Fairy Tales

A fairy tale, in the simplest terms, is a story that conveys a moral or lesson, typically to children. Most have historical connections to folklore and oral tales; they are about magic and magical creatures and feature houses made of gingerbread, godmothers with magic wands, and animals that talk and wear human clothing. Many traditional fairy tales, such as “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” and “Sleeping Beauty,” feature princesses in peril and princes saving the day. However, modern tales, such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, offer a critique of society (in Atwood’s novel, it’s a feminist critique), and sometimes a grim view of the future.

As a child, you probably read or saw film versions of traditional fairy tales and learned social lessons from them. “Hansel and Gretel” and “Little Red Riding Hood” warn children of the dangers of going into the dark woods without a grown-up and reinforce the rule “don’t talk to strangers.” “The Three Little Pigs” enforces the idea that if something is worth doing, it’s worth doing right.

As an adult — and as a reader and writer — you most likely encounter fairy tales from a different, more analytic angle. Use the guidelines that follow to read fairy tales and related genres critically. Understanding their conventions and rhetorical contexts are key to composing in them.

Analyzing Fairy Tales

Purpose Traditionally authors write fairy tales to entertain their readers and to teach morals or lessons to young audiences. Authors achieve these purposes in part through characters — often stock characters such as imperiled princesses and dangerous wolves that are easily identifiable and generic enough that a wide audience can relate to them. Authors of fairy tales entertain by keeping their stories brief and their pacing brisk and instruct by using every detail sentence and line of dialogue so it leads to the moral or lesson.

Audience Authors of fairy tales create stories for children and, secondarily, for the adults who read to them at home or at school. Authors bring in fantasy elements, such as magic and talking animals, because these elements captivate children. The stories are written so that they're easy for young readers to understand and remember; authors tend to focus on universal human themes (curiosity, fear, coming of age) to connect with as many readers as possible.

Rhetorical appeals Authors of fairy tales most often rely on appeals based on pathos. Because their purpose is to teach a lesson to a young audience, writers rely on emotion to move the reader. In "Little Red Riding Hood," the reader needs to feel the danger of wolves in order to heed the warning of the tale. Authors also establish their credibility (ethos) by using the conventions of the genre, such as the stock opening of "Once upon a time" and a voice that sounds very assured.

Modes & media Most often, we encounter fairy tales in anthologies such as *Grimm's* and *Mother Goose.* These print-based collections of tales are usually illustrated; sometimes individual tales are translated into film, such as Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty*, or recorded as audiobooks.

Elements of the genre Fairy tales are characterized by the following:

- *Typical elements of fiction*. Fairy tales are works of fiction, and like other works of fiction, they are typically structured around a few main elements. The plot is an arrangement of incidents that shape the action of a story. Authors also employ characters (the people involved in the story), a setting (the time, place, and atmosphere in which the story takes place), symbolism (the use of a person, object, image, word, or action that has a range of meaning beyond the literal), a point of view (who tells the story and how), and a theme (the story's central meaning or main idea).
- *Magical or fantasy elements*. Unlike most other types of fiction, fairy tales, as the genre's name implies, also feature fairies and magical creatures, such as the fairy godmother in "Cinderella"; magical elements, such as the decades-long naps in "Sleeping Beauty" and

"Rip Van Winkle"; and/or magical objects, such as the talking mirror in "Snow White."

- *Stock characters*. Fairy-tale characters are usually one-dimensional, defined by only a few exaggerated details, such as greed, intelligence, or beauty. In "The Three Little Pigs," each pig is defined by one particular trait: One builds a house of straw, one a house of sticks, and one a house of bricks. Fairy-tale characters are usually completely good or completely evil (such as the "big bad" wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood"). They are often animals that the author has anthropomorphized — that is, the animals have human capabilities, such as being able to speak and wear clothing.
- *Conflict*. In most fairy tales, main characters have a task to fulfill or a journey to complete; often they are in danger.
- *Moral or lesson*. Conveying a moral or lesson — which is usually direct and obvious — is the main purpose of most fairy tales (don't go into the woods alone).

