Postmodernism is just about impossible to define. (Indeed to try to define it is probably the very antithesis of postmodernism). The term is used in many areas; history, art, architecture, literature, literary criticism, philosophy, science and sociology. It can mean quite different things in these different fields, although it usually has some aspects in common.

Postmodernism was a late 20th century movement (1975- ) that opposed the Modernist preoccupation with purity of form and technique, and aimed to eradicate the divisions between art, popular culture, and the media. Postmodern artists employed influences from an array of past movements, applying them to modern forms. Postmodernists embraced diversity and rejected the distinction between "high" and "low" art. Ignoring genre boundaries, the movement encourages the mix of ideas, medias, and forms to promote parody, humor, and irony.

Features of postmodern culture begin to arise in the 1920s with the emergence of the Dada movement, which featured collage and a focus on the framing of objects and discourse as being as important, or more important, than the work itself. Another strand which would have tremendous impact on post-modernism would be the existentialists, who placed the centrality of the individual narrative as being the source of morals and understanding.

Armed with this process of questioning the social basis of assertions, postmodernist philosophers began to attack unities of modernism, and particularly unities seen as being rooted in the Enlightenment. Since Modernism had made the Enlightenment a central source of its superiority over the Victorian and Romantic periods, this attack amounted to an indirect attack on the establishment of modernism itself.

Postmodernism is often used in a larger sense, meaning the entire trend of thought in the late 20th century, and the social and philosophical realities of that period. Marxist critics argue that post-modernism is symptomatic of "late capitalism" and the decline of institutions, particularly the nation-state. Other thinkers assert that post-modernity is the natural reaction to mass broadcasting and a society conditioned to mass production and mass political decision making. The ability of knowledge to be endlessly copied, defeats attempts to constrain interpretation, or to set "originality" by simple means such as the production of a work.

Postmodernism was first identified as a theoretical discipline in the 1970s, but as a cultural movement it predates them by many years. Exactly when modernism began to give way to postmodernism depends on the observer and the theoretical framework. Some theorists reject that such a distinction even exists, viewing postmodernism, for all its claims of fragmentation and plurality, as still existing within a larger "modernist" framework.

Postmodernism is closely allied with several contemporary academic disciplines, most notably those connected with sociology. Many of its assumptions are integral to feminist and post-colonial theory. Some identify the burgeoning anti-establishment movements of the 1960s as the earliest trend out of cultural Modernity toward postmodernism. Tracing it further back, some identify its roots in the breakdown of idealism, and the impact of both World Wars (perhaps even the concept of a World War).

The movement has had diverse political ramifications: its anti-ideological ideas appear conducive to, and strongly associated with, the feminist movement, racial equality movements, gay rights movements, most forms of late 20th century anarchism, even the peace movement and various hybrids of these in the current anti-globalization movement. Unsurprisingly, none of these institutions entirely embraces all aspects of the postmodern movement in its most concentrated definition, but reflect, or in true postmodern style, borrow from some of its core ideas.
Frank Gehry, architect

Gehry was born Frank Goldberg in Toronto, Canada, in 1929. Frank Gehry moved to Los Angeles at an early age and completed his architectural education at the University of Southern California. Frank Gehry subsequently worked for Wdton Becket & Associates (1957-1968) and Victor Gruen (1968-1961) in Los Angeles, as well as for Andre Remondet in Paris (1961). In 1962, Frank Gehry founded his own firm, and embarked on the design of a large variety of residential, commercial, office, and institutional projects. During the 1960s, Frank Gehry began to redirect his architecture by fusing the Japanese and vernacular elements in his early work with the influence of painters and sculptors in a sophisticated manipulation of perspectively distorted shapes, sculptural masses molded by light, and buildings that reveal their structures. This strategy reached its first resolution with the Malibu house for a friend, painter Ron Davis, and developed through a series of small residential projects. These houses allowed Frank Gehry especially to explore a fascination with the process of construction and the use of mass produced and affordable materials. By exposing wood frame construction, by using plywood, corrugated metal, and chain link metal fence as sheathing or screens, and by breaking volumes into incomplete geometries and partial objects, he revealed the structure of the physical and architectural context in which and out of which Frank Gehry was building. This search for new architectural orders culminated in his own house in Santa Monica (1978), in which an existing Cape Cod house was surrounded and cut through by an addition clad in metal and glass. This new space was shot through with implied volumes created by skewed pieces of chain link, wood studs, and glass. The wood construction of both the new and the old building was exposed, as were parts of the foundation and the roof.

At the same time, Frank Gehry engaged in the design of several larger scale buildings in which he put the lessons, learned from his houses, to use in combination with often playful geometries. These developments came together in his renovation of a former police bus depot as the temporary headquarters of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (1983). Here, the existing structure and context of the building were allowed to continue above and through a minimal intervention of fireproofing, exhibition walls, and access points, and the exterior was marked by an ephemeral chain link canopy supported on steel columns.

As part of his formal investigations, Frank Gehry also experimented with the fabrication of furniture out of cardboard and plywood. His "Easy Edges" line of chairs, tables, stools, and accessories (1970) was extremely popular, and gave him his first national exposure. The success of the first line led to the production of the more free-form "Experimental Edges" of 1979 and continues with current prototypes for a new series of chairs. In 1983, Frank Gehry produced a limited edition of lamps in die form of fish and snakes made out of Colorcore Formica.

Gehry’s experiments in architecture have given the world many interesting buildings that will hopefully endure the centuries.
Low White Fish Lamp, 1984. Collection of Fred and Winter Hoffman and Frank and Berta Gehry

CHIAT/DAY BUILDING
Venice, California 1985–91
VITRA INTERNATIONAL MANUFACTURING FACILITY AND DESIGN MUSEUM
Weil am Rhein, Germany 1987–89

VITRA INTERNATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
Birsfelden, Switzerland 1988–94
FISH SCULPTURE AT VILA OLIMPICA
Barcelona 1989–92

EMR COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY CENTER
Bad Oeynhausen, Germany 1991–95

CONDÉ NAST CAFETERIA