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# Definitions of Science Fiction

It's not as easy to define as it seems

by [Mark Wilson](#) , Updated February 05, 2018

These definitions of science fiction are for those of you who are not satisfied with Damon Knight's definition of science fiction: "...[[Science Fiction](#)] means what we point to when we say it."

## Brian W. Aldiss

Science fiction is the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science) and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mould.

—*Trillion Year Spree: the History of Science Fiction* (London, 1986)

## Dick Allen

Is it any wonder that a new generation has rediscovered science fiction, rediscovered a form of literature that argues through its intuitive force that the individual can shape and change and influence and triumph; that man can eliminate both war and poverty; that miracles are possible; that love, if given a chance, can become the main driving force of human relationships?

## Kingsley Amis

Science Fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin.

— *New Maps Of Hell* (London, 1960)

## Benjamin Appel

Science fiction reflects scientific thought; a fiction of things-to-come based on things-on-hand.

— *The Fantastic Mirror-SF Across The Ages* (Panthenon 1969)

## Isaac Asimov

Modern science fiction is the only form of [literature](#) that consistently considers the nature of the changes that face us, the possible consequences, and the possible solutions.

That branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings.

— (1952)

## James O. Bailey

The touchstone for [science fiction](#), then, is that it describes an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences. The most serious pieces of this fiction arise from speculation about what may happen if science makes an extraordinary discovery. The romance is an attempt to anticipate this discovery and its impact upon society and to foresee how mankind may adjust to the new condition.

— *Pilgrims Through Space and Time* (New York, 1947)

## Gregory Benford

SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible.

## John Boyd

Science fiction is story-telling, usually imaginative as distinct from realistic fiction, which poses the effects of current or extrapolated scientific discoveries, or a single discovery, on the behavior of individuals of society.

Mainstream fiction gives imaginative reality to probable events within a framework of the historical past or present; science fiction gives reality to possible events, usually in the future, extrapolated from present scientific knowledge or existing cultural and social trends. Both genres ordinarily observe the unities and adhere to a cause-and-effect schema.

## **Ray Bradbury**

Science fiction is really [sociological studies](#) of the future, things that the writer believes are going to happen by putting two and two together.

## **Reginald Bretnor**

Science Fiction: fiction based on rational speculation regarding the human experience of science and its resultant technologies.

## **Paul Brians**

[Science Fiction is:]a subdivision of fantastic literature which employs science or rationalism to create an appearance of plausibility.

— *Posted to the mailing list SF-LIT, May 16, 1996*

## **John Brunner**

As its best, SF is the medium in which our miserable certainty that tomorrow will be different from today in ways we can't predict, can be transmuted to a sense of excitement and anticipation, occasionally evolving into awe. Poised between intransigent skepticism and uncritical credulity, it is par excellence the literature of the open mind.

## **John W. Campbell, Jr.**

The major distinction between fantasy and science fiction is, simply, that science fiction uses one, or a very, very few new postulates, and develops the rigidly consistent logical consequences of these limited postulates. Fantasy makes its rules as it goes along...The basic nature of fantasy is "The only rule is, make up a new rule any time you need one!" The basic rule of science fiction is "Set up a basic proposition--then develop its consistent, logical consequences."

— *Introduction, Analog 6, Garden City, New York, 1966*

## **Terry Carr**

Science Fiction is literature about the future, telling stories of the marvels we hope to see-- or for our descendants to see--tomorrow, in the next century, or in the limitless duration of time.

— *Introduction, Dream's Edge, Sierre Club Books, San Fransisco, 1980*

## **Groff Conklin**

The best definition of science fiction is that it consists of stories in which one or more definitely scientific notion or theory or actual discovery is extrapolated, played with, embroidered on, in a non-logical, or fictional sense, and thus carried beyond the realm of the immediately possible in an effort to see how much fun the author and reader can have to explore the imaginary outer reaches of a given idea's potentialities.

## **Edmund Crispin**

A science fiction story is one which presupposes a technology, or an effect of technology, or a disturbance in the natural order, such as humanity, up to the time of writing, has not in actual fact experienced.

— *Best Science Fiction Stories (London, 1955)*

## **L. Sprague De Camp**

Therefore, no matter how the world makes out in the next few centuries, a large class of readers at least will not be too surprised at anything. They will have been through it all before in fictional form, and will not be too paralyzed with astonishment to try to cope with contingencies as they arise.

## **Lester Del Rey**

... science fiction "is the myth-making principle of human nature today."

## **Gordon R. Dickson**

In short, the straw of a manufactured realism with which the writer makes his particular literary bricks must be entirely convincing to the reader in its own right, or the whole story will lose its power to convince.

## **H. Bruce Franklin**

We talk a lot about science fiction as extrapolation, but in fact, most science fiction does not extrapolate seriously. Instead, it takes a willful, often whimsical, leaps into a world spun out of the fantasy of the author...

