

Comparison Chart for Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism

Characteristic	Neoclassicism	Romanticism	Realism	Modernism
Quality of Literature	Decorum, concision, restraint, balance, reason, regularity, wit	Emotion, introspection, passion, sublimity, beauty, spontaneity, irregularity, picturesque	Realistic, clear, precise, serious, truthful, accurate	Abstract, strange, fragmented, innovative, disconnected, surreal, absurd, collage-like
Subjects	“The proper study of mankind is Man.” – Alexander Pope, manners, politics, social concerns	Humankind, nature, the soul, individuality, women, children, animals, flowers, rural, common people	The current time, facts of individual’s life, housewives, business/commerce, social conditions, everyday occurrences	The human mind, violence, war, death, hyper-reality, jazz, mass media, social feminism, the self as confused, political change, loneliness, human anxiety, the outcast
Values	absolute, public, rational	private, spiritual (but not organized religion), universal spirit in nature and humankind	objectivity, moral behavior, money, life doesn’t always have happy endings	abandonment of past social, religious, and artistic traditions; the New, uncertainty, ambiguity; “profound truth” is relative; “God is dead.” Nietzsche
The writer	Witty, gentlemanly, moral, incisive, rational, capable of moral outrage	Solitary, reflective, inspired, a person of imagination, visionary	Detached observers, recorder of facts, de-emphasize writer’s importance	Remote, detached, angry, emotionally withdrawn, alienated, ironic
Settings	The urban, rural settings are ignorant and unmannerly	Rural, the countryside, city is the seat of corruption and greed	The city, the factory, inside the house	“city consciousness,” masses isolated within the city, the internal minds of characters, symbolic settings: jungle, wasteland, desert
Allusion/history	Biblical, Classical Greece and Rome	The mythic, medieval, gothic, but not Classical references	Contemporary events—here and now	Quantum physics, myth, Bible, foreign languages, street life, personal, psychology, sociology, agonized recollection of the past
Language	Dressed up language, formal, full of allusions, didactic	Beautiful, colloquial, creative	Technical, clinical, detailed, realistic	Experimental, self-conscious, without punctuation or capitalization, breakdown of rational thought, improvisational, mixture of styles
Genres	Satire, epistle, epic, sonnet	Lyric, ode	Novel, drama, newspaper	Mass communication (radio, TV, film), stream of consciousness, mixed forms (prose poems)
Form	Formal, regular meter, regular rhyme scheme	Less formal, may have irregular meter and rhyme	Natural, realistic, not contrived	Free verse, experimental (often as important as the meaning), riddle, puzzle, game between author and reader, non-chronological
Ideas of nature	The order of things, harmony, rationality, the real world as we experience it is divinely ordered	External world is beautiful, nature is creative and moral, nature inspires human imagination	Described in clinical detail, biology influenced view of nature (genetics, natural selection)	World as a wasteland, decaying, can be manipulated by mankind, writers can change the way readers view nature, nature is radically different than it used to be (bomb)