

Literary Terms

Authors and poets use many different techniques when they write. These techniques help to convey ideas and feelings and create memorable works of literature. As you become more familiar with these, you will begin to incorporate them in your own writing.

What Is It Called?	What Does It Mean?	What Does it Look Like?
<i>Allegory</i>	The representation of ideas or moral principles by means of symbolic characters, events, or objects	Arthur Miller's <u>The Crucible</u> uses the Salem Witch Trials as an allegory for the hunt for Communists in America during the 1950s.
<i>Alliteration</i>	The repetition of a consonant sound to create rhythm and aid memory	The falling flakes fluttered to the ground. The swift, silent serpent slithered along.
<i>Allusion</i>	A brief reference to a historical or literary person, place, object, or event	Biblical allusions are frequently used in English Literature; a writer may refer to Adam, Eve, Serpent or The Garden to tap into associations that already exist for the reader.
<i>Analogy</i>	The comparison of two similar things so as to suggest that if they are alike in some respects, they are probably alike in other ways as well	Learning to walk is a good analogy for learning to ride a bike; you start slowly, you are a little wobbly at first, but once you have your balance, you are zooming along.
<i>Anecdote</i>	A short narrative that tells the particulars of an interesting and/or humorous event	My father and mother often used anecdotes as a way to teach us various safety rules.
<i>Antagonist</i>	A person or thing that opposes the protagonist or hero/heroine of a story	The antagonist is not always a person; it may be a force of nature or a corrupt institution.
<i>Apostrophe</i>	A figure of speech where someone (usually absent or dead), an object, some abstract quality, or a nonexistent person is directly addressed as though present and real	"Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean--roll!" (Byron) "Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so." (Donne) "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." (E.B. Browning)
<i>Blank Verse</i>	Unrhymed, but otherwise regular verse, usually iambic pentameter	Most of the text in Shakespeare's plays is written in blank verse, although he often liked to rhyme the last couplet of a scene so the audience would know it was ending.
<i>Caricature</i>	A representation or imitation of a person's physical or personality traits that are so exaggerated or inferior as to be comic or absurd	When a villain is not a caricature, it makes him/her much more complex and interesting which adds depth to the piece.
<i>Characterization</i>	The creation of imaginary persons so that they seem lifelike.	The six elements used to create a character are: physical description, speech, thoughts/feelings, actions/reactions, what other characters say about them and possible direct comments from a narrator.
<i>Cliché</i>	A word or phrase that is so overused that it is no longer effective in most writing situations	"Never judge a book by its cover." "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched." Avoid cliches "like the plague." (irony intended)
<i>Climax</i>	A high point or turning point in a piece of literature, the point at which the rising action reverses and becomes the falling action or denouement	At the climax of the play the true villain was revealed to the audience; no one had suspected her at all.
<i>Coherence</i>	The parts of a composition should be arranged in a logical and orderly manner so that the meaning and ideas are clear and intelligible.	When we write essays, we want to check for coherence during the revision process so that our message is as clear and precise as possible.
<i>Conflict</i>	The problem or struggle that the characters have to solve or come to grips with by the end of the story.	There are five types of conflict: Person vs. Person Person vs. Society Person vs. Nature Person vs. Self Person vs. Fate (God)

