



Literary Devices



WHY?

To successfully interpret and analyze literary texts, you'll first need to have a solid foundation in literary terms and their definitions.



WHAT?

Literary devices are techniques that writers use to create a special and pointed effect in their writing, to convey information, or to help readers understand their writing on a deeper level.



Allegory

An allegory is a story that is used to represent a more general message about real-life (historical) issues and/or events. It is typically an entire book, novel, play, etc.



Example:

George Orwell's dystopian book [Animal Farm](#) is an allegory for the events preceding the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist era in early 20th century Russia. In the story, animals on a farm practice animalism, which is essentially communism. Many characters correspond to actual historical figures.

Alliteration

Alliteration is a series of words or phrases that all (or almost all) start with the same sound. **These sounds are typically consonants to give more stress to that syllable.** You'll often come across alliteration in poetry, titles of books and poems ([Jane Austen](#) is a fan of this device, for example—just look at *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*), and tongue twisters.



Example:

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." In this tongue twister, the "p" sound is repeated at the beginning of all major words.



Allusion

Allusion is when an author makes an indirect reference to a figure, place, event, or idea originating from *outside* the text. Many allusions make reference to previous works of literature or art.



Example:

"Stop acting so smart Raiden—it's not like you're Einstein or something." This is an allusion to the famous real-life theoretical physicist Albert Einstein.



Anachronism

An anachronism occurs when there is an (intentional) error in the chronology or timeline of a text. This could be a character who appears in a different time period than when he actually lived, or a technology that appears before it was invented. Anachronisms are often used for **comedic effect**.



Example:

A Renaissance king who says, "That's dope, dude!" would be an anachronism, since this type of language is very modern and not actually from the Renaissance period.



Analogy

An analogy is a literary device that helps to establish a relationship based on similarities between two concepts or ideas. By using an analogy we can convey a new idea by using the blueprint of an old one as a basis for understanding.



Example:

In the same way as one cannot have the rainbow without the rain, one cannot achieve success and riches without hard work.



Anaphora

Anaphora is when a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of multiple sentences throughout a piece of writing. It's used to emphasize the repeated phrase and evoke strong feelings in the audience.



Example:

A famous example of anaphora is Winston Churchill's "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" speech. Throughout this speech, he repeats the phrase "we shall fight" while listing numerous places where the British army will continue battling during WWII. He did this to rally both troops and the British people and to give them confidence that they would still win the war.



Anthropomorphism

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Example:

Children's cartoons have many examples of anthropomorphism. For example, Mickey and Minnie Mouse can speak, wear clothes, sing, dance, drive cars, etc. Real mice can't do any of these things, but the two mouse characters behave much more like humans than mice.



Colloquialism

Colloquialism is the use of informal language and slang. It's often used by authors to **lend a sense of realism to their characters and dialogue**. Forms of colloquialism include words, phrases, and contractions that aren't real words (such as "gonna" and "ain't").



Example:

"Hey, what's up, man?" This piece of dialogue is an example of a colloquialism, since it uses common everyday words and phrases, namely "what's up" and "man."



Diction

Diction is the distinctive tone or tenor of an author's writings. Diction is not just a writer's choice of words it can include the mood, attitude, dialect and style of writing.



Example:

Certain writers in the modern day and age use archaic terms such as 'thy', 'thee' and 'wherefore' to imbue a Shakespearean mood to their work.



Elegy

A poem expressing grief over a death.



Example:

O Captain! My Captain! by Walt Whitman is an elegy for Abraham Lincoln.



Epistrophe

Epistrophe is similar to anaphora, but in this case, the repeated word or phrase appears at the *end* of successive statements. Like anaphora, it is used to evoke an emotional response from the audience.



Example:

In Lyndon B. Johnson's speech, "The American Promise," he repeats the word "problem" in a use of epistrophe: "There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem."



Euphemism

A euphemism is when a more mild or indirect word or expression is used in place of another word or phrase that is considered harsh, blunt, vulgar, or unpleasant.



Example:

"I'm so sorry, but he didn't make it." The phrase "didn't make it" is a more polite and less blunt way of saying that someone has died.

