

Literary Devices, Techniques, and Elements

A **literary device** is any specific aspect of literature, or a particular work, which we can recognize, identify, interpret and/or analyze. Both literary elements *and* literary techniques can rightly be called literary devices.

Literary techniques are specific, deliberate constructions of language which an author uses to convey meaning. An author's use of a literary technique usually occurs with a single word or phrase, or a particular group of words or phrases, at one single point in a text. Unlike literary elements, literary techniques are *not* necessarily present in *every* text.

Alliteration: The repetition of consonant sounds within close proximity, usually in consecutive words within the same sentence or line.

Anthropomorphism: Where animals or inanimate objects are portrayed in a story as people, such as by walking, talking, or being given arms, legs and/or facial features. (This technique is often incorrectly called **personification**.)

*The King and Queen of Hearts and their playing-card courtiers comprise only one example of Carroll's extensive use of **anthropomorphism** in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*

Blank verse: Non-rhyming poetry, usually written in iambic pentameter.

*Much of Shakespeare's dialogue is written in **blank verse**, though it does occasionally rhyme.*

Creative license: Exaggeration or alteration of objective facts or reality for the purpose of enhancing meaning in a fictional context.

*Dickens took some **creative license** with the historical events of the French Revolution in order to clarify the ideological conflicts.*

Dialogue: Where characters speak to one another; may often be used to substitute for exposition.

*Since there is so little stage direction in Shakespeare, many of the characters' thoughts and actions are revealed through **dialogue**.*

Dramatic irony: Where the audience or reader is aware of something important, of which the characters in the story are *not* aware.

*Macbeth responds with disbelief when the weird sisters call him Thane of Cawdor; **ironically**, unbeknownst to him, he had been granted that title by king Duncan in the previous scene.*

Exposition: Where an author interrupts a story in order to explain something, usually to provide important background information.

*The first chapter consists mostly of **exposition**, running down the family's history and describing their living conditions.*

Figurative language: Any use of language where the intended meaning differs from the actual literal meaning of the words themselves. There are many techniques which can rightly be called figurative language, including metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification, onomatopoeia, verbal irony, and oxymoron. (Related: **figure of speech**)

*The poet makes extensive use of **figurative language**, presenting the speaker's feelings as colors, sounds and flavors.*

Foreshadowing: Where future events in a story, or perhaps the outcome, are **suggested** by the author before they happen. Foreshadowing can take many forms and be accomplished in many ways, with varying degrees of subtlety. However, if the outcome is deliberately and explicitly revealed early in a story (such as by the use of a narrator or flashback structure), such information does **not** constitute foreshadowing.

*Willy's concern for his car **foreshadows** his eventual means of suicide.*

Hyperbole: A description which exaggerates.

*The author uses **hyperbole** to describe Mr. Stevens, calling him "the greatest human being ever to walk the earth."*

Iambic pentameter: Poetry written with each line containing ten syllables, in five repetitions of a two-syllable pattern wherein the pronunciation emphasis is on the second syllable.

*Shakespeare wrote most of his dialogue in **iambic pentameter**, often having to adjust the order and nature of words to fit the syllable pattern, thus endowing the language with even greater meaning.*

Imagery: Language which describes something in detail, using words to substitute for and create sensory stimulation, including visual imagery and sound imagery. Also refers to specific and recurring types of images, such as food imagery and nature imagery.

Irony (a.k.a. **Situational irony**): Where an event occurs which is unexpected, and which is in absurd or mocking opposition to what is expected or appropriate. See also **Dramatic irony**; **Verbal irony**.

*Jem and Scout are saved by Boo Radley, who had **ironically** been an object of fear and suspicion to them at the beginning of the novel.*

Metaphor: A direct relationship where one thing or idea substitutes for another.

*Shakespeare often uses light as a **metaphor** for Juliet; Romeo refers to her as the sun, as “a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear,” and as a solitary dove among crows.*

Onomatopoeia: Where sounds are spelled out as words; or, when words describing sounds actually sound like the sounds they describe.

*Remarque uses **onomatopoeia** to suggest the dying soldier’s agony, his last gasp described as a “gurgling rattle.”*

Oxymoron: A contradiction in terms.

*Romeo describes love using several **oxymorons**, such as “cold fire,” “feather of lead” and “sick health,” to suggest its contradictory nature.*

Paradox: Where a situation is created which cannot possibly exist, because different elements of it cancel each other out.

*In 1984, “doublethink” refers to the **paradox** where history is changed, and then claimed to have never been changed.*

*A Tale of Two Cities opens with the famous **paradox**, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”*

Parallelism: Use of similar or identical language, structures, events, or ideas in different parts of a text.

