What is science fiction and why is it so popular?

Science fiction is literature that explores the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals. Like its cousins, fantasy and horror, sci-fi is a type of speculative fiction. All speculative fiction writing employs elements that are profoundly alien to the reader. Within these alien situations, real human concerns and issues can be explored in an entirely different light. This makes the popularity of sci-fi two-fold: we are thrilled by the unknown and imaginative worlds, but it is ultimately about us.

1. Discuss a favorite sci-fi title. How was the world in the book different from our own world? What impact does the fictional world have on the characters? What do you think the book says about the human condition?

Pioneers of science fiction

1. Name one of the first writers of a book recognized as science fiction.
2. Name one of the first recognized women writers of science fiction.
3. Science fiction writers are worldwide. What are a few of the countries from which the writers hail? Do a search on current technologies of those countries. Is technology infused into these societies?

Hard sci-fi versus soft sci-fi

1. What are the arguments about the classifications? Do you lean toward any particular classification when you read sci-fi? Explain why you prefer one over the other.

The power of words

1. What sci-fi words are a part of everyday language? Which ones are jargon specific to the world of sci-fi? What words would you like to see incorporated into society?

Visit nie.newsok.com for sci-fi-themed crossword puzzles, plus recommended sci-fi reading and additional discussion questions.
Science fiction writers are known to predict future technologies—just think of that Star Trek communicator the next time you make a call on your cell phone. By combining their imagination with their knowledge of real science, authors have “created” some mind-boggling technologies. More importantly, sci-fi authors have speculated on the impact such technologies can have on individuals and societies.

Discuss the questions that follow. Links to websites with background information about the top ten novels that predicted the future, other science fiction predictions, and a timeline of science fiction inventions are posted at nie.newsok.com.

1. What science fiction technology would you like to see developed in the real world?
2. Construct a three-dimensional model of your technology.
3. Is it monetarily feasible?
4. Can current technology create what you want to see?
5. How will your technology be used—in the military, in businesses, or for everyday use? Can it be used for both good and bad purposes?
6. Will your technology be accepted by the general public? What impact would this new technology have on individuals and society? What human needs does it solve? What problems could it create?
7. If created for military use, will national and international laws have to be rewritten or created for the technology’s use?

Visit nie.newsok.com for additional links and questions.
Like science fiction, fantasy and horror are speculative fiction cousins that incorporate imaginative and alien elements. But unlike sci-fi, fantasy and horror are steeped in the supernatural—that which is not and never will be true. Magic and monsters have been part of storytelling since humans began to spin tales, and elements of the fantastic have been part of literature since its beginning.

Discuss the questions that follow. Links to websites with background information about fantasy thrills, horror chills and vampires are posted at nie.newsok.com.

**Fantasy fiction**

1. How do you define fantasy? What are the differences between science fiction and fantasy? How do they overlap?
2. What fantasy world would you want to live in? What are the benefits and drawbacks of that world?

**Horror fiction**

1. Describe a scene in a book that scared you. Did the fear change the way you thought or behaved, even for a short time? What books scared you as a child? Do you still have the same fear or has it changed?
2. How has film changed the definition of horror? How do you define horror, and is the basis of your definition rooted in film or literature?

**Vampires: cold and hot!**

These lifeless creatures may be cold, but they’ve never been hotter in popular culture.

1. How has the literary vampire changed over time, from Bram Stoker’s classic Dracula to the modern day vamp as personified in book series like *The Vampire Diaries* and *Twilight*?
2. Does the vampire serve as a metaphor for a type of person in the real world? What does the vampire represent to you?

Visit nie.newsok.com for additional reading lists and activities.
All great speculative fiction begins with the author posing a question. What if we could travel through time? What if we could animate dead bodies? What if there was a magical land? These writers create entire worlds and populate them with the fantastic. In the process, they entertain us and tell us something about our own world.

Start thinking about science fiction scenarios by finding your age and weight on other worlds at www.exploratorium.edu/ronh/age and www.exploratorium.edu/ronh/weight.

The great “what if…?”

1. Come up with your own “What if…?” question for a science fiction story. List the immediate impacts of your scenario on individuals and society. Who benefits? Who loses?
2. Will your “what if…?” ultimately lead to more trouble or a better world?
3. Take the next step and write a plot synopsis or short story based on your scenario.

Brainstorm!
Take two minutes and write down as many words as you can. Keep pen to paper the entire time, writing everything that comes into your mind.

1. For fantasy, write down magical words, names and phrases.
2. For science fiction, write down all of the sci-fi words, phrases, names and places that pop into your head.
3. For horror, write down the things that scare you and why they scare you.
4. Compare your lists with those of other students.

Story starters
Have one person start a story, and then have another person write the rest of the story. Here’s a fantasy story starter to get you, well… started:

It all started when my sister made it rain inside the laundry room. Misha was mad at Mom for making her do the laundry and she decided to take an easier route. I was bringing in my clothes, and I froze in the doorway when I saw my sister whip out her wand. Dark, ominous wisps of smoke floated from the wand tip. There was a smell of rotten eggs and I knew something bad was going to happen.

Visit nie.newsok.com for additional story starters in the realms of fantasy, science fiction and horror.