

Literary and Reading Terms

Act A major unit of action in a drama or a play. Each act can be further divided into smaller sections called scenes.

Allegory A story in which people, things, and actions represent an idea or a generalization about life; allegories often have a strong moral or lesson.

Alliteration When the beginnings of words start with the same consonant or vowel sounds in stressed syllables – and the words are close together. Example: Toby teaches tiny tots in Toledo.

Allusion A reference to some striking incident in history or reference to a mythological character. Example: Cain and Abel or Atlas.

Analogy A point-by-point comparison between two dissimilar things in order to clarify the less familiar of the two.

Anecdote A brief account of an interesting incident or event that usually is intended to entertain or to make a point. A short summary of a humorous event used to make a point.

Antagonist The person or thing opposing the protagonist or hero of the story. When this is a person, he or she is usually called the villain.

Antithesis An opposition, or contrast, of ideas. Example: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times..."

Aphorism A short statement that expresses a general observation about life in a clever or pointed way. – "Sometimes the human heart is the only clock in the world that keeps true time" – "Keeping Time"

Apostrophe The direct address of the absent or dead as if they were present, or the inanimate as if it were animate e.g. when Juliet talks to dead Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Archetype An image, character or pattern of circumstance that recurs throughout literature and thought consistently enough to be considered universal – wise grandparent, generous thief, innocent maiden.

Aside An author directly addresses the audience but is not supposed to be heard by other actors on the stage.

Assonance A repetition of vowel sounds. e.g. How now brown cow.

Author's perspective An author's beliefs and attitudes as expressed by his or her writing.

Author's purpose His or her reason for creating a particular work.

Autobiography An author's account or story of his own life.

Biases An inclination for or against a person, place, idea, or thing that inhibits impartial judgment

Biography The story of a person's life written by another person.

Caricature A picture or imitation of a person's features or mannerisms exaggerated in a comic or absurd way.

Cause and effect Two events are related as cause and effect when one event brings about, or causes, the other. The event that happens first is the cause; the one that follows is the effect.

Character A person or an animal in a story, play, poem, or other work of literature.

Character sketch A short piece of writing that reveals or shows something important about a person or fictional character.

Characterization A representation of a person's attributes or peculiarities, appearance, personality.

- **Direct:** The writer states directly what the character is like. Example: Rita was small and fragile looking, but she had immense courage and independence.
- **Indirect:**

1) The writer gives the actual speech of the character. Example: "I'm afraid but I'll do it anyway!" said Rita.

2) The writer reveals what the character is thinking or feeling. Example: As the cold water of the lake wrapped around her legs, Rita trembled at the memory of last summer's accident.

3) The writer tells about the character's actions. Example: With determined effort, Rita managed to get the rowboat into the lake and clamber aboard.

4) The writer tells how other people respond to the character. Example: Polly watched from the shore, knowing it was impossible to stop Rita once she had decided to do something. "She is so stubborn!" Polly thought.

Chronological order The order in which events happen in time.

Classic An enduring work of literature that continues to be read long after it was written.

Cliché Any expression used so often that its freshness and clarity have worn off e.g. "tip of the iceberg."

Climax The high point of the story. It is the point that brings about the solution (or decides that there will not be a solution). The conflict builds and becomes worse up to this point. After the climax, the problem will usually, though not always, be solved. The climax comes near the end of the story.

Comedy A dramatic work that is light and often humorous in tone. It usually ends with a happy resolution.

Comparison The process of identifying similarities. Comparisons are used to make ideas and details clearer to the reader.

Conflict The colliding or clashing of thoughts, feelings, actions, or persons: the problems or complications in the story. All stories have conflicts. There are five basic types of conflict:

- **Character vs. Character:** One character in a story has a problem with one or more of the other characters
- **Character vs. Society:** A character has a conflict or problem with some element of society – the school, the law, the accepted way of doing things, etc.
- **Character vs. Self:** A character has trouble deciding what to do in a particular situation.
- **Character vs. Nature:** A character has a problem with some natural happening: a snowstorm, an avalanche, the bitter cold, or any of the other elements of nature
- **Character vs. Fate (God):** A character has to battle what seems to be an uncontrollable problem. Whenever the problem seems to be a strange or unbelievable coincidence, fate can be considered as the cause of the conflict

Connotation All the emotions or feelings a word can arouse, such as the positive or good feeling associated with the word love.

Consonance The repetition of consonant sounds within a line of verse or a sentence of prose. Not limited to the initial letter of a word. e.g. "such a tide as seems asleep."

Contrast The process of pointing out differences between things.

Conventions Widely accepted rules for grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

Denotation The dictionary meaning of a word.

Denouement The final outcome or resolution of a play or story.

