

## A Sampling of Science Fiction Definitions

Dr. Jason W. Ellis

### Introduction

The human brain is uniquely suited for pattern recognition and categorization. Due to this evolutionarily derived ability, we like to put similar things into groups. This kind of cognitive work helps us make sense of our complex world, and it helps us communicate with others about how some things are similar and others are different.

In culture, we associate works of art, music, literature, film, and video games into genres. A genre is a category of culture that is widely agreed upon. However, people often debate what constitutes a genre. This is because genres change over time and they overlap with other genres. Also, single cultural works (e.g., a novel by Stephen King) might occupy several different genres and/or complicate what people expect those genres to be like.

Put another way, we can find an analog in biological taxonomy: Life, Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus (shares root with genre), and Species. One possible simple taxonomy of culture from the macro/general to the micro/specific might be: Culture, Medium, Genre.

Below, I have included a number of definitions of the science fiction genre organized chronologically. They begin with the person who wrote the definition, the year it was written, the definition, and the MLA formatted citation for that quote's source. You may use these definitions and citations in your work in our class.

Most of them are different from one another in some way, but many of them also share some similarities. These definitions represent the debates in the science fiction field about what science fiction means, what is science fiction, and what is not science fiction. We will use these as a guide throughout the semester. I want you to keep this list handy as we read and discuss science fiction this semester.

After the list of definitions, I have included a glossary of basic terms that we will talk about the first week of class and that will be useful to your thinking about science fiction moving forward.

## Chronological List of Definitions of Science Fiction

Hugo Gernsback. 1926. "By 'scientifiction' 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 ... Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading—they are always instructive. They supply knowledge . . . in a very palatable form ... New adventures pictured for us in the scientifiction of today are not at all impossible of realization tomorrow ... Many great science stories destined to be of historical interest are still to be written ... Posterity will point to them as having blazed a new trail, not only in literature and fiction, but progress as well" (Gernsback 3).

Gernsback, Hugo. "A New Sort of Magazine." *Amazing Stories* April 1926: 3. Print.

J. O. Bailey. 1947. "A piece of scientific fiction is a narrative of an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences and consequent adventures and experiences ... It must be a scientific discovery -- something that the author at least rationalizes as possible to science" (Bailey 10).

Bailey, J. O. *Pilgrims Through Space and Time: A History and Analysis of Scientific Fiction*. New York: Argus Books, 1947. Print.

Robert A. Heinlein. 1947. "Let's gather up the bits and pieces and define the Simon-pure science fiction story: 1. The conditions must be, in some respect, different from here-and-now, although the difference may lie only in an invention made in the course of the story. 2. The new conditions must be an essential part of the story. 3. The problem itself—the "plot"—must be a *human* problem. 4. The human problem must be one which is created by, or indispensably affected by, the new conditions. 5. And lastly, no established fact shall be violated, and, furthermore, when the story requires that a theory contrary to present accepted theory be used, the new theory should be rendered reasonably plausible and it must include and explain established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk. It may be far-fetched, it may seem fantastic, but it must not be at variance with observed facts, i.e., if you are going to assume that the human race

descended from Martians, then you've got to explain our apparent close relationship to terrestrial anthropoid apes as well" (Heinlein 17).

Heinlein, Robert. "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction." *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science-Fiction Writing*. Ed. Lloyd Arthur Eshbach. Reading, PA: Fantasy Press, 1947. 11-19. Print.

John W. Campbell, Jr. 1947. "To be science fiction, not fantasy, an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation from the known must be made. Ghosts can enter science fiction—if they're logically explained but not if they are simply the ghosts of fantasy. Prophetic extrapolation can derive from a number of different sources, and apply in a number of fields. Sociology, psychology, and parapsychology are, today, not true sciences: therefore instead of forecasting future results of applications of sociological science of today, we must forecast the development of a science of sociology" (91).

"Campbell, Jr., John W. "The Science of Science Fiction Writing." *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science-Fiction Writing*. Ed. Lloyd Arthur Eshbach. Reading, PA: Fantasy Press, 1947. 89-101. Print.

John W. Campbell, Jr. 1947. "Scientific methodology involves the proposition that a well-constructed theory will not only explain every known phenomenon, but will also predict new and still undiscovered phenomena. Science-fiction tries to do much the same—and write up, in story form, what the results look like when applied not only to machines, but to human society as well" (Campbell 12).

