

In medias res

The limits of borderlines marginality margins and peripheries

*In medias res* (Latin for “into the midst of things”) is an indication of relative time. The term is used mainly in narratology and indicates that a narrative starts not at the beginning of a story’s events but somewhere in the middle, or perhaps even near the end, with no exposition provided.

Hence, the story begins in the middle of an ongoing situation. In a film or a book, starting in medias res can be a technique for deliberately withholding information from the audience. Storylines and intercharacter conflicts are then usually explained through flashbacks.

The term can also be used to refer to someone arriving late, unwittingly or in ignorance.

It is better here to use the term “metaphysical realism”, which refers to an ostensible realism, primarily the highly sophisticated tissue of symbols, allegories and references buried in that which is perceived.

Literature: “In medias res” is a Latin expression introduced by the Roman poet Horace in his *Ars poetica*. In medias res is a favoured device in classical literature and epic poems, such as John Milton’s Paradise Lost.

Film: Works of film noir often begin in medias res. For example, an opening scene might show a murder being committed (*Crossfire*) or a person fleeing (*Dead Reckoning*), with the story subsequently told in flashbacks. The technique has been used in modern thrillers, such as *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004); action thrillers, like *Firestarter* (1984); and numerous James Bond films. Many war films, such as *The Thin Red Line* (1998), also begin in medias res, showing the protagonists in the heat of battle, with no preamble to events.

“Exposition”, or “backstory”, is a term from narratology that refers to explanatory information given at the beginning of a narrative.

The expository information a writer provides at the beginning of a story serves to tell readers or viewers what they need to know in order to understand the events to come. Exposition conveys what has happened in the story’s world before a book or film’s narrative starts. The author or screenwriter introduces the characters and their relationships and sketches the setting where the action takes place. In practical terms, the writer figures out what has taken place in the weeks, days or hours before the story starts and incorporates the necessary details in the exposition.

Not every film or story starts with exposition. Other methods can be used to convey needed information. For example, characters may discuss previous events. This technique, known as the sewing circle dialogue, is deployed mainly by beginning screenwriters and is best avoided. One film that provides little introductory information for viewers is *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957). The opening scene shows a battered raft washing up on a beach. A half-dead marine (Robert Mitchum) crawls ashore, and we see a nun (Deborah Kerr) nearby. While this type of opening is exciting and mysterious, when exposition is minimal or entirely absent, viewers are kept temporarily in the dark about what is going on. When a film or other story begins with an action scene of the kind found in the middle of a narrative, in screenwriting terms, it starts in medias res.