Style Fairy tales are characterized by:

- *A conversational but often didactic tone*. Authors often use an informal tone (e.g., "Grandma, what big teeth you have"), but because they are writing to teach children a lesson, the tone can also be preachy. Traditional fairy tales do not feature irony or humor, though some modern versions do.
- *Simple prose*. Most authors of fairy tales use very straightforward language and sentence structure (e.g., "Once upon a time").
- *Repetition and rhythm*. Like poems or songs, fairy tales often include specific patterns of language and refrains (e.g., "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down.")
- *Sparse detail*. Authors tend to rely on just a few details, for example, describing a castle simply as "gloomy" or a forest as "dark." Details such as how large or old the castle is, or what kinds of trees grow in the forest, are usually not revealed.

Design Although the details in the fairy tales themselves are usually spare, many are lavishly illustrated. Some are illustrated with realistic

images, such as the Gustave Doré engravings that accompany some editions of Charles Perrault's version of "Little Red Riding Hood." In more modern books of fairy tales, illustrations are often colorful and fanciful looking; in *The Random House Book of Fairy Tales*, for example, each tale includes full-color images that illustrate key moments.

Sources Fairy tales do not include footnotes or Works Cited pages, although most modern-day fairy tales are based on older stories that have been circulating in either oral or written form for generations. "Little Red Riding Hood," for instance, is connected to many European peasant tales that go back as far as the 1300s.

Guided Reading | Fairy Tale

Charles Perrault (1628–1703) was a French writer during the reign of Louis XIV, and he told stories and tales, in part, to entertain the king and the royal court. Perrault's work did much to promote the fairy tale as a literary genre, and many of his versions of tales have been retold by other writers, including the Brothers Grimm. Presented here is Perrault's telling of "Little Red Riding Hood." Drawing on existing tales that had been passed on verbally through generations, he published the tale, originally titled "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge," in a collection of fairy tales in 1697. Our source for the Perrault text is a library of folklore and mythology at the University of Pittsburgh, hosted by Professor D. L. Ashliman, who has also gathered a collection of critical essays for each tale. The accompanying illustration was created by Gustave Doré and is from a Perrault edition of "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge."

In the annotations that are shown, we've applied a possible analysis of the tale in terms of the author's rhetorical situation and the fairy tale's conventions as a genre. The analysis is meant not as an interpretation of the story, but as a tool for reading fairy tales and other narrative genres critically.

FAIRY TALE

RHETORICAL SITUATION & CHOICES

PURPOSE
Perrault's purpose is to convey a message or moral.

AUDIENCE
Readers of fairy tales are usually children who are learning about how the world works.

RHETORICAL APPEALS
Perrault establishes the tale's credibility by beginning with "Once upon a time," associating the tale with a venerable past (ethos). The author appeals to readers' pathos by implying that the child is in danger.

MODES & MEDIA
Mode = written: Author Charles Perrault might have assumed two things about the audiences for his collected fairy tales: (1) that adults would read the stories silently to themselves, and (2) that adults would read the stories aloud for their children. Further, given the long oral tradition of telling tales and the limited options for entertainment (seventeenth century), it is also likely that the story would have been read aloud as a source of amusement for adults. So there are both written and verbal aspects to fairy tale modes.

◀ What is the composer, Charles Perrault, doing?

How do I know this is ▶ a fairy tale?

Credit: Gustave Doré illustration from "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge."

Once upon a time there lived in a certain village a little country girl, the prettiest creature who was ever seen. Her mother was excessively fond of her; and her grandmother doted on her still more. This good woman had a little red riding hood made for her. It suited the girl so extremely well that everybody called her Little Red Riding Hood.

One day her mother, having made some cakes, said to her, "Go, my dear, and see how your grandmother is doing, for I hear she has been very ill. Take her a cake, and this little pot of butter."

Little Red Riding Hood set out immediately to go to her grandmother, who lived in another village.

As she was going through the wood, she met with a wolf, who had a very great mind to eat her up, but he dared not, because of some woodcutters working nearby in the forest. He asked her where she was going. The poor child, who did not know that it was dangerous to stay and talk to a wolf, said to him, "I am going to see my grandmother and carry her a cake and a little pot of butter from my mother."

"Does she live far off?" said the wolf.

"Oh I say," answered Little Red Riding Hood; "it is beyond that mill you see there, at the first house in the village."