Description Writing that helps the reader to picture scenes, events, and characters.

Dialect A form of language that is spoken in a particular place or by a particular group of people.

Dialogue Consists of the conversations characters have with one another. Dialogue has two main functions:

- 1) It tells a lot about the characters' personalities.
- 2) It moves the plot, or action, along.

Diction An author's choice of words based on their correctness, clearness, or effectiveness.

- **Archaic** words are those that are old fashioned and no longer sound natural when used. Example: "I believe thee not".
- **Colloquialism:** An expression that is usually accepted in informal situations and certain locations. Example: "He really grinds my beans".
- **Jargon:** Specialized language used by a specific group, such as those who use computers. Example: override, interface, and download.
- **Profanity:** Language that shows disrespect for someone or something regarded as holy or sacred.
- **Slang:** The informal language used by a particular group of people among themselves. It is also used in fiction to lend color and feelings. Example: awesome, chill, no way - way.
- **Vulgarity:** Language that is generally considered crude, gross, and, at times, offensive.

Didactic Literature instructs or presents a moral or religious statement.

Drama The form of literature known as plays; but drama also refers to the type of serious play that is often concerned with the leading character's relationship to society rather than with some tragic flaw within his personality.

Dramatic monologue A literary work (or a part of a literary work) in which a character is speaking about him or herself as if another person were present. The words of the speaker reveal something important about his or her character.

Dynamic Character A character who undergoes adaptation, change, or growth--Pinocchio

Empathy Putting yourself in someone else's place and imagining how that person must feel.

Epic A long narrative poem about the adventures of a hero whose actions reflect the ideals and values of a nation or a group.

Epigram A brief, witty saying or poem often dealing with its subject in a satirical manner.

Epiphany A sudden moment of understanding that causes a character to change or act in a certain way.

Epitaph A short poem or verse written in memory of someone.

Epithet A word or phrase used in place of a person's name and is characteristic of that person. Example: Material Girl, Alexander the Great, Ms. Know-It-All.

Essay A piece of prose which expresses an individual's point of view; usually, it is a series of closely related paragraphs which combine to make a complete piece of writing.

Exaggeration An extreme overstatement of an idea. It is often used for purposes of emphasis or humor.

Exposition The beginning of the story where:

- The audience usually meets the characters
- The time and place (setting) are told
- The conflict (the problem in the story that needs to be solved) is introduced
- This portion helps the reader understand the background or situation in which the story is set.

Extended metaphor A figure of speech that compares two essentially unlike things at some length. It may introduce a series of metaphors representing different aspects of a situation.

Fable A short fictional narrative that teaches a lesson. It usually includes animals that talk and act like people.

Fact A statement that can be proved.

Falling action All that happens after the climax. This is the action which works out the decision arrived at during the climax. The resolution (denouement) follows.

Fantasy A work of literature that contains at least one fantastic or unreal element.

Farce Literature based on a humorous and improbable plot.

Fiction Prose writing that tells an imaginary story. The writer of a fictional work might invent all the events and characters in it or might base parts of the story on real people or events.

Figurative language Writers use figurative language – expressions that are not literally true – to create original descriptions.

Figure of Speech A literary device used to create a special effect or feeling by making some type of interesting and creative comparison. Examples: Antithesis, Hyperbole, Metaphor, Metonymy, Personification, Simile, Understatement, etc.

Flashback Returning to an earlier time in the story for the purpose of making something in the present clearer.

Flat Character A character who is simple, two dimensional, and shallow. Readers do not feel like they get to KNOW a flat character. e.g. the mother in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Foil Someone who serves as a contrast or challenge to another character.

Foreshadowing A suggestion of what is to come later in the work by giving hints and clues.

Genre Used to define form or type of literature. The novel, the essay, and poem are examples of the many genre or forms of literature.

Gothic novel A type of fiction that is characterized by gloomy castles, ghosts, and supernatural happenings - creating mysterious and sometimes frightening story.

Historical fiction Contemporary fiction that is set in the past.

Horror fiction Contains mysterious and often supernatural events to create terror.

Hubris Derived from the Greek word *hybris*, means "excessive pride." In Greek tragedy, hubris is often viewed as the flaw that leads to the downfall of the tragic hero.

Hyperbole A figure of speech in which the truth is exaggerated for emphasis or for humorous effect. Example: "I have seen this river so wide it had only one bank."

Idiom An expression whose meaning is different from the sum of the meanings of its individual words.

Imagery Used to describe the words or phrases, which bring forth a certain picture or image in the mind of the reader. It is the sensory language and the metaphors that the writer uses to create the atmosphere.

Impressionism The recording of events and situations as they have been impressed upon the mind.

