

The following list includes important terms used in the discussion and analysis of literature.

SELECT LITERARY TERMS

ALLITERATION

The repetition of an initial consonant sound in a series of words.

EXAMPLE: The stealthy serpent slithered silently.

ALLUSION

The mention of an event, place, idea, or character from history, literature, religion, culture, or some other source with which both the writer and the reader are assumed to be familiar. Their shared understanding of the subject is essential in grasping the full meaning of the allusion.

EXAMPLE: My boyfriend, Lewis, is such a *Romeo*.

(The writer is alluding to the character, Romeo, from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.)

ANALOGY

An extended comparison that emphasizes a similar feature shared by two seemingly dissimilar things.

EXAMPLE: Choosing a book to read is like choosing what you are going to eat for dinner; your choice depends on what you are hungry for.

ARCHETYPE

A symbol, experience, character, idea, or phenomenon that appears in a wide range of literary works or settings. Archetypes are so commonly encountered that they seem to be basic to all humanity and to have almost universal meaning.

EXAMPLES: The sun often represents life or hope. (Archetypal symbol)

Death and rebirth are themes that recur throughout literature. (Archetypal idea)

Mythology from around the world often contains accounts of a hero rescuing someone from the land of the dead. (Archetypal character, symbol, and phenomenon)

ASSONANCE

The repeated stress of similar vowel sounds surrounded by different consonants within a group of words.

EXAMPLE: Sweet dreams.

CAESURA

A pause or break in a poetic line that creates special rhythm or meaning. Most often, it appears in the middle of a line.

EXAMPLES: "Once upon a midnight *dreary*, *while* I pondered, weak and weary."

(The pause between *dreary* and *while* represents a caesura).

CHARACTERIZATION

The means by which an author makes a person, animal, or thing seem real and alive to the reader. In **direct characterization**, the author literally describes the character. When **indirect characterization** is used, the author portrays either the actions and words of the character or the attitude of others toward it.

EXAMPLES: She seemed distant and uninterested. (Direct characterization)

In response to his question, she grunted unintelligibly and looked away. (Indirect characterization)

CONNOTATION

Any association that readers connect to a word that is different from its literal meaning.

EXAMPLE: Often, mention of a fox carries connotations of cleverness and quickness.

DENOTATION

The dictionary definition of a word.

EXAMPLE: Fox: A noun referring to a small, carnivorous mammal.

DIALOGUE

Conversation between characters.

EXAMPLE: “I love you,” he whispered.
“Join the crowd,” replied Jana.

DICTION

The author’s choice of words. For example, an author’s diction might be characterized as formal and scholarly, or it might be informal and conversational. The following examples show a sharp contrast in diction:

EXAMPLES: “Your deduction is replete with logical fallacies.” (Formal diction)
“That doesn’t make any sense.” (Informal diction)

ETHOS

The means by which an author establishes his or her credibility as a reliable authority.

EXAMPLES: Using reputable sources to support his or her ideas enhances a writer’s ethos.
Using words or terminology incorrectly is one way for an author to develop poor ethos and lose the confidence of the reader.

FARCE

A humorous work that uses ridiculously exaggerated events, dialogues, and characterizations.

EXAMPLE: The television series, *I Love Lucy*, is often farcical in its portrayal of people with exaggerated characteristics who often find themselves in unrealistically humorous situations.

FLASHBACK

A device by which a writer interrupts the chronological flow of a narrative to portray an event that occurred at an earlier time.

EXAMPLE: Although the story portrayed the events of her graduation day, it included a flashback to her first day of school.

FOIL

A character whose actions and beliefs are opposite to those of another character. A foil is often used to highlight distinct traits of the contrasting character.

EXAMPLE: Joe seemed all the more sinister and worldly when I read about his interaction with Brandon, whose naiveté and innocence made him the perfect foil for Joe.

FORESHADOWING

A device by which an author hints at an event in a story that will occur in the future.

EXAMPLE: By hinting at Lisa’s murderous tendencies, the author foreshadowed the book’s tragic conclusion.

Types of Writing

Select Literary Terms

GENRE

The specific classification or type of writing into which texts are categorized.

EXAMPLES: Book review E-mail Fiction Mystery Romance
Drama Essay Lab report Poetry Science Fiction

HYPERBOLE

A figure of speech that uses incredible exaggeration or overstatement for emphasis or humor.

EXAMPLE: I'm so hungry that *I could eat a horse*.

IMAGERY

The use of language to evoke a sensory impression or vivid picture in the reader's mind.

EXAMPLE: The rain pounded the dark ocean waves as they crashed against the rocky shore.

IRONY

Using inconsistency or contradiction to give different meaning to seemingly clear statements or situations. Irony can add humor, tension, or emphasis and is normally divided into three main types: **verbal irony**, **dramatic irony**, and **situational irony**.

◀ **Verbal Irony:** When a person says one thing but means the opposite.

EXAMPLE: "Great!" he cried in frustration. "That's *just great!*"

◀ **Dramatic Irony:** When the reader's knowledge differs from what the character understands.