"Well," said the wolf, "and I'll go and see her too. I'll go this way and you go that, and we shall see who will be there first."

GENRE CONVENTIONS

ELEMENTS OF THE GENRE
This is a made-up story, geared toward children.
It has a moral, which, in this case, is spelled out in the final paragraph.
It includes magical elements, such as a talking animal.
The main character has a task or journey to complete and is in potential danger.
The tale features symbolism, in this case, a red cloak.

STYLE
The story is set in the past; the author begins with the much-used opening "Once upon a time."
Perrault tells the story simply but builds tension as he moves toward the conflict and the closing lesson that he wants to impart.
The tale features a stock character (the big bad wolf).
The setting has little detail.

DESIGN
Perrault wrote text; editors of some editions of his text added illustrations, such as the one shown here.

SOURCES
There are no footnotes or Works Cited list. There are many different sources and versions of this

Charles Perrault, *Little Red Riding Hood*

Description

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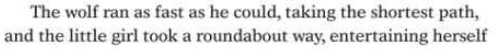
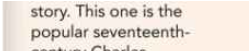




Description

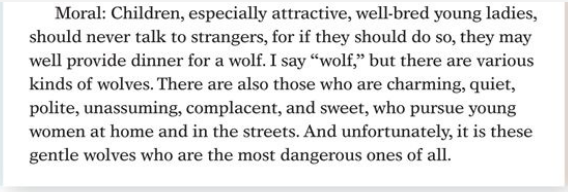
The story reads, “The wolf ran as fast as he could, taking the shortest path, and the little girl took a roundabout way, entertaining herself by gathering nuts, running after butterflies, and gathering bouquets of little flowers. It was not long before the wolf arrived at the old woman’s house. He knocked at the door: tap, tap. “Who’s there?” “Your grandchild, Little Red Riding Hood,” replied the wolf, counterfeiting her voice; “who has brought you a cake and a little pot of butter sent you by mother.” The good grandmother, who was in bed, because she was somewhat ill, cried out, “Pull the bobbin, and the latch will go up.” The wolf pulled the bobbin, and the door opened, and then he immediately fell upon the good woman and ate her up in a moment, for it been more than three days since he had eaten. He then shut the door and got into the grandmother’s bed,

expecting Little Red Riding Hood, who came some time afterwards and knocked at the door: tap, tap. “Who’s there?” Little Red Riding Hood, hearing the big voice of the wolf, was at first afraid; but believing her grandmother had a cold and was hoarse, answered, “It is your grandchild Little Red Riding Hood, who has brought you a cake and a little pot of butter mother sends you.” The wolf cried out to her, softening his voice as much as he could, “Pull the bobbin, and the latch will go up.” Little Red Riding Hood pulled the bobbin, and the door opened. The wolf, seeing her come in, said to her, hiding himself under the bedclothes, “Put the cake and the little pot of butter upon the stool, and come get into bed with me.” Little Red Riding Hood took off her clothes and got into bed. She was greatly amazed to see how her grandmother looked in her nightclothes, and said to her, “Grandmother, what big arms you have!” “All the better to hug you with, my dear.” “Grandmother, what big legs you have!” “All the better to run with, my child.” “Grandmother, what big ears you have!” “All the better to hear with, my child.” “Grandmother, what big eyes you have!” “All the better to see with, my child.” “Grandmother, what big teeth you have got!” “All the better to eat you up with.” And, saying these words, this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood, and ate her all up.”

The text surrounding the story reads, “Medium = print:

“Little Red Riding Hood” is presented here in print, and the assumption is that you will read it linearly, that is, from beginning to end. (In this case, you might be noticing the annotations in the margins as well.) Printed media are usually presented as pages that you turn; this gives an author the opportunity to create a minicliffhanger at the end of a page so that readers will turn the page and stay hooked. In contrast, a digital rendering of this tale might include hyperlinks that would allow you to skip around and read the story in whatever order you like.

story. This one is the popular seventeenth century Charles Perrault version, and its sources, in turn, probably date back to the fourteenth century. He is credited with being the first person to gather tales that had only been told orally in the past and to treat them as literature.”


Moral: Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say “wolf,” but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.