*Hobbs’ final strikeout **parallels** the Whammer’s striking out against him at the beginning of the novel.*

Personification (I) Where inanimate objects or abstract concepts are seemingly endowed with human self-awareness; where human thoughts, actions and perceptions are directly attributed to inanimate objects or abstract ideas. (Not to be confused with **anthropomorphism**.)

*Malamud **personifies** Hobbs’ bat, giving it a name, Wonderboy, referring to it using personal pronouns, and stating that “he went hungry” during Hobbs’ batting slump.*

Personification (II) Where an abstract concept, such as a particular human behavior or a force of nature, is represented as a person.

*The Greeks **personified** natural forces as gods; for example, the god Poseidon was the **personification** of the sea and its power over man.*

Repetition: Where a specific word, phrase, or structure is repeated several times, to emphasize a particular idea.

*The **repetition** of the words “What if...” at the beginning of each line reinforces the speaker’s confusion and fear.*

Simile: An indirect relationship where one thing or idea is described as being similar to another. Similes usually contain the words “like” or “as,” but not always.

*The **simile** in line 10 describes the lunar eclipse: “The moon appeared crimson, like a drop of blood hanging in the sky.”*

The character’s gait is described in the simile: “She hunched and struggled her way down the path, the way an old beggar woman might wander about.”

Symbolism: The use of specific objects or images to represent abstract ideas. This term is commonly misused, describing any and all representational relationships, which in fact are more often metaphorical than symbolic. A **symbol** must be something tangible or visible, while the idea it **symbolizes** must be something abstract or universal.

*Golding uses **symbols** to represent the various aspects of human nature and civilization as they are revealed in the novel. The conch **symbolizes** order and authority, while its gradual deterioration and ultimate destruction **metaphorically** represent the boys’ collective downfall.*

Verbal irony: Where the meaning is intended to be the exact opposite of what the words actually mean. (**Sarcasm** is a tone of voice that often accompanies verbal irony, but they are not the same thing.)

*Orwell gives this torture and brainwashing facility the **ironic** title, “Ministry of Love.”*

Literary elements are aspects or characteristics of a whole text. They are not “used,” per se, by authors; *we* derive what they are from reading the text. Most literary elements can be derived from any and all texts; for example, every story has a **theme**, every story has a **setting**, every story has a **conflict**, every story is written from a particular **point-of-view**, etc. In order to be discussed legitimately, literary elements must be *specifically identified* for that text.

Allegory: Where every aspect of a story is representative, usually symbolic, of something else, usually a larger abstract concept or important historical/geopolitical event.

Lord of the Flies provides a compelling **allegory** of human nature, illustrating the many sides of the psyche through its sharply-defined main characters.

Antagonist: Counterpart to the main character and source of a story’s main conflict. The person may not be “bad” or “evil” by any conventional moral standard, but he/she opposes the protagonist in a significant way.

Characterization: The author’s means of conveying to the reader a character’s personality, life history, values, physical attributes, etc. Also refers directly to a description thereof.

Atticus is **characterized** as an almost impossibly virtuous man, always doing what is right and imparting impeccable moral values to his children.

Climax: The turning point in a story, at which the end result becomes inevitable, usually where something suddenly goes terribly wrong; the “dramatic high point” of a story.

*The story reaches its **climax** in Act III, when Mercutio and Tybalt are killed and Romeo is banished from Verona.*

Conflict: A struggle between opposing forces which is the driving force of a story. The outcome of any story provides a resolution of the conflict(s); this is what keeps the reader reading. Conflicts can exist between individual characters, between groups of characters, between a character and society, etc., and can also be purely abstract (conflicting ideas).

*The **conflict** between the Montagues and Capulets causes Romeo and Juliet to behave irrationally once they fall in love.*

*Jack’s priorities are in **conflict** with those of Ralph and Piggy, which causes him to break away from the group.*

*Man-versus-nature is an important **conflict** in The Old Man and the Sea.*

Context: Facts and conditions surrounding a given situation.

*Madame Defarge’s actions seem almost reasonable in the **context** of the Revolution.*

Mood: The atmosphere or emotional condition created by the piece, within the setting.

The mood of Macbeth is dark, murky and mysterious, creating a sense of fear and uncertainty.

Motif: A recurring important idea or image. A motif differs from a theme in that it can be expressed as a single word or fragmentary phrase, while a theme usually must be expressed as a complete sentence.

Blood is an important motif in A Tale of Two Cities, appearing numerous times throughout the novel.

Plot: Sequence of events in a story. Most literary essay tasks will instruct the writer to “avoid plot summary;” the term is therefore rarely useful for response or critical analysis. When discussing plot