The Epistolary Novel
An epistolary novel is written as a series of documents. The usual form is letters.

It adds greater realism to a story.

It includes multiple narrators instead of an omniscient narrator.

The story can be told and interpreted from numerous viewpoints.

The subjective points of view makes it the forerunner of the modern psychological novel.

**Etymology**

The word *epistolary* comes from the Latin word *epistola*, meaning a letter.
Origins of the Epistolary Novel

Originated from novels with inserted letters, in which the third person narrative in between the letters was gradually reduced.

Originated from collections of letters and poetry: some of the letters were tied together into a mostly amorous plot.
The first truly epistolary novel is the Spanish *Prison of Love (Cárcel de amor)* by Diego de San Pedro.

The founder of the epistolary novel in English is considered to be James Howell with *Familiar Letters*.

The first novel to explore the complex changing perspectives in the genre was Aphra Behn who wrote three volumes - *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*.

Individual points are presented by the individual correspondents. The central author's voice and moral judgement disappears.
The epistolary novel as a genre became popular in the 18th century.

Samuel Richardson is the most popular writer of the epistolary novel with *Pamela* and *Clarissa.*

*Pamela* (1740) is the first mature epistolary novel in English. It is marked by a coherence of characterization, plot, and theme.

*Clarissa* (1749).
Themes
Questions of morality.
Many are sentimental in nature.
The depiction of domestic and personal concerns.
Women Novelists

Much epistolary fiction was written by or about women.

The letter-novel was an early means for women writers to achieve public recognition.

Female characters in the novels often wrestle with sexual temptation and moral propriety.

The letter is the only way to express themselves honestly and thoroughly.

Women novelists were read in the 18th century but the bias was that serious literary work was conducted by men.
Later in the 18th century, the epistolary form was subject to much ridicule, resulting in a number of parodies. The most notable example of these was Henry Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741), written as a parody of *Pamela*.

*Shamela*

The female narrator can be found wielding a pen and scribbling her diary entries under the most dramatic and unlikely of circumstances.
The epistolary novel slowly fell out of use in the late 18th century. The epistolary form survived in fragments in 19th century novels.

In Honoré de Balzac's *Letters of Two Brides*, two women write over a 17 year period.

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* contains a number of letters that play a critical role in the plot.

Mary Shelley employs the epistolary form in her novel *Frankenstein*. 
Three Types of Epistolary Techniques

1. **Monologic** (giving the letters of only one character),
2. **Dialogic** (giving the letters of two characters), and
3. **Polylogic** (with three or more letter-writing characters).
Efforts to revive the epistolary novel continued in the 19th century.

**Bram Stoker**’s *Dracula* as an epistolary novel captures the imagination of modern readers.

**Alice Walker** uses the epistolary form in her novel *The Color Purple* in the 20th century.

**Stephen King**’s first well-known novel *Carrie* combines epistolary elements in the 20th century.