is a simulator of infinite capacity. And like a dream, that not every element is literally possible is important and constructive. These infinite options allow for a sense of newness and originality when simulating essentially common situations. There’s an old saying that there are no new stories, only old stories told in new ways.

Consider the story of Robin Hood. How many versions are you aware across all forms of media? Ten? Twenty? More? Whatever the number, each takes essentially the same story and, with some level of adjustment to characters, setting, and plot, delivers it anew. This invites audiences familiar with the basic story itself--the hero who robs from the rich to give to the poor--to reinforce as well as reconsider their understanding of the tale without boring repetition. Fictitious trappings make the trite potent once more.

Possibility is only endless in imagination. In fiction, a familiar idea can be made new, a tired issue given new vibrancy, a foreign value made relevant for the first time.

**Fiction: Far More than Entertainment**

Critics sometimes claim fiction is merely entertainment. They call it “escapist,” a whimsical deviation from the real world and the things that really matter there. Fiction *can* be an escape, and given what we know about the realities of many human lives it should be obvious how precious any chance to escape can be.

But the true value of fiction lies not in the escaping but in what we bring back from fictional journeys to our captive lives: new attitudes, ideas, and approaches, weapons to fight what’s wrong in life and maps for how to actually build a better world. Positive change requires imagination; it requires going beyond mimicking what is real here and now to what *could* be real in the future. Fiction offers people tools to escape the confining prisons of now.

Albert Einstein, originator of the theory of general relativity and arguably as great a scientist as has ever lived, is often attributed the following statement: “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales” (qtd. in Winick). But there’s ample question whether he actually said this.

[[Read an exploration into the origins of the quote on the Library of Congress Blog](http://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2013/12/einsteins-folklore/)]

We’ll likely never know the answer for certain, to know the fact of the statement. But the question is, does it matter? Does the fact of it have any bearing on its truth?