Inference A logical guess based on evidence. Readers, by combining the information the writer provides with what they know from their own experience, can figure out more than the words say.

Irony A contrast between what is expected and what actually exists.

Jargon Specialized language of a trade, profession, or group.

Legend A story handed down from the past about a specific person.

Litotes A form of understatement that is achieved by saying the opposite of what you mean e.g. calling a fat child-- "skinny" or a slow one-- "speedy."

Local color The use of language and details that are common in a certain region of the country. (Regional dialect)

Main idea A central idea that a writer wishes to express. It could be the central idea of an entire work or a topic sentence of a paragraph.

Malapropism A type of pun, or play on words, that results when two words become jumbled in the speaker's mind. The term comes from a character in Sheridan's comedy, *The Rivals*. The character, Mrs. Malaprop, is constantly mixing up her words.

Melodrama An exaggerated form of drama (soap operas) characterized by heavy use of romance, suspense, and emotion.

Memoir A specific type of autobiography. A memoir does not cover the author's entire life.

Metaphor A comparison of two things that have some quality in common. A metaphor does not contain the words of comparison – like or as. Example: "A green plant is a machine that runs on solar energy."

Metaphor A comparison between two things that have something in common without using like, as or resembles the dog had "a stick of a leg"- "Moco Limping"

Meter The more or less regular pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in poetry.

Metonymy Substituting one word for another related word. Example: The White House has decided to create more public service jobs. (White House is substituted for president.)

Mood The feeling a piece of literature arouses in the reader: happy, sad, etc.

Moral A lesson or value that the author is trying to get across to the reader.

Motif A term for an often-repeated idea or theme in literature.

Motivation Why characters behave in a certain way. You can track motivation with because sentences.

Myth A traditional story that attempts to justify a certain practice or believe or to explain a natural phenomenon.

Narration Writing that relates an event or a series of events.

Narrative Writing that tells a story. The events can be real or imagined.

Narrator The person who is telling the story.

Naturalism An extreme form of realism in which the author tries to show the relation of a person to the environment or surroundings. Often, the author finds it necessary to show the ugly or raw side of that relationship.

Nonfiction Writing that tells about real people, places, and events.

Novel A term that covers a wide range of prose materials, which have two common characteristics: they are fictional and lengthy.

Novella A prose work longer than the standard short story, but shorter and less complex than a full-length novel.

Onomatopoeia The formation or use of words such as buzz that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to. -moo, drip, clang, choo choo.

Opinion A statement that reflects a writer's belief, but which cannot be supported by proof or evidence.

Organization Writing that has an inviting lead, purposeful sequencing and no dream ending.

Outlining A general description covering the main points of a subject with headings & subheadings

Oxymoron A combination of contradictory terms as in "jumbo shrimp."

Parable A short descriptive story that illustrates a particular belief or moral.

Paradox A statement that seems contrary to common sense, yet may, in fact be true. Example: "The coach considered this a good loss."

Parallel Structure The repeating of phrases and sentences that are syntactically similar.

Paraphrasing The restatement of a text by readers in their own words or in another form.

Parody A form of literature that intentionally uses comic effect to mock a literary work or style.

Pathetic fallacy: A form of personification giving human traits to nature. Example: cruel sea, howling wind.

Pathos A Greek root meaning suffering or passion. It usually describes the part in a play or story that is intended to elicit pity or sorrow from the audience or reader.

Personification A literary device in which the author elevates an animal, object, or idea to the level of human such that it takes on the characteristics of a human personality. Example: "The rock stubbornly refused to move."

Persuasion Meant to sway readers' feelings, beliefs, or actions.

Picaresque novel A work of fiction consisting of a lengthy string of loosely connected events. It usually features the adventures of a rogue living by his or her wits.

Plot The sequence of events that happen in a story. There are five basic parts to a plot :

- Exposition
- Rising Action
- Climax
- Falling Action
- Resolution

Poetic justice A term that describes a character "getting what he deserves" in the end, especially if what he deserves is punishment. The purest form of poetic justice is when one character plots against another but ends up being caught in his or her own trap.

Poetic License A poet or other professional writer is allowed to break conventional rules of grammar, spelling, form, or citation to make rhyme or meter or general effect better --Dr. Seuss

Poetry A type of literature in which ideas and feelings are expressed in compact, imaginative, and often musical language.

Point of view The vantage point from which the story is being told.

- **First-person point of view:** The story is told by one of the characters.

- **Third-person point of view:** The story is told by someone outside of the story. There are three kinds of third person p.o.v.:

- **Omniscient-** allows the narrator to relate the thoughts and feelings of all the characters
- **Limited omniscient-** allows the narrator to relate the thoughts and feelings of only one character
- **Camera (objective) view-** seeing and recording the action from a neutral or unemotional point of view

Primary source A firsthand account of an event. Primary sources include: diaries, journals, letters, speeches, news stories, photographs, and pieces of art.

