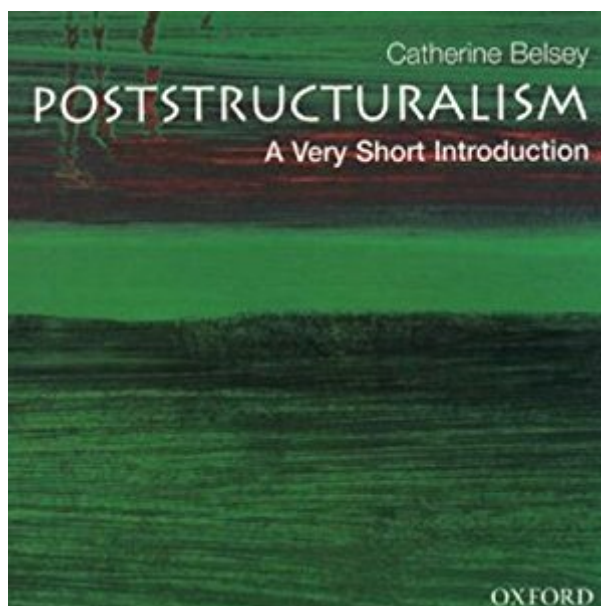


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# Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

Poststructuralism changes the way we understand the relations between human beings, their culture, and the world. Following a brief account of the historical relationship between structuralism and poststructuralism, this very short introduction traces the key arguments that have led poststructuralists to challenge traditional theories of language and culture. Whilst the author discusses such well-known figures as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, she also draws pertinent examples from literature, art, film, and popular culture, unfolding the poststructuralist account of what it means to be a human being. ABOUT THE SERIES: The Very Short Introductions series from Oxford University Press contains hundreds of titles in almost every subject area. These are the perfect way to get ahead in a new subject quickly. Our expert authors combine facts, analysis, perspective, new ideas, and enthusiasm to make interesting and challenging topics highly accessible.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

For those looking to see what exactly all of this talk about Post-Structuralism is about, this is a handy, dandy place to start. (I really do give kudos to whomever thought up this series of Very Short Introductions). Post-Structuralism looks at how language and words create our world. Rather than being a unified theory, however, post-structuralism consists of many different theories proposed by many different thinkers. All of these thinkers and their theories are gathered, for better or for worse, under the category "post-structuralism". Notable theorists are Saussure, Barthes, Lacan and Foucault (these names pop up a lot in all the various post- theories: post-structuralism,

post-modernism, post-colonialism, etc.). Belsey traces the development of literary theory up to the present and discusses various thinkers' strengths and weaknesses. She also distinguishes it from Deconstruction (founded by Jacques Derrida), which is related but not the same. She includes a selection of works that she recommends people read for further understanding of the object. Like all of the other Very Short Introductions that I have read, this one is well written, detailed and - as the title indicates - short. Whether you are the busy person who doesn't have the time to dip into more detailed introductions or the person with just some idle curiosity and a few bucks to spend, this is a great introduction.

French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's assertion that the relationship between a signifier (i.e., a word, symbol) and the signified (the phenomenon it describes) is arbitrary is the starting point for all forms of Poststructuralism. It reveals that language (and all signifying systems) actually create, rather than describe, the world we live in. Consequently, all our understandings of the world, be they through culture, knowledge, or ideology, are artificial constructs. While Poststructuralists do not necessarily deny the existence of reality, they argue that ALL understandings of reality are shaped by the signifying systems through which we must experience and understand it. Their objective, therefore, is not to dissect language/symbols in order to discover an ultimate Truth, but rather to reveal how language and symbols create meaning/reality. Here, Catherine Belsey shows how these ideas inform the work of diverse thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek, and Jean-François Lyotard. Although Poststructuralism is not necessarily political, it can be seen as "subversive" since by revealing how signifying systems create our understandings of the world, the individual learns to recognize and deconstruct the "realities" that control us. While Poststructuralism is empowering in this sense, it also has obvious shortcomings: we can no longer assert any absolutes. This leads the author to conclude that "Poststructuralism is more useful in prompting the uncertainty of questions than in delivering the finality of answers" (107). I think this work is a very good "general" introduction to the topic. For only 107 pages, I don't think anyone could expect anything more. But, for anyone already familiar with Poststructuralism, it may seem a bit superficial.

Poststructuralism is a difficult area of study, as there are many different (sometimes conflicting) points of view and thinkers which are labelled 'poststructuralist'. Poststructuralist thought deals with (among other things) 'signifiers' (words, symbols, actions, etc. which signify meaning), and the way in which people are controlled and defined by the kinds of signifiers their particular culture is made

of. But that's just one consideration of a much more vast and varied area of study. Catherine Belsey's introduction is useful as a departure point for further study into this intriguing discipline, although at times certain important points aren't made clearly enough, and certain poststructuralist vocabulary is not rendered as clear as it could be. Also, she gives only passing attention to arguments against poststructuralism. However, I'd recommend this to anyone interested in the subject, with the caveat that, despite this being part of the normally lucid Very Short Introduction series, it would probably pay to read it more than once.

Poststructuralism is accepted as a fairly challenging set of concepts. I had hoped and expected that this intro would surmount the subject difficulties and offer an admittedly brief yet understandable and foundational presentation of the subject. While the book was at least adequate in satisfying my wishes, the subject presentation seemed a bit scattered and broken (is that poststructuralism?) with rather abrupt changes in direction that left me feeling that the previous train of thought had not yet been completed. I would recommend the book but with some reservations.

...and it's a mere 100-pages long. Catherine Belsey excels at any register of academic writing, and this book is no exception. Concise and clear, it is recommendable not only for students but also for Humanities teachers that wish to rewind and find a clearer way of explaining what poststructuralism is. Poststructuralism is a critical trend mainly concerned with the philosophical consequences of Ferdinand de Saussure's thought. From this fundamental proposition, Belsey weaves a thorough, beautifully simple introduction to one of the most complex schools of critical thought in the 20th Century. I have recommended this book to undergraduate and graduate students alike. While this book is not, of course, a complete introduction, it is more than sufficient to make the reader wish to delve deeper into poststructuralist authors.

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