Campbell, John W., Jr. "Introduction." *Venus Equilateral*. George O. Smith. New York: Garland Publishing, 1975. 10-14. Print.

Isaac Asimov. 1951. "True s-f is not to be confused with weird stories or horror stories or tales of the supernatural or, in fact, with fantasies of any sort. The best definition of s-f that I know of is, indeed, almost sociological in its gravity. It goes as follows: *Science-fiction is that branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings*" (Asimov 148).

Asimov, Isaac. "Other Worlds to Conquer." *The Writer* 64.5 (May 1951): 148-151. Print.

Theodore Sturgeon. 1953. "After some fifteen years of arduous filtering, one of S-F's more widely-read practitioners has come up with a definition of science fiction designed to include all that is worthy in the field, and exclude the cowboy story which occurs on Mars instead of in Arizona. 'A good story is good science fiction,' he says, 'when it deals with human beings with a human problem which is resolved in terms of their humanity, cast in a narrative which could not occur without the science element'" (qtd. in Williams 376). [While this definition is often attributed to Sturgeon, he seems to give credit to another writer. However, Sturgeon began publishing in 1938—15 years before 1953—so, he could be employing rhetoric to give a definition he thought up greater weight.]

Williams, Paul. "Story Notes." Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2000. 375-388. Print.

Kingsley Amis. 1960. "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-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin" (Amis 8).

Amis, Kingsley. *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*. New York: Harcourt, 1960. Print.

Rod Serling. 1962. "Fantasy is the impossible made probable. Science Fiction is the improbable made possible" ("The Fugitive").

"The Fugitive." *The Twilight Zone*. Writ. Charles Beaumont. Dir. Richard L. Bare. CBS, 1962. Web.

Judith Merril. 1966. "Speculative fiction: stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to *learn*, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, or 'reality' ... I use the term 'speculative fiction' here specifically to describe the mode which makes use of the traditional 'scientific

method' (observation, hypothesis, experiment) to examine some postulated approximation of reality, by introducing a given set of changes—imaginary or inventive—into the common background of 'known facts', creating an environment in which the responses and perceptions of the characters will reveal something about the inventions, the characters, or both" (Merril 60).

Merril, Judith. "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?" *SF: The Other Side of Realism*. Ed. Thomas D. Claerson. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971. 53-95. Print.

Samuel R. Delany. 1971. "A distinct level of subjunctivity informs all the words in an SF story at a level that is different from that which informs naturalistic fiction, fantasy, or reportage. Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between (to borrow Saussure's term for 'word'): sound-image and sound-image. A blanket indicative tension (or mood) informs the whole series: *this happened*. That is the particular level of subjunctivity at which journalism takes place. Any word, even metaphorical ones, must go straight back to a real object, or a real thought on the part of the reporter. The subjunctivity level for a series of words labeled naturalistic fiction is defined by: *could have happened*. ...Fantasy takes the subjunctivity of naturalistic fiction and throws it into reverse. At the appearance of elves, witches, or magic in a non-metaphorical position, or at some correction of image too bizarre to be explained by other than the supernatural, the level of subjunctivity becomes: *could not have happened*. ...But when spaceships, ray guns, or more accurately any correction of images that indicates the future appears in a series of words and mark it as SF, the subjunctivity level is changed once more: These objects, these convocations of objects into situations and events, are blanketly defined by: *have not happened*. *Events that have not happened* included several subcategories. These subcategories describe the subcategories of SF. *Events that have not happened* include those events that *might happen*. ...*events that will not happen*. ...*events that have not happened yet*. ...[and] *events that have not happened in the past*" (Delany 10-11).

Delany, Samuel R. "About 5,750 Words." *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2009. 1-15. Print.

Ursula K. Le Guin. 1971. "I write science fiction because that is what publishers call my books. Left to myself, I should call them novels" (Le Guin 1).

Le Guin, Ursula K. "The View In." *A Multitude of Visions*. Ed. Cy Chauvin. Baltimore: T-K Graphics, 1975. 5-7. Print.

Darko Suvin. 1972. Science fiction is "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" (Suvin 375).

Suvin, Darko. "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre." *College English* 34.3 (Dec 1972): 372-382. Jstor. Web. 29 March 2012.

Brian Aldiss. 1973. "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 mode" (Aldiss 8).

Aldiss, Brian. *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973. Print.

Pamela Sargent. 1974. "One can wonder why a literature that prides itself on exploring alternatives or assumptions counter to what we normally believe has not been more concerned with the roles of women in the future. There are two possible answers, although neither excludes the others. Either science fiction is not as daring or original as some of its practitioners would like to believe, this being more a worthy ideal than a reality; or this literature, designed to question our assumptions cannot help reflecting how very deeply certain prejudices are ingrained—despite its sometimes successful efforts at imaginative liberation from time and place" (Sargent xv-xvi).

"Only *sf* and *fantasy* literature can show us women in entirely new or strange surroundings. It can explore what we might become if and when the present restrictions on our lives vanish, or show

us new problems and restrictions that might arise" (Sargent lx).

Sargent, Pamela. "Introduction." *Women of Wonder: Science Fiction Stories By Women About Women*. New York: Vintage, 1975. xii-lxiv. Print.

Joanna Russ. 1975. "I should like to propose the following: That science fiction, like much medieval literature, is *didactic*. That despite superficial similarities to naturalistic (or other) modern fiction, the protagonists of science fiction are always collective, never individual persons (although individuals often appear as exemplary or representative figures). That science fiction's emphasis is always on *phenomena*—to the point where reviewers and critics can commonly use such phrases as 'the idea as hero.' That science fiction is not only didactic, but very often awed, worshipful, and *religious* in tone" (Russ par. 7-9).

"Science fiction, like medieval painting, addresses itself to the mind, not the eye" (Russ par. 22).

"It draws its beliefs, its material, its great organizing metaphors, its very attitudes, from a culture that could not exist before the industrial revolution, before science became both an autonomous activity and a way of looking at the world" (Russ par. 25).

"It is the only modern literature which attempts to assimilate imaginatively scientific knowledge about reality and the scientific method, as distinct from the merely practical changes science has made in our lives" (Russ par. 31).

"Science fiction is, of course, about human concerns. It is written and read by human beings. But the culture from which it comes—the experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and learning which one must bring to it—these are not at all what we are used to as proper to literature. They may, however, be increasingly proper to human life." (Russ par. 33).

Russ, Joanna. "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 6.2 (July 1975). n.p. Web.

Robert Scholes. 1975. "Fabulation, then, fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (Scholes 26).

Robert Scholes. 1975. "The tradition of speculative fiction is modified by an awareness of the universe as a system of systems, a structure of structures, and the insights of the past century of science are accepted as fictional points of departure. Yet structural fabulation is neither scientific in its methods nor a substitute for actual science. It is a fictional exploration of human situations made perceptible by the implications of recent science. Its favorite themes involve the impact of developments or revelations derived from the human or physical sciences upon the people who must live with those revelations or developments" (Scholes 214).

Scholes, Robert. "The Roots of Science Fiction." *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*. Eds. James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005. 205-218. Print.

Ray Bradbury. 1980. "I define science fiction as the art of the possible. Fantasy is the art of the impossible. Science fiction, again, is the history of ideas, and they're always ideas that work themselves out and become real and happen in the world. And fantasy comes along and says, 'We're going to break all the laws of physics.'" (Bradbury par. 23)

Bradbury, Ray. "Ray Bradbury: The Science of Science Fiction." By Arthur Unger. *The Christian Science Monitor* 13 Nov. 1980. n.p. Web. 10 May 2014.

Kim Stanley Robinson. 1987. SF is "an historical literature ... In every sf narrative, there is an explicit or implicit fictional history that connects the period depicted to our present moment, or to some moment in our past" (Robinson 54).

Robinson, Kim Stanley. "Notes for an Essay on Cecelia Holland." *Foundation* 40 (Summer 1987): 54-61. Print.

Christopher Evans. 1988. "Perhaps the crispest definition is that science fiction is a literature of 'what if?' What if we could travel in time? What if we were living on other planets? What if we made contact with alien races? And so on. The starting point is that the writer supposes things are different from how we know them to be" (Evans 9).

Evans, Christopher. *Writing Science Fiction*. London, A & C Black, 1988. Print.

Margaret Atwood. 1989. "I define science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that contain various technologies we have not yet developed. But in *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or that it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We've done it, we're doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place, and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion. So I think of *The Handmaid's Tale* not as science fiction but as speculative fiction; and, more particularly, as that negative form of Utopian fiction that has come to be known as Dystopia" (Atwood 92-93).  
Atwood, Margaret. "Writing Utopia." *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983-2005*. New York: Carroll & Graff, 2005. 92-100. Print.

Marleen S. Barr. 1993. "As I explain throughout this study, postmodern fiction must recognize a new supergenre of women's writing—feminist fabulation—which includes works now thought of as mainstream, SF, fantasy, supernatural, and utopian as well as feminist texts men author. Further, critical studies should address the influence and importance of works of feminist fabulation which have been dismissed as genre fiction" (Barr xiii).

Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992. Print.

Damien Broderick. 1995. "SF is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by (i) metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics, (ii) the foregrounding of icons and interpretative schemata from a collectively constituted generic 'mega-text' and the concomitant de-emphasis of 'fine writing' and characterization, and (iii) certain priorities more often found in scientific

and postmodern texts than in literary models: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject” (Broderick 155).

Broderick, Damien. *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Octavia Butler. 1997. “[Science fiction] doesn’t necessarily mean anything at all except that if you use science, you should use it correctly, and if you use your imagination to extend it beyond what we already know, you should do that intelligently. The reason I’ve stayed with science fiction to the degree that I have is because you can do almost anything in it” (qtd. in Fry par. 26).

Butler, Octavia. “‘Congratulations! You’ve Just Won \$295,000!’: An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” By Joan Fry. JoanFry.com, 2014. n.p. Web. 10 May 2014.

Ray Bradbury. 2010. “Science fiction is the fiction of ideas. Ideas excite me, and as soon as I get excited, the adrenaline gets going and the next thing I know I’m borrowing energy from the ideas themselves. Science fiction is any idea that occurs in the head and doesn’t exist yet, but soon will, and will change everything for everybody, and nothing will ever be the same again. As soon as you have an idea that changes some small part of the world you are writing science fiction. It is always the art of the possible, never the impossible” (Bradbury par. 8).

“I often use the metaphor of Perseus and the head of Medusa when I speak of science fiction. Instead of looking into the face of truth, you look over your shoulder into the bronze surface of a reflecting shield. Then you reach back with your sword and cut off the head of Medusa. Science fiction pretends to look into the future but it’s really looking at a reflection of what is already in front of us. So you have a ricochet vision, a ricochet that enables you to have fun with it, instead of being self-conscious and superintellectual” (Bradbury par. 22).

Bradbury, Ray. “Ray Bradbury, The Art of Fiction No. 203.” By Sam Weller. *The Paris Review* 192 (Spring 2010). Web. 10 May 2014.

## Glossary of Basic Science Fiction Terminology

Science Fiction (abbreviation: SF): This is the proper name for science fiction. Use this term in our discussions and your writing. My working definition: Narratives based on a technoscientific turn that sets it apart from the here-and-now (despite its extrapolation from the here-and-now and its ensuing historical/cultural baggage).

Sci-fi: This the popular and journalistic term for science fiction. Forrest J. Ackerman is said to have introduced the term as a play on the rising popularity of “hi-fi” stereos in the 1950s. Some critics began using sci-fi as a designation of bad science fiction while reserving science fiction/SF for the good stuff. This distinction never gained much adoption by journalists or the general public. Nevertheless, you will want to know this distinction and use it in our discussions.

Skiffy: An alternative pronunciation of “sci-f” that gained popularity around 1978 when critics including Susan Wood began to promote it as a way to distinguish great science fiction/SF from trashy sci-fi.

Speculative Fiction: As contentiously debated as science fiction, speculative fiction is part a more respectable term used by some to refer to science fiction and part near-future/strongly extrapolated from the present. It shares the SF abbreviation.

Fantasy: Science fiction is not fantasy. My working definition: Narratives devoid of the scientific turn, which necessitates the construction of a self-consistent world. Popular examples include Tolkien’s *The Hobbit/The Lord of the Rings* series (1937, 1954-1955), J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), and George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996-2011). When science fiction and fantasy are discussed together, they are sometimes abbreviated as SFF (pronounced as S-F-n-F).