

COMMON LITERARY TERMS

ALLITERATION - The repetition of consonant sounds in a line or grouping of words.

ALLUSION - A significant reference, direct or indirect, to a work of literature, music, or art, as well as a historical event, person, or place.

ANACHRONISM - An event or a detail that is chronologically out of its proper time in history.

ANALOGY - A comparison of two things, stressing their similarities.

ARTISTIC LICENSE - Freedom to depart from known facts to create a story.

ASIDE - A dramatic convention in which a character turns "aside" to speak a few words directly to the audience or another character, but is not supposed to be heard by others on stage. (Asides are quite common in Shakespeare's plays.)

ASSONANCE - The repetition of vowel sounds in a line or grouping of words.

ATMOSPHERE - The general mood or feeling established in a work of literature.

BLANK VERSE - Verse written in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

CLIMAX - The moment of highest emotional intensity in a plot, when the nature of the conflict is made most clear to the reader.

CONFLICT - A struggle between two opposing forces in a piece of literature.

CONNOTATION - The suggested meanings of a word or phrase; the meanings and feelings that have become associated with the word, in addition to its explicit meaning.

CONVENTIONS - Certain forms, practices or methods of communication that are accepted by a reader or an audience even though they are not always realistic.

COUPLET - A pair of successive rhymed lines of poetry.

DENOTATION - The explicit meaning of a word, as found in a dictionary.

DIALECT - A variety of language belonging to a particular time, place, or social group.

DICTION - A writer's choice and use of words.

DRAMATIC IRONY - A device which allows an audience or a reader to know something that a character in a drama or story is unaware of.

EPITHET - An adjective phrase used to set apart, describe, and typify a character, place, or thing.

EXAGGERATION - Saying more than what is literally true, oftentimes for humor or emphasis.

FABLE - A very brief story told to teach a moral lesson.

FALLING ACTION - The action that follows the turning point (see term listed).

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE - Language that is used to describe a thing in terms of something else; language that is not intended to be taken literally. (Examples are Metaphor, Simile, Symbol, and Personification.)

FLASHBACK - A scene in a story or play that interrupts the present action to tell about events that happened sometime earlier.

FORESHADOWING - Providing clues that suggest or hint at important plot developments that are to follow in a story.

FREE VERSE - Poetry that doesn't have a fixed line length, stanza form, rhyme scheme, or meter.

HYPERBOLE - A figure of speech that uses exaggeration or overstatement for effect.

IMAGERY - Words or phrases that use description to create vivid pictures in the reader's mind.

IRONY - A contrast or discrepancy between what is stated and what is really meant, or between what is expected and what actually happens.

LOCAL COLOR - The use of specific details describing the speech, dress, customs, and scenery associated with a particular region or country.

LYRIC POETRY - Verse that focuses on the emotions or thoughts of the poet.

METAPHOR - The comparison of two dissimilar things, oftentimes by expressing that the one thing is actually the other.

METER - The rhythmic pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. The following are expressions of meter called "feet":

1. Iamb (iambic): De/bate
2. Trochee (trochaic): Walk/ing
3. Dactyl (dactylic): Dif/fer/ent
4. Anapest (anapestic): Ap/pre/hend
5. Spondee (spondaic): Down/town

MONOLOGUE - A long speech in a play or story, delivered by a single character.

NARRATOR - The one who tells a story.

- **FIRST-PERSON**: Told by someone in the story.
- **THIRD-PERSON**: Told by someone not in the story.
- **OMNISCIENT**: Someone who expresses the interior thoughts of any of the characters without assuming any particular identity.

OCTAVE - Eight lines of verse grouped together, as in the first part of a sonnet.

ONOMATOPOEIA - Words that sound like their meaning (i.e. buzz, purr).

PARADOX - An expression that reveals truth, although it may seem, at first, to be contradictory and untrue.

PARALLELISM - The repetition of words, phrases, or clauses that are similar in structure or in meaning.

PERSONA - The contrived voice or speaker of a poem; the voice of the speaker in a poem should not automatically be assumed to be that of the poet.

PERSONIFICATION - When something that is not human is given human characteristics or feelings.

PLOT - The events of a story; action over time.

PROTAGONIST - The main character in a story or drama who the reader or audience sympathizes with.

QUATRAIN - A stanza of four lines, rhymed or unrhymed.

RHYME - Generally, the repetition of accented vowel sounds; three types include:

- **End Rhyme**: places the rhyme at the end of a line of verse.

- Internal Rhyme: repeats sounds within lines.
- Approximate Rhyme: rhymed words are close, but not exact.

RHYME SCHEME - The pattern of rhymed words in a stanza or poem, designated by letters; for example, if the final words are:

- Roses are red A
- Violets are blue B
- Sugar is sweet C
- And so are you B

RISING ACTION - The events in a drama that lead up to the turning point, when the fate of the main character becomes clear.

SETTING - The time and place in which the events of a story take place.

SIMILE - A direct comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as." This may be done by some other less overt comparative means, also.

SOLILOQUY - A lengthy speech given by a character, alone on stage; considered "verbalized thoughts."

STANZA - A group of related lines in a poem forming a division in the poem's structure.

STYLE - The way in which a writer writes, determined by his/her use of words, sentence structure, and figurative language.

SUBPLOT - A plot in a story or play that is secondary to the main plot.

SUSPENSE - The wonder or anxiety a work produces concerning the outcome of events.

SYMBOL - An object that represents itself and some greater reality than itself.

THEME - A main idea expressed in a literary work; a universal message a work may provide about some aspect of life. (It is often expressed in a complete, declarative sentence. For example, "The Scarlet Letter reveals that people who act pious, like Reverend Dimmesdale, often deny their own humanity, and people who are labeled as "sinners," like Hester Prynne, are often very humane and compassionate.")

TONE - The attitude a writer conveys about some aspect of his subject or work, identified through word choice.

TURNING POINT - The key moment in a story when the fate of the hero or heroine is clear.

UNITY - An organizing principle which holds all of the parts of a story together; often understood in terms of "structure."

VERISIMILITUDE - The appearance of truth without its substance.