<i>Connotation</i>	The emotions and feelings that surround a word; they may be negative, neutral or positive, depending on their context.	When people want to "soften" the word "died," they may use the phrases: "passed away," "at rest," or "at peace," so that the connotation is not as harsh.
<i>Context</i>	The environment of a word, the words that surround a particular word and help to determine or deepen its meaning.	Often you can figure out the meaning of a word by re-reading the sentence or paragraph and looking for context clues that give you additional information about the word.
<i>Couplet</i>	In poetry (verse), two consecutive lines that rhyme	"Tiger! Tiger! Burning <i>bright</i> In the forests of the <i>night</i> ," (Blake)
<i>Critique</i>	A critical examination of a work of art to determine its nature and how it measures up to established standards.	Writing a critique of a book helps us to sharpen our critical thinking skills and deepen our understanding of what we look for in good literature.
<i>Denotation</i>	The literal or basic meaning of a word (the dictionary definition)	The denotation of the word "died" is "to cease living."
<i>Denouement</i>	The resolution or outcome of a play or story	In the denouement of a play, the loose ends of the plot get tied up or answered.
<i>Dialogue</i>	The conversation between two or more characters in a work of literature.	To indicate dialogue in a novel, characters' exact words are enclosed in quotation marks, but in a play, where all the lines are made up of dialogue, the playwright does not need to use quotation marks.
<i>Diction</i>	The writer's choice of words based on their clarity and effectiveness	Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."
<i>Drama</i>	A story told by actors who play the characters who reveal the conflict through their actions and dialogue.	If the actors in a drama give a great performance, they seem to become the characters they are taking on and we get emotionally hooked.
<i>Editorial</i>	A short essay in a newspaper or magazine that expresses the opinion of the writer.	In the editorial section of the newspaper, the editor, as well as community members, can express their opinion on a current issue or topic.
<i>Elegy</i>	A formal poem that meditates on death or another solemn theme	Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," was composed as the poet wandered in an old cemetery and thought about other people's deaths and his own as well.
<i>Empathy</i>	When you put yourself in someone else's place and imagine how that person must feel	<i>Sympathy</i> is "feeling sorry for," someone, while <i>empathy</i> takes us closer to the experience by "feeling the same as" someone else.
<i>Epic</i>	A long narrative poem about the deeds of a great hero that reflects the values of the society that produced it.	<u>Beowulf</u> is the oldest surviving piece of English literature; it is an epic that describes the gory details of gruesome battles between men and monsters.
<i>Epitaph</i>	A short verse or poem in memory of someone	Epitaphs are often engraved on tombstones.
<i>Essay</i>	A piece of prose that expresses an individual's point of view; it is a series of closely related paragraphs that discuss a single topic.	All strong essays need a clear and specific thesis statement that lets the reader know the writer's opinion and direction he/she will take.
<i>Eulogy</i>	A formal speech praising a person or thing	A eulogy can be written for the living as well as for the dead.
<i>Euphemism</i>	When you replace one word or phrase for another in order to avoid being offensive	Corporate "restructuring" or "downsizing" are euphemisms for "laying off" or "firing" workers.
<i>Exposition</i>	The introductory section of a play or novel that provides background information on setting, characters, and plot	Exposition helps the reader to get a sense of the who, when, and what a story or play is about.
<i>Fable</i>	A brief tale told to point to a moral	Aesop, a Greek slave living about 600 B.C., wrote several fables that use animals as their main characters. In modern times, some of Walt Disney's animal stories and Jim Henson's muppet stories can