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QUESTIONS | Analyzing Perrault’s Fairy Tale

RHETORICAL SITUATION & CHOICES

1. **Purpose.** Charles Perrault, in his telling of “Little Red Riding Hood,” seeks to entertain and provide a lesson — in fact, he states the official moral at the end of the story. However, what other interpretations could be reached about the main character, the story, and the story’s lessons? Which details support these alternative interpretations?
2. **Audience.** To what degree does Perrault gear his version of the tale toward children — and to what degree toward adults? What makes you think so? What are the ages of the children who are the primary targets of this tale, and how do you know? Which details or aspects of the story would appeal to different age groups?
3. **Rhetorical appeals.** Little Red Riding Hood seems to be an extremely naïve character, not quite recognizing that the creature in her grandmother’s bed is not her grandmother. How does Little Red’s naïveté function in terms of ethos, pathos, and logos?
4. **Rhetorical appeals.** How would the ethos of the tale be affected if, instead of beginning with “Once upon a time,” it opened with a specific time and place, such as “Stockholm, Sweden; January 12, 1960”?
5. **Modes & media.** If you were to adapt “Little Red Riding Hood” for a digital format, what changes would you make? What might you

hyperlink? Why?

GENRE CONVENTIONS

6. **Elements of the genre.** Why is a wolf a fitting animal to play the role of the villain in this story? What other animals might adequately fulfill the role?
7. **Elements of the genre.** What is the significance of Little Red Riding Hood's red cape? What abstract or symbolic meaning might it have? Why do you think so?
8. **Style.** Sometimes the moral in a fairy tale is made explicit, as in this tale, and other times it's implied but not explicitly stated. What is the effect of the author stating the moral explicitly? And why does Perrault say that gentle wolves are the most dangerous?
9. **Style.** Identify the details of the story that convey the setting. To what extent do they contribute to your visualization of the story? To what extent do they add to the story's universality?
10. **Design.** How does Gustave Doré's woodblock illustration included with the text influence your reading of the story?
11. **Sources.** It's possible that oral stories served as inspiration for Perrault's tale and other similar tales. Can you think of more modern stories or films that may use this story as a source?

CHECKLIST | Drafting a Fairy Tale

Thinking of drafting a fairy tale? Ask yourself the following questions.

RHETORICAL SITUATION & CHOICES

□ **Purpose.** What is my story, and why do I want to tell it? What message, main idea, or moral do I want to convey? What makes my message so important?

□ **Audience.** Who are my readers? Why will my story matter to them? And how will I reach them?

☐ **Rhetorical appeals.** How will I use ethos, pathos, and logos to tell my tale and reach my audience? How will I establish my authority as a writer? To what extent will I appeal to my readers' emotions? What role, if any, will logic play in my tale?

☐ **Modes & media.** Will I compose my fairy tale in written, audio, or visual form? Will I present it in print, electronically, or face-to-face?

GENRE CONVENTIONS

☐ **Elements of the genre.** How will I structure my plot? Who are my characters? What is going to happen to them? What is my story's setting? Who will narrate the story, and how? To what extent will I use symbols to convey meaning? How about magical objects? Talking animals? What is the central conflict of my tale? How will I get to my moral?

☐ **Style.** What tone will I take in my writing? Will my tale be funny? Preachy? Both? What kind of language will I use? How much detail?

☐ **Design.** How will I format my story? Will I include illustrations? If so, what kind? And for what key scenes? Why?

☐ **Sources.** Will my fairy tale connect to an existing tale? Will it connect with actual events in history? What sources, if any, will I draw on for my story? Why will I use those sources?

PRACTICE

Telling a Tale

Draft a brief fairy tale of your own in which a generic character defined by one trait (old man, poor woman, silly boy, vain girl) experiences something that teaches a lesson. The lesson should connect in some way to a main trait of your character, just as Little Red's naïveté is connected to her ultimate demise. Alternatively, write your own version of "Little Red Riding Hood" or another popular

traditional tale. What will be your main goal in rewriting the tale (perhaps you want to improve on it or make it more modern)? How will your rhetorical situation differ from that of the earlier authors of the tale? What conventions will you adhere to or adapt? How will your writing style compare to the original?