Propaganda One sided persuasion, materials spread abroad by advocates of a doctrine.

Prose An ordinary form of spoken and written language. It is the language that lacks the special features of poetry.

Protagonist The main character or hero of the story.

Pseudonym A pen name or false name. The name a writer uses in place of his or her given name.

Pun A word or phrase that is used to suggest more than one possible meaning.

Quest A main character seeking to find something or achieve a goal. In the process, this character encounters and overcomes a series of obstacles, returning wiser and more experienced.

Realism Literature that attempts to represent life as it really is.

Realistic fiction Imaginative writing set in the real, modern world.

Renaissance Means "rebirth," is the period of history following the Middle Ages. This period began late in the 14th century and continued through the 15th and 16th centuries. The term now applies to any period in time in which intellectual and artistic interest is revived or reborn.

Repetition A technique in which a sound, word, phrase, or line is repeated for effect or emphasis.

Resolution Sometimes called the "denouement." It ties up the story. It is most often the final solution to the conflict. It is also what happens as a result of the solution.

Rhetorical Question A question asked for effect which neither requires a reply nor wants a reply. -

- When it is past bed time and a parent asks, "Isn't it past your bed time?"

Rhetorical Techniques The tools used in effective or persuasive language --contrast, repetition, paradox, understatement, sarcasm, and rhetorical questions.

Rhyme Repetition of sounds at the end of words e.g. "I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them Sam I am."

Rising Action The part of a drama that follows the event that gives rise to the conflict & precedes the climax.

Romanticism A literary movement with an emphasis on the imagination and emotions.

Sarcasm Use of praise to mock someone or something.

Satire A literary technique in which ideas or customs are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society.

Scene In a play, a scene is a section presenting events that occur in one place at one time.

Science fiction Is prose writing in which a writer explores unexpected possibilities of the past or future by using scientific data and theories as well as his or her imagination.

Secondary source Presents information compiled from or based on other sources.

Sensory details Words and phrases that help readers see, hear, taste, feel, or smell what the author is describing.

Sentence Fluency Sentences have varied length and beginnings, they are easy to read aloud.

Setting The place and time that a literary or dramatic work takes place.

Short story A brief work of fiction that can generally be read in one sitting. Usually contains one major conflict and at least one main character.

Simile A comparison of two unlike things in which a word of comparison (like or as) is used. Example: She eats like a bird.

Slang Non-standard vocabulary, figures of speech marked by spontaneity and raciness.

Slapstick A form of low comedy that often includes exaggerated, sometimes violent action. The "pie in the face" routine is a classic piece of slapstick.

Soliloquy A speech delivered by a character when he or she is alone on stage. It is as though the character is thinking out loud.

Stage Is the level and raised platform on which entertainers usually perform.

Stage directions In the script of a play, the stage directions are the instructions to the actors, director, and stage crew.

Static Character A character who undergoes no change e.g. Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Stereotype A broad generalization or an oversimplified view that disregards individual differences. These can lead to unfair judgments of people on the basis of ethnic background or physical appearance.

Stream of consciousness A style of writing in which the thoughts and feelings of the writer are recorded as they occur.

Style How the author uses words, phrases, and sentences to form his or her ideas. Style is also thought of as the qualities and characteristics that distinguish one writer's work from the work of others.

Surprise ending An unexpected twist in the plot at the end of a story.

Suspense A feeling of growing tension and excitement.

Symbol A concrete object used to represent an idea. Example: A black object usually symbolizes death or sorrow.

Syntax The arrangement – the ordering, grouping, placement – of words within a sentence and sentences within a paragraph.

Theme The statement about life a particular story is trying to get across to the reader. A theme is a message about life or human nature that is communicated by a literary work.

Tone The overall feeling, or effect, created by a writer's use of words. This feeling may be serious, humorous, or satiric.

Tragedy A literary work in which the hero is destroyed by some flaw within his character and/or by forces he cannot control.

Tragic Hero A character that experiences an inner struggle because of some flaw within his character. That struggle ends in the defeat of the hero.

Transcendentalism A philosophy that requires human beings to go beyond (transcend) reason in their search for truth. It assumes that an individual can arrive at the basic truths of life through spiritual insight if he or she takes the time to think seriously about them.

Understatement A way of emphasizing an idea by talking about it in a restrained manner. Example: "Aunt Polly is prejudiced against snakes." (She was terrified of them.)

Voice An author's or a narrator's voice is his or her distinctive style or manner of expression.

Word Choice Vivid images created with just the right words and phrases.