In fact, one good working definition of science fiction may be the literature which, growing with science and technology, evaluates it and relates it meaningfully to the rest of human existence.

## **Northrop Frye**

Science fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong tendency to myth.

## **Vincent H. Gaddis**

Science fiction expresses the dreams that, varied and modified, later becomes the visions and then the realities of scientific progress. Unlike fantasy, they present probabilities in their basic structure and create a reservoir of imaginative thought that sometimes can inspire more practical thinking.

## **Hugo Gernsback**

By "scientification,"... I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision.

## **Amit Goswami**

Science Fiction is that class of fiction which contains the currents of change in science and society. It concerns itself with the critique, extension, revision, and conspiracy of revolution, all directed against static scientific paradigms. Its goal is to prompt a paradigm shift to a new view that will be more responsive and true to nature.

— *The Cosmic Dancers* (New York, 1983)

## **James E. Gunn**

Science Fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger.

— *Introduction, The Road To Science Fiction, Vol 1, NEL, New York 1977*

## **Gerald Heard**

Science fiction in the hand of character-draughtsman can create a new contemporary tension-of-choice, new moral decisions, and so indicate how they may be faced or flunked.

In its [science fiction's] aim it is bound, by its extrapolation of science and its use of dramatic plot, to view man and his machines and his environment as a three-fold whole, the machine being the hyphen. It also views man's psyche, man's physique, and the entire life process as also a threefold interacting unit. Science fiction is the prophetic ... the apocalyptic literature of our particular culminating epoch of crisis.

## **Damon Knight**

What we get from science fiction—what keeps us reading it, in spite of our doubts and occasional disgust—is not different from the thing that makes mainstream stories rewarding, but only expressed differently. We live on a minute island of known things. Our undiminished wonder at the mystery which surrounds us is what makes us human. In science fiction, we can approach that mystery, not in small, everyday symbols, but in bigger ones of space and time.

## **Robert A. Heinlein**

A handy short definition of almost all science fiction might read: realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method.

To make this definition cover all science fiction (instead of "almost all") it is necessary only to strike out the word "future."

— *from: Science Fiction: its nature, faults, and virtues, in The Science Fiction Novel, Advent, Chicago: 1969*

Science Fiction is speculative fiction in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it, including all established facts and natural laws. The result can be extremely fantastic in content, but it is not fantasy; it is legitimate—and often very tightly reasoned—speculation about the possibilities of the real world. This category excludes rocket ships that make U-turns, serpent men of Neptune that lust after human maidens, and stories by authors who flunked their Boy Scout merit badge tests in descriptive astronomy.

— *from: Ray Guns And Spaceships, in Expanded Universe, Ace, 1981*

## **Frank Herbert**

Science fiction represents the modern heresy and the cutting edge of speculative imagination as it grapples with Mysterious Time—linear or non-linear [time](#).

Our motto is Nothing Secret, Nothing Sacred.

## **Damon Knight**

What we get from science fiction—what keeps us reading it, in spite of our doubts and occasional disgust—is not different from the thing that makes mainstream stories rewarding, but only expressed differently. We live on a minute island of known things. Our undiminished wonder at the mystery which surrounds us is what makes us human. In science fiction, we can approach that mystery, not in small, everyday symbols, but in bigger ones of space and time.

## **Sam J. Lundwall**

A simplified definition would be that the author of a "straight" science fiction story proceeds from (or alleges to proceed from) known facts, developed in a credible way...

## **Sam Moskowitz**

Science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science, and philosophy.

## **Alexei Panshin**

Facts and a concern with change are the stuff that science fiction is made of; science fiction that ignores facts and change can be made less frightening and more popular, but inasmuch as it is superficial, stupid, false-to-fact, timid foolish or dull, it is minor in another and more important way, and it is certainly bad as science fiction.

... its [science fiction's] attraction lies ... in the unique opportunity it offers for placing familiar things in unfamiliar contexts, and unfamiliar things in familiar contexts, thereby yielding fresh insights and perspective.

## **Frederik Pohl**

The future depicted in a good SF story ought to be in fact possible, or at least plausible. That means that the writer should be able to convince the reader (and himself) that the wonders he is describing really can come true...and that gets tricky when you take a good, hard look at the world around you.

— *The Shape of Things to Come and Why It Is Bad, SFC, December 1991*

If anyone were to force me to make a thumbnail description of the differences between SF and fantasy, I think I would say that SF looks towards an imaginary future, while fantasy, by and large, looks towards an imaginary past. Both can be entertaining. Both can possibly be, perhaps sometimes actually are, even inspiring. But as we can't change the past, and can't avoid changing the future, only one of them can be real.

— *Pohlemic, SFC, May 1992*



That's really what SF is all about, you know: the big reality that pervades the real world we live in: the reality of change. Science fiction is the very literature of change. In fact, it is the only such literature we have.