EXAMPLE: As the story neared its climax, I wanted to jump into its page, grab the hero by his shoulders, and say, "Don't go into that room! Can't you see it's a trap?" But the unsuspecting hero had no idea what was coming.

◀ **Situational Irony:** When something unexpected happens that is outside human control.

EXAMPLE: In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable*, it is ironic that Gavroche and Eponine, two of the novel's most streetwise characters, are the first to be killed on the streets of Paris.

LOGOS

The form of persuasion that uses logical thinking, reason, statistics, facts, etc. to prove a point.

EXAMPLE: Five out of six dentists prefer Brand X toothpaste.

METAPHOR AND SIMILE

Comparisons between two unlike actions, ideas, or things. **Similes** use words such as *like* and *as* to compare two unrelated objects. In contrast, **metaphors** do not use the words *like* or *as*, instead referring directly to one object with terms that normally apply to another.

EXAMPLES: His hair looks *like* a mop. (Simile)
His hair is a mop. (Metaphor)

METER

The repeated pattern of rhythmic stresses in poetry.

EXAMPLE: The metric pattern of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" is called **iambic pentameter** because each line consists of five ("penta-") metric units (called "iambs") that contain one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

OXYMORON

The combination of opposite or contradictory terms.

EXAMPLES: Deafening silence
Jumbo shrimp
Bitter sweet

PARADOX

A statement that seems to contradict itself but that often reveals a truth when viewed in a new context.

EXAMPLE: Less is more.

PATHOS

The form of persuasion that authors use when they try to appeal to readers' emotions.

EXAMPLE: A tear trickled down her cheek as the tattered pup, barely six weeks old, breathed its last bit of air, let out a tiny yelp, and bowed its lifeless head over Laura's arm.

PERSONIFICATION

A literary device by which an object, idea, or animal is given human feelings, thoughts, or attributes.

EXAMPLES: The moon smiled down on them.

PLOT

The series of events in a storyline. A typical plot begins with an **exposition** (the opening or introduction). Tension gradually builds through a period of **rising action** until the story reaches its **climax**, at which point the tension is greatest for the reader. The story then quickly moves through a phase called **falling action**, finally ending with the *dénouement* (resolution or conclusion).

EXAMPLE: The entire movie, *Return of the Jedi*, builds up to Luke Skywalker's final, climactic confrontation with the Emperor.

POINT OF VIEW

The perspective from which a story is told. The most common points of view are **first person** (the narrator is the main character and uses *I* or *we*); **second person** (the narrator speaks directly to the reader, making the reader a character in the story by using the pronoun *you*); or **third person** (the narrator and the reader are not characters in the story, so the writer uses pronouns such as *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they*).

EXAMPLES: Barely conscious, *I* gasped for air. (First person narration)
Barely conscious, *you* gasped for air. (Second person narration [rarely used in academic writing])
Barely conscious, *the girl* gasped for air. (Third person narration)

PUN

A device used to create humor by replacing a word with another word that is similar to the original word, but that has a different meaning.

EXAMPLE: My uncle loves making corny puns. I always tell him, "That wasn't very punny."

SATIRE

A form of writing that points out and ridicules the mistakes or shortcomings of people or groups of people, often through shocking or humorous exaggeration.

EXAMPLE: In Jonathan Swift's 1729 essay, "A Modest Proposal," he proposed eating Irish children so that they would no longer be a "burden on society."

SETTING

The background of a story, including location and scenery, occupations of characters, time period, and general environment or culture.

EXAMPLE: The setting of *Huckleberry Finn* is the Mississippi River in the eighteenth century.

STANZA

A distinct group of lines in poetry with a set meter and rhyme.

EXAMPLE: Take the keys and lock her up,
Lock her up, lock her up.
Take the keys and lock her up,
My fair lady. (The second stanza in “London Bridge Is Falling Down”)

SYMBOL

A person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in and of itself and also stands for something more.

EXAMPLES: Sunshine often symbolizes happiness.
Rain sometimes symbolizes sadness and loneliness. At other times, it has been used to symbolize cleanliness, growth, and renewal of life.

THEME

The underlying principle, insight, or idea about life and people that a literary work reveals.

EXAMPLE: Shakespeare’s *Othello* deals with the theme of jealousy.

TONE

The author’s attitude toward the subject and audience and the general atmosphere created by the work.

EXAMPLES: The introduction to Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation...” sets a serious and formal tone that continues throughout the speech.

In contrast, Mark Twain’s first words in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* present a casual and informal tone: “You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter.”

UNDERSTATEMENT

A figure of speech that adds emphasis to an idea, often humorously, by intentionally falling short of describing the full extent or magnitude of the subject.

EXAMPLE: It gets *a little uncomfortable* in the sun on those 115-degree summer afternoons.

VOICE

The distinct attitude or style that an author uses to present his or her ideas, especially as evidenced by diction, tone, and structure.

EXAMPLE: In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain establishes an informal, conversational voice by using words and expressions that would not be acceptable in standard English writing like “there was things which he stretched” and “that ain’t no matter.” His sentence structure also enhances this voice. For example, he uses dashes to insert ideas into the middle of a sentence, much as someone would in conversation: “Aunt Polly – Tom's Aunt Polly, she is – and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book.”