

An Allegory and an Example

An *allegory* is a concrete story or detailed description that has a point for point connection or representation to a very different, often times abstract idea or concept. Many students mistake an extended *example* for an allegory. For instance, say a writer is attempting to explain his belief that friendship makes a person stronger because he trusts the ideas and advice of a friend, and he wants to create an allegory. The allegory must be very concrete and very different in nature from two people sharing a friendship. Yet, some writers have created a story of a person living in a cave who chances to meet others occasionally, but who chooses to reject them and stay alone in his cave. One day, he chances to meet a person who is attempting to kill a large animal. Seeing that neither he or the other could kill the animal but sensing that working together they both could, the man helps the other kill the animal and strikes up a friendship with him, initially based on helping each other kill large animals, but eventually encompassing many other helpful things. The writer then explains that this "allegory" shows that people can be stronger and better by having others upon whom to rely.

The problem with this "allegory" is that, although the people were slightly different in their relationship, it was still an example of the benefits of a friendship and not an allegory that allows the reader to see more clearly an abstract idea. A better allegory would be a detailed description of the melding of iron and tin into steel, how iron is strong, but brittle and tin is weak but supple, and how the joining of the two brings out the strength of each and minimizes each's weakness.

The "Allegory of the Cave" was about people, but it was an allegory about how people acquire wisdom, not a story explaining how people can escape from caves. The exit of the cave was the acquisition of wisdom, so they were very different in their meanings. In "On Self-Discipline," Plato created an allegory of two people who make casks to hold various liquids. One's casks are leaking so he must continually seek to fill them but the other's are tight and hold their liquids well. This person does not need to spend his time filling his casks. Plato used this allegory to show how self-disciplined people benefit from their discipline, just as the person with the tight casks benefited from their integrity. The allegory also shows how the undisciplined person becomes a slave to his needs. Having casks that are loose or tight is fundamentally different from lacking or having self-discipline, but they both are alike in their implications.

Be sure that you create a real allegory and not an example for your paper. It is perfectly fine to create an example as well, but don't present it as your allegory.