— *Pohlemic, SFC, May 1992*

Does the story tell me something worth knowing, that I had not known before, about the relationship between man and technology? Does it enlighten me on some area of science where I had been in the dark? Does it open a new horizon for my thinking? Does it lead me to think new kinds of thoughts, that I would not otherwise perhaps have thought at all? Does it suggest possibilities about the alternative possible future courses my world can take? Does it illuminate events and trends of today, by showing me where they may lead tomorrow? Does it give me a fresh and objective point of view on my own world and culture, perhaps by letting me see it through the eyes of a different kind of creature entirely, from a planet light-years away?

These qualities are not only among those which make science fiction good, they are what make it unique. Be it never so beautifully written, a story is not a good science fiction story unless it rates high in these aspects. The content of the story is as valid a criterion as the style.

— *Introduction—SF: Contemporary Mythologies (New York, 1978)*

## **Eric S. Rabkin**

A work belongs to the genre of science fiction if its narrative world is at least somewhat different from our own, and if that difference is apparent against the background of an organized body of knowledge.

— *The Fantastic In Literature (Princeton University Press, 1976)*

## **Dick Riley**

At its best, science fiction has no peer in creating another universe of experience, in showing us what we look like in the mirror of technological society or through the eyes of a non-human.

— *Critical Encounters (New York, 1978)*

## **Thomas N. Scortia**

... [science fiction has]the humanistic assumption that the laws of nature are amenable to the interpretation of human logic and, more than this, amenable to logical extrapolation.

## **Tom Shippey**

A revealing way of describing science fiction is to say that it is part of a literary mode which one may call "fabril" "Fabril" is the opposite of "Pastoral". But while "the pastoral" is an established and much-discussed literary mode, recognized as such since early antiquity, its dark opposite has not yet been accepted, or even named, by the law-givers of literature. Yet the opposition is a clear one. Pastoral literature is rural, nostalgic, conservative. It idealizes the past and tends to convert complexities into simplicity; its central image is the shepherd. Fabril literature (of which science fiction is now by far the most prominent genre) is overwhelmingly urban, disruptive, future-oriented, eager for novelty; its central images is the "faber", the smith or blacksmith in older usage, but now extended in science fiction to mean the creator of artefacts in general--metallic, crystalline, genetic, or even social.

—*Introduction, The Oxford Book of Science Fiction, (Oxford, 1992)*

## **Brian Stableford**

True science fiction [is]fiction which attempts to build logically coherent imaginary worlds based on premises licensed by the world-view of contemporary science.

— *(very slight editing from his GOH speech, ConFuse 91)*

Science fiction is essentially a kind of fiction in which people learn more about how to live in the real world, visiting imaginary worlds unlike our own, in order to investigate by way of pleasurable thought-experiments how things might be done differently.

—*(from his GOH speech, ConFuse 91)*

What is authentic about genuine science fiction, is that the science fiction writer should not stop with just saying: Well, the plot needs this to happen, therefore I'll just do it and I'll invent an excuse for it being able to be done. Proper science fiction ought to require people to begin to explore the consequences of what they've invented. And thus, I think that science fiction is, in a real sense, capable of being scientific. Not in the sense that it can foresee the future of science, but it can adopt a kind of variation of the scientific method itself, it does feel compelled to explore the consequences of hypotheses and the way things fit together.

— *(from an interview on Science in SF, ConFuse 91)*

## Theodore Sturgeon

A science fiction story is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content.

— *Definition given by: William Atheling Jr., (James Blish) in The issue at Hand: Studies in Contemporary Magazine Fiction (Chicago, 1964)*

## Darko Suvin

It [science fiction] should be defined as a fictional tale determined by the hegemonic literary device of a locus and/or dramatis personae that (1) are radically or at least significantly different from empirical times, places, and characters of "mimetic" or "naturalist" fiction, but (2) are nonetheless--to the extent that SF differs from other "fantastic" genres, that is, ensembles of fictional tales without empirical validation--simultaneously perceived as not impossible within the cognitive (cosmological and anthropological) norms of the author's epoch.

— *Preface, Metamorphoses Of Science Fiction, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979)*

SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.

— *Chapter 1, Metamorphoses Of Science Fiction, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979)*

## Alvin Toffler

By challenging anthropocentrism and temporal provincialism, science fiction throws open the whole of civilization and its premises to constructive criticism.

## Jack Williamson

"Hard" science fiction ... probes alternative possible futures by means of reasoned extrapolations in much the same way that good historical fiction reconstructs the probable past. Even far-out fantasy can present a significant test of human values exposed to a new environment. Deriving its most cogent ideas from the tension between permanence and change, science fiction combines the diversions of novelty with its pertinent kind of realism.

## **Donald A. Wollheim**

Science fiction is that branch of fantasy, which, while not true to present-day knowledge, is rendered plausible by the reader's recognition of the scientific possibilities of it being possible at some future date or at some uncertain point in the past.

— *"The Universe Makers"*

List compiled by Neyir Cenk Gökçe