**Irony is Fundamental in Storytelling**

Irony is the opposite of expectation. When what we expect to happen doesn’t happen, it creates **conflict**.

When we know the truth about a dangerous situation and we watch someone else get close to that danger, it creates **suspense**.

When someone says one thing but means another, it creates **complexity**.

All of these elements (conflict, suspense, complexity) are fundamental building blocks in storytelling.

**Irony** is when the reality is opposite of what we expect. The key here is "opposite," not just different. This incongruity can be found in language (what we say vs. what we mean) or circumstances (what we expect to happen vs. what actually happens).

Irony can be sad and tragic, or it can funny and satirical. In other words, there are limitless ways you can wield irony in your stories.

There are 3 different types of irony: dramatic, verbal, and situational. Each has a different definition and function in storytelling.

1. [Dramatic irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-dramatic-irony-definition-examples/) is when we have more information about the circumstances than a character.

Ex. When you know a trap has been set and watch someone walk into it.

Within dramatic irony, there is only one subtype: [tragic irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-tragic-irony-definition-and-examples/). The difference between these two types of irony is slight but it’s an important distinction to make. Basically, tragic irony is dramatic irony with tragic/very sad consequences — it's as easy as that.

1. [Verbal irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-verbal-irony-definition-examples/) is when someone says something but means the opposite.

Ex. When you fail your term paper and say, "Wow, I did a really good job on my term paper!"

In *Mean Girls*, Cady's first inkling that Regina George truly is "plastic" comes in the scene where a fellow classmate approaches the girls and Regina gives her a glowing compliment on her skirt. But in a perfect example of verbal irony, Regina actually meant quite the opposite.

Within this verbal irony general definition, there are 4 types of verbal irony:

1. [Sarcasm](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-sarcasm-definition-and-examples/): is an ironic statement meant to mock or ridicule another person. The term has its origins from the Greek root word “*sarkezein*” meaning “to tear flesh, bite the lip in rage, sneer.”
2. [Understatement](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-understatement-definition-and-examples/): is when you say something to intentionally downplay what you actually mean. It is the opposite of exaggeration, a more subtle way to communicate how you really feel. If verbal irony is saying the opposite of what you mean, understatement is simply saying less of what you mean.
3. [Overstatement](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-overstatement-definition-and-examples/): is when you use language to exaggerate your intended meaning. These statements count as figurative language and are not meant to be taken literally. Also known as hyperbole, overstatement is saying more of what you mean.
4. [Socratic irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-socratic-irony-definition-and-examples/): when you feign ignorance in order to get someone to admit something. It’s “playing dumb” to catch someone in a lie or to get them to confess to something that they wouldn’t otherwise concede. It’s a verbal chess match that gives your opponent a false sense of security that lures them into a trap.
5. [Situational irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-situational-irony-definition-examples/) is when we expect one thing but get the opposite.

Ex. A fire station burns down. This is unexpected because one would assume the fire chief would keep his own building safe.

The whole story of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by [L. Frank Baum](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/l-frank-baum) is a case of situational irony. Dorothy and her friends are in search of external forces to help them get what they need but discover that they each had what they needed the whole time. Dorothy learns that the shoes she was wearing can get her home. Scarecrow discovers he was smart all along. The Tinman finally learns that he has a good heart. The cowardly Lion turns out to be extremely courageous.

Within this general definition, there are 4 subtypes of situational irony:

1. [Cosmic irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-cosmic-irony-definition-and-examples/): occurs when a higher power (God, fate, the Universe) intervenes to create an ironic situation. This “irony of fate” can be actual or inferred.

Ex. We all know the story of the Titanic. It was said that not even God could sink that ship. It was built with watertight compartments designed to keep it afloat even when taking on water. Devastatingly, the ship struck an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage.

1. [Poetic irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-poetic-justice-definition-and-examples/): (a.k.a. poetic justice) occurs when a crime or transgression is unexpectedly resolved positively, often due to a twist of fate or karma (you get what you deserve). It’s closely related to cosmic irony, but it is much more subtle and completely up to interpretation.

Ex. Kathryn Stockett’s novel, *The Help*, contains humorous examples of poetic justice. In this book, a white woman unjustly fires a young African American maid. However, the maid receives her poetic justice when she bakes a special “chocolate” pie for the former employer. The eating of this pies results in humiliation for the white woman and praise from the maid’s community.

1. [Structural irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-structural-irony-definition-and-examples/): occurs when the perspective of an unreliable narrator or naïve protagonist is different from the reality of the situation. The narrator purposely deceives the audience or may have convinced themselves of a faulty truth, or the protagonist is unable to realize how much danger s/he is in.

Ex. Forrest Gump uses running as an escape method from bullies as a child and by continuing to run throughout his life he has many adventures and survival stories that normally wouldn’t have happened to him (chosen as a quarterback, saves his friends in Vietnam, meets the president as a reward his running heroism…etc.). His running is the tool used by an innocent character who doesn’t really know what he’s doing but by chance it keeps him safe and brings him success and fame.

1. [Historical irony](https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-historical-irony-definition-and-examples/): is when hindsight provides an ironic perspective on an action or stance made in the past. This type of irony is perfect for a character who ends up in an ironic situation they would never expect. As the name suggests, this could apply to real life as well as fiction

Ex. Gunpowder was accidentally created by Chinese alchemists in the 9th century who were actually attempting to find an "elixir of immortality."