"I have to let you go" is a euphemistic expression for firing someone.



Flashback

A flashback is an interruption in a narrative that depicts events that have already occurred, either before the present time or before the time at which the narration takes place. This device is often used to **give the reader more background information and details about specific characters, events, plot points, and so on.**



Example:

Most of the novel [Wuthering Heights](#) by Emily Brontë is a flashback from the point of view of the housekeeper, Nelly Dean, as she engages in a conversation with a visitor named Lockwood. In this story, Nelly narrates Catherine Earnshaw's and Heathcliff's childhoods, the pair's budding romance, and their tragic demise.



Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is when an author indirectly hints at—through things such as dialogue, description, or characters' actions—what's to come later on in the story. This device is **often used to introduce tension to a narrative.**



Example:

Say you're reading a fictionalized account of Amelia Earhart. Before she embarks on her (what we know to be unfortunate) plane ride, a friend says to her, "Be safe. Wouldn't want you getting lost—or worse." This line would be an example of foreshadowing because it implies that something bad ("or worse") will happen to Earhart.



Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement that's not meant to be taken literally by the reader. It is often used for **comedic effect and/or emphasis.**



Example:

"I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."
The speaker will not literally eat an entire horse (and most likely *couldn't*), but this hyperbole emphasizes how starved the speaker feels.



Idiom

An idiom is a group of words with a meaning that cannot be understood by the meanings of the words considered separately. Idioms are often particular to certain groups of people.



Example:

When the idiom “break a leg” is used, the actual meaning is different from the words in the phrase.

“Don’t cut any corners” is an idiom; on its surface, it doesn’t make sense but is a known phrase that means don’t take shortcuts.



Imagery

Imagery is when an author describes a scene, thing, or idea so that it appeals to our senses (taste, smell, sight, touch, or hearing). This device is often used to help the reader **clearly visualize parts of the story by creating a strong mental picture.**



Example:

The gushing brook stole its way down the lush green mountains, dotted with tiny flowers in a riot of colors and trees coming alive with gaily chirping birds.



Irony

- Irony is when a statement is used to express an opposite meaning than the one literally expressed by it. There are three types of irony in literature:
- **Verbal irony:** When someone says something but means the opposite (similar to sarcasm).
- **Situational irony:** When something happens that's the opposite of what was expected or intended to happen.
- **Dramatic irony:** When the audience is aware of the true intentions or outcomes, while the characters are *not*. As a result, certain actions and/or events take on different meanings for the audience than they do for the characters involved.

Example:

- **Verbal irony:** One example of this type of irony can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." In this short story, a man named Montresor plans to get revenge on another man named Fortunato. As they toast, Montresor says, "And I, Fortunato—I drink to your long life." This statement is ironic because we the readers already know by this point that Montresor plans to kill Fortunato.
- **Situational irony:** A girl wakes up late for school and quickly rushes to get there. As soon as she arrives, though, she realizes that it's Saturday and there is no school.
- **Dramatic irony:** In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo commits suicide in order to be with Juliet; however, the audience (unlike poor Romeo) knows that Juliet is not actually dead—just asleep.



Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the comparing and contrasting of two or more different (usually opposite) ideas, characters, objects, etc. This literary device is often used to help **create a clearer picture of the characteristics of one object or idea by comparing it with those of another.**



Example:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ..."



Metaphor/Simile

Metaphors are when ideas, actions, or objects are described in non-literal terms. In short, it's when an author compares one thing to another. The two things being described usually share something in common but are unlike in all other respects.

A simile is a type of metaphor in which an object, idea, character, action, etc., is compared to another thing using the words "as" or "like."

Both metaphors and similes are often used in writing for clarity or emphasis.



Example:

"What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun." In this line from *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo compares Juliet to the sun. However, because Romeo doesn't use the words "as" or "like," **it is *not* a simile—just a metaphor.**

"She is as vicious as a lion." Since this statement uses the word "as" to make a comparison between "she" and "a lion," **it is a simile.**



Mood

Mood is the general feeling the writer wants the audience to have. The writer can achieve this through description, setting, dialogue, and word choice. The general feeling the speaker evokes in the reader through the atmosphere, descriptions, and other features.