		be classified as fables.
<i>Falling Action</i>	The last section of a play or story that works out the decision arrived at during the climax	During the falling action in a tragedy, the hero's fortunes will take a turn for the worse and often end in disaster or catastrophe.
<i>Farce</i>	Literature that has essentially one purpose, to make the audience laugh	Farce often depends less on plot and character than on improbable situations. Many situation comedies on television can be classified as farce.
<i>Figurative Language</i>	Language that cannot be taken literally since it was written to create a special effect or feeling	Writers use figurative language to add depth and interest to their pieces.
<i>Figures of Speech</i>	A literary device used to create a special meaning in a piece of writing	The most commonly used figures of speech are: apostrophe, hyperbole, metaphor, metonymy, personification, simile, symbol, and synecdoche.
<i>Flashback</i>	Insertion of a scene or event that took place in the past, for the purpose of making something in the present more clear	A novelist may include a flashback to reveal a childhood incident in the life of an adult character.
<i>Foil</i>	The term is applied to any person who through contrast underscores the distinctive characteristics of another.	In the tragedy <u>Hamlet</u> , the characters of Laertes and Fortinbras serve as foils for the main character Hamlet; they offer a contrast since they are able to take swift action of which he is incapable.
<i>Foreshadowing</i>	The suggestion or hint of events to come later in a literary work	Gray clouds at the beginning of a story may foreshadow turmoil or conflict that occurs later.
<i>Free Verse</i>	Verse written without rhyme, meter or regular rhythm	For centuries, many poets used regular patterns of rhyme, meter and rhythm in their poetry, but in the 18 th century they began to free themselves from these strict conventions.
<i>Genre</i>	A French word used as a synonym for type or form of literature	The most common literary genres are: essay, drama, poetry, novel, screen play, short story, etc.
<i>Hamartia</i>	The error, frailty, mistaken judgment, or misstep through which the fortunes of a tragic hero are reversed	Hamartia is similar to tragic flaw, yet is distinguished by the fact that it is not so much a defect in the character as it is a misjudgment or error that causes a definite action or failure to act.
<i>Heroic Couplet</i>	Two consecutive lines of rhymed verse written in iambic pentameter	"But when to mischief mortals bend their will, How soon they find fit instruments of ill."
<i>Historical Fiction</i>	Fiction whose setting is in some time other than that in which it is written	Arthur Miller's <u>The Crucible</u> was written in the 20 th century, but is a fictional account of the Salem witch trials.
<i>Hyperbole</i>	A type of figurative language that makes an overstatement for the purpose of emphasis	I was so embarrassed, I could have died. I'm so tired I could sleep for years.
<i>Iambic Pentameter</i>	A line of poetry that contains five iambic feet; an iamb is a foot consisting of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable	"And we / are put / on earth / a litt / le space, That we / may learn / to bear / the beams / of love." (William Blake)
<i>Imagery</i>	The use of descriptive words or phrases to create vivid mental pictures in the minds of the reader, often appealing to sight, sound, taste, or smell	The tree roots clutched the ground like gnarled fingers. The frightened screech of an unseen animal tore through the night.
<i>Irony: Dramatic</i>	When the audience knows more than the characters on stage, which creates tension	Horror films use dramatic irony to create suspense: the audience knows that the ax murderer is in the closet, but the unsuspecting victim is totally unaware ...until it is too late!
<i>Irony: Situational</i>	A situation or event that is the opposite of what is or might be expected	It would be ironic if a lifeguard had to be saved from drowning.
<i>Irony: Verbal</i>	The expression of an attitude or intention that is the opposite of what is actually meant	When a late-comer is told sarcastically, "Thanks for joining us."

<i>Legend</i>	A narrative or tradition handed down from the past; distinguished from a myth by having more historical truth and perhaps less of the supernatural.	<u>Johnny Appleseed</u> is a famous American legend.
<i>Limerick</i>	A form of light verse that follows a definite rhyme scheme where the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme and the third and fourth lines rhyme (patterns may vary)	"There once was a lady from Maine, Who was as thin as a cane; When her bathing was done And the water did run, She slid through the hole in the drain."
<i>Lyric</i>	A short poem that expresses the personal feelings and thoughts of a single speaker	Types of lyrics include the elegy, epitaph, ode and sonnet.
<i>Malapropism</i>	When two words become jumbled in the mind of a speaker because they resemble each other and he/she uses the wrong one	In <u>Ulysses</u> , Joyce's character, Molly Bloom speaks of "the preserved seats" in a theatre, instead of "reserved seats."
<i>Melodrama</i>	An exaggerated, sensational form of drama which is intended to appeal to the emotions of the audience	Many television soap operas fall into the category of melodrama.
<i>Metaphor</i>	A type of figurative language that makes a comparison but does not use "like" or "as"	The girls were tigers on the playing field, devouring the competition. All the world is a stage.
<i>Direct Metaphor</i>	When the writer directly states both of the things being compared	Life is a long road with many twists and turns.
<i>Indirect Metaphor</i>	When the writer states one of the things and the reader must infer the other	You have come to a fork in the road and cannot go back.
<i>Metonymy</i>	The substitution of an object closely associated with a word for the word itself	Instead of referring to a monarch, often you might hear a reference to "the crown."
<i>Mood</i>	The feeling a piece of literature arouses in the reader	The mood of the murder mystery was suspenseful and scary.
<i>Motif</i>	Recurring ideas, images, and actions that tend to unify a work	The motif of love and its complications runs through many of Shakespeare's comedies.
<i>Myth</i>	A traditional story that presents supernatural beings and situations that attempt to explain and/or interpret natural events	The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone was created to explain how the seasons came about.
<i>Narrator</i>	The person who is telling the story	See point of view for the different choices of narration.
<i>Novel</i>	Covering a wide range of prose materials which have two common characteristics: they are fictional and lengthy	Because of the length of a novel, the reader has the opportunity to see a character grow and develop as a result of events or actions.
<i>Objective</i>	When a writer makes every attempt to simply present the facts, without opinion or bias	The reporting of the news should be done in an objective manner so the reader can make up his/her own mind on the issues and events.
<i>Onomatopoeia</i>	A type of figurative language in which words sound like the things they name	bang, buzz, crackle, sizzle, hiss, murmur, and roar
<i>Oxymoron</i>	A self-contradictory combination of words (usually paired)	Jumbo shrimp, dear enemy, sweet sorrow, bittersweet,
<i>Parable</i>	A short descriptive story whose purpose is to illustrate a lesson or moral	Many religious works will use parables to teach the desired learning of that religion.
<i>Paradox</i>	A statement that at first seems contradictory, but in fact, reveals a	"I must be cruel, only to be kind." (Shakespeare) "Death, thou shalt die." (Donne)

