

Ten Allusions Common to Writers

Copyright 2005 © Laraine Flemming.

Copyright is granted exclusively to instructors and students using textbooks written by Laraine Flemming. General distribution and redistribution are strictly prohibited.

Start expanding the number of allusions you know on sight by learning those listed here.

1. **Gordian knot:** According to Greek legend, King Gordius had a wagon tied to a temple column by means of an intricate knot. He then said that whoever untied it would rule Asia. Alexander the Great arrived on the scene and with one swift stroke of his sword untied the knot to become the ruler of Asia. However, even though Alexander succeeded, the allusion to a Gordian knot suggests an extremely difficult problem; e.g., “The administration was faced with the *Gordian* knot of how to depart as quickly as possible while giving the appearance of having won a victory.”
2. **Machiavelli, Machiavellian, *The Prince*:** Niccolo Machiavelli was a Renaissance political philosopher whose book *The Prince* advised rulers to be ruthless and cunning if they wanted to hold onto their power. As a result, references to Machiavelli or his book suggest a willingness to engage in trickery in order to achieve political power; e.g., “Even as a young man, the president had had his eye on the White House, and to get there, he was willing to take pointers from *Machiavelli*, if necessary.”
3. **Fellini, Felliniesque:** Italian film director Federico Fellini made a series of films, e.g., “*La Dolce Vita*,” “*8 ½*,” and “*Satyricon*,” that feature strange, dreamlike sequences filled with bizarre looking characters and action. As a result, his name is used to suggest the odd and the unusual; e.g., “The new dance club was called *Bizarre Fantasy*, a name that was underscored by its *Felliniesque* patrons and decor.”
4. **Delphic:** In ancient Greece, those who wanted to know their future would pay a visit to the oracle or prophet of Delphi. But like astrologers, the oracles of Delphi often made predictions so vague and ambiguous that they could be interpreted in any number of ways. Today, writers use the adjective *Delphic* to allude to something they consider vague or ambiguous; e.g., “When asked about the court records, the file keeper made some *Delphic* comment that left the young investigators scratching their heads in puzzlement.”
5. **Madame DeFarge:** A character in Charles Dickens’s novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Madame DeFarge was an angry and vengeful figure who rejoiced at the many trips that former royalty took to the guillotine during the French revolution. Nowadays, her name is synonymous with a desire for vengeance; e.g., “Only *Madame*

DeFarge could have matched the former first lady's determination to punish those who had ridiculed her family.”

6. **Homer, Homeric:** Homer was an ancient Greek poet said to have written *The Iliad*, a long poem that recorded the events of the Trojan War. Homer's description of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans remains so powerful that translations of *The Iliad* are still read and discussed to this day. A reference to Homer suggests a gifted writer or storyteller who has created a story based on historical, larger-than-life, legendary events; e.g., “The extraordinary athletes, who made America's black baseball teams a joy to watch, require a *Homer* to tell their story.”
7. **June Cleaver:** June Cleaver was a character in a famous situation comedy called *Leave It to Beaver*. On the show, she was the perfect mother who never had a hair out of place, never raised her voice, and never ever made a mistake. She was and is the symbol of the impossibly perfect suburban mom; e.g., “My mother adored us, but she was no *June Cleaver*; most of the time, she ran around in jeans and a sweatshirt, and her hair, drawn up in the back into a pony tail, was always falling in her eyes.”
8. **Waiting for Godot:** *Waiting for Godot* is a play by Samuel Beckett about two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait for a man called Godot. Each day a boy comes to tell them Godot will be there tomorrow, but as the play ends, Vladimir and Estragon are still waiting. An allusion to the play suggests an endless wait; e.g., “The reporter had waited so long for the interview, he felt as if he were playing one of the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*.”
9. **Hades:** The Greek word for the underworld or hell. The word also refers to the ruler of the underworld. An allusion to Hades suggests death, danger, and darkness; e.g., “In the forest at night, the soldiers felt as if they were journeying through *Hades*.”
10. **Achilles heel:** According to Greek mythology, the warrior Achilles was invulnerable to injury except in one spot, his heel. Thus, he died when an arrow struck him in the heel. References to an Achilles heel point to a weak spot in someone or something that otherwise seems sound; e.g., “The greenhouse, with its fragile glass doors, was the security system's *Achilles heel*.”