Example:

“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before”

"It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle. The door opened on to a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel: a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats -- the hobbit was fond of visitors."



Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is a word (or group of words) that represents a sound and **actually resembles or imitates the sound it stands for**. It is often used for dramatic, realistic, or poetic effect.



Example:

buzz

boom

chirp

creak

sizzle

zoom



Oxymoron

An oxymoron is a combination of two words that, together, express a contradictory meaning. This device is often used for emphasis, for humor, to create tension, or to illustrate a paradox.



Example:

deafening silence

organized chaos

cruelly kind

insanely logical

a fine mess



Paradox

A paradox is a statement that appears illogical or self-contradictory but, upon investigation, might actually be true or plausible.

Note that a paradox is different from an oxymoron: **a paradox is an entire phrase or sentence, whereas an oxymoron is a combination of just two words.**



Example:

"This statement is false."

If the statement is true, then it isn't actually false (as it suggests). But if it's false, then the statement is true! Thus, this statement is a paradox because it is **both true and false at the same time.**



Personification

Personification is when a nonhuman figure or other abstract concept or element is described as having human-like qualities or characteristics. (Unlike anthropomorphism where non-human figures *become* human-like characters, with personification, the object/figure is simply *described* as being human-like.) Personification is used to help the reader create a clearer mental picture of the scene or object being described.



Example:

The shadows danced on the wall.

"The wind moaned, beckoning me to come outside." In this example, the wind—a nonhuman element—is being described as if it is human (it "moans" and "beckons").



Repetition

Repetition is when a word or phrase is written multiple times, usually for the purpose of emphasis. It is often used in poetry (for purposes of rhythm as well).



Example:

And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside.

*“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”*



Satire

Satire is genre of writing that **criticizes something**, such as a person, behavior, belief, government, or society. Satire often employs irony, humor, and hyperbole to make its point.



Example:

Animal Farm is a work of satire, critiquing Stalinism and the politics Soviet Union.

The Onion is a satirical newspaper and digital media company. It uses satire to parody common news features such as opinion columns, editorial cartoons, and click bait headlines.



Soliloquy

A type of monologue that is often used in dramas, a soliloquy is when a character speaks aloud to himself (and to the audience), thereby revealing his inner thoughts and feelings.



Example:

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's speech on the balcony that begins with, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" is a soliloquy, as **she is speaking aloud to herself** (remember that she doesn't realize Romeo's there listening!).



Symbolism

Symbolism refers to the use of an object, figure, event, situation, or other idea in a written work to represent something else—**typically a broader message or deeper meaning that differs from its literal meaning.**

The things used for symbolism are called "symbols," and they'll often appear multiple times throughout a text, sometimes changing in meaning as the plot progresses.



Example:

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, the green light that sits across from Gatsby's mansion symbolizes Gatsby's hopes and dreams.

In *Macbeth*, the “spot” Lady Macbeth cannot get off her dress is a symbol of her guilt-stained conscience.



Synecdoche

A synecdoche is a literary device in which part of something is used to represent the whole, or vice versa. It's similar to a metonym (see above); however, **a metonym doesn't have to represent the whole—just something associated with the word used.**



Example:

"Help me out, I need some hands!" In this case, "hands" is being used to refer to people (the whole human, essentially).

When someone refers to looking out at a "sea of faces," the faces represent whole people.



Tone

While mood is what the audience is supposed to feel, **tone is the writer or narrator's attitude towards a subject.** A good writer will always want the audience to feel the mood they're trying to evoke, but the audience may not always agree with the narrator's tone, especially if the narrator is an unsympathetic character or has viewpoints that differ from those of the reader.



Example:

In an essay disdaining Americans and some of the sites they visit as tourists, Rudyard Kipling begins with the line, "Today I am in the Yellowstone Park, and I wish I were dead." If you enjoy Yellowstone and/or national parks, you may not agree with the author's tone in this piece.