	truth	
<i>Parody</i>	When a writer imitates an already existing form for the purpose of humor	The television show, <i>Saturday Night Live</i> , uses parody to poke fun at famous people and political figures.
<i>Personification</i>	A type of figurative language that gives animate (living) characteristics to inanimate (nonliving) things	The sun smiled down on the village. The leaves danced in the wind. The thunder growled in the distance.
<i>Plot</i>	The action of a story; all of the events that occur from the beginning to the end.	There are five basic parts or elements that make up the plot line or plot structure: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution (denouement).
<i>Point of View:</i>	From whose angle the story is being told	Writers think very carefully about their choice of point of view since it has a tremendous impact on the story.
<i>First Person</i>	When a character in the story tells the story using "I" or "We" (F or NF)	I strolled into the classroom, not knowing what to expect on my first day of class.
<i>Second Person</i>	Used in nonfiction, primarily for the purpose of writing instructions or directions, using "you" (NF)	When you are a new teacher, you should try to be as well prepared and as confident as possible.
<i>Third Person</i>	When the narrator is telling the events from "outside" the story from a neutral or unemotional viewpoint, using "he," "she," etc. (F or NF)	The young teacher strolled into his classroom looking confident and competent.
<i>Omniscient</i>	When the narrator can see into the hearts and minds of more than one of the characters in the story	The teacher was giving himself a silent pep talk about making his first day great. Casey, who always sat by the window, thought he looked like a pretty nice guy.
<i>Limited Omniscient</i>	When the narrator can see into the mind and heart of only one of the characters in the story	The teacher's head was spinning with what he should say first; Casey, who sat by the window, glanced up to take a look at the new teacher.
<i>Protagonist</i>	The main character in a work; the action revolves around this person and the antagonist, or opposing force	The protagonist will never have a hard time finding an antagonist since their struggle is what creates the conflict and action of a story.
<i>Pseudonym</i>	Means "false name" and is used by some writers instead of their real name	Samuel Langhorne Clemens used the pseudonym Mark Twain when he published his work. Charlotte Bronte used the pseudonym Currer Bell when she began since women often were not published unless they disguised their gender.
<i>Pun</i>	A word or phrase which has a "double meaning" as intended by the writer; often these words sound the same (or nearly the same) but have different meanings	When Hamlet says, "I am too much in the sun," he is making a play on the words "sun" and "son."
<i>Repetition</i>	Repeating a word or group of words for emphasis or effect	There in the sudden blackness, the black pall of nothing, nothing, nothing – nothing at all.
<i>Resolution</i>	The portion of a play or story where the problem is solved	Resolution does not always mean a happy ending; in some stories or plays, especially tragedies, the resolution of the conflict may end sadly.
<i>Rhetorical question</i>	A question asked only for effect or to make a statement, but not to get an answer	How much longer will we put up with this injustice? Isn't it time that we took action?
<i>Rising Action</i>	The portion of a play after the initial incident (introduction of the conflict) where the action is complicated by the opposing forces ending with the	In a novel, play, or movie, the rising action moves the story along and the plot usually becomes more complicated. Because rising action leads to climax, there is usually building tension throughout the

	climax	rising action
<i>Satire</i>	A type of writing that uses humor, irony, or wit to make a point	At this rate, we might as well dump garbage straight into the ocean if we're not going to increase the penalty for polluting the environment.
<i>Setting</i>	The time and place of a story	The setting often plays an important role in a story, influencing characters, conflicts, and themes. In the case of <u>Call of the Wild</u> by Jack London, for example, the northern, snow-covered tundra plays an important role in the outcome of the story.
Short Story	A relatively brief fictional narrative in prose (500-12,000 words)	Edgar Allen Poe's short stories often delight readers with their intrigue and suspense.
Simile	A comparison using "like" or "as"	Her eyes gleamed like stars. The house was as large as a castle.
<i>Soliloquy</i>	A long speech given by a character alone on stage that reveals his/her innermost thoughts and feelings	One of Shakespeare's most famous soliloquies begins with the line, "To be, or not to be, that is the question . ." spoken by the main character, Hamlet.
<i>Sonnet</i>	A poem of fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter that follows one of several rhyme schemes	Elizabeth Barrett Browning used the line, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," as the opening to her famous love sonnet for her husband Robert Browning.
<i>Stereotype</i>	This is a pattern or form which does not change; this term is applied to oversimplified mental pictures or judgments	For many centuries, women were <i>stereotyped</i> as delicate and helpless creatures that needed a man to come in and rescue them from peril.
<i>Structure</i>	This is the organization or planned framework that a writer creates for his/her piece of literature	Carefully examining a writer's structure may help readers deepen their understanding of the work.
<i>Style</i>	This refers to <i>how</i> the author writes (form) rather than <i>what</i> he/she writes (content)	Style is a combination of a writer's diction, tone, and syntax.
<i>Subjective</i>	When a writer inserts opinion or bias into the piece of writing	An editorial is subjective since its purpose is to make clear one's opinion on a current topic.
<i>Symbolism</i>	A symbol is something that stands for something larger than itself	A rose symbolizes beauty. The flag symbolizes the country. Darkness symbolizes evil or the unknown.
<i>Synecdoche</i>	When a part represents the whole or when the whole represents the part	All <i>hands</i> on deck for duty! The <i>law</i> came to his door to issue a warrant for his arrest.
<i>Syntax</i>	The arrangement of words within a phrase, clause or sentence. Factors such as: the type of sentence, the length of the sentence, the use of punctuation and the use of language patterns can all contribute to an effective use of syntax.	When the writer wanted the narrative pace to build, she lengthened her sentences and used very few pauses; then, just before the story's climax, she began to use short choppy sentences to build suspense which was an effective use of syntax.
<i>Theme</i>	A statement of the central idea of a piece of writing.	Courage can be the topic or subject of a piece of writing, but the statement, "It takes a great deal of courage to stand up against one's peers," is a theme.
<i>Tone</i>	The attitude of the author toward his/her subject and audience	Comic, serious, formal, informal, solemn, playful, sarcastic, intimate, distant, etc.
<i>Tragedy</i>	<i>Classical tragedy:</i> A dramatic work where a noble hero's tragic flaw causes him/her to break a moral law that leads to his/her downfall. <i>Modern tragedy:</i> A dramatic work where the hero is often an ordinary person who faces their circumstances with dignity and courage of spirit.	<u>Oedipus Rex</u> and <u>Antigone</u> are classical tragedies that deal with the fall of their respective hero and heroine due to a series of seemingly unavoidable circumstances. <u>The Crucible</u> , <u>Death of a Salesman</u> , and <u>All My Sons</u> are modern tragedies written by Arthur Miller.
<i>Unity</i>	A piece of writing is organized so that all of its parts belong and are well integrated.	When you revise a piece of your writing, check unity by making sure all of the sentences in a given paragraph belong and connect to the main idea.

<i>Writer's Voice</i>	The writer's awareness and effective use of such elements as: diction, tone, syntax, unity, coherence and audience to create a clear and distinct "personality of the writer."	The more familiar a writer is with all of the possible literary devices and techniques, the stronger his/her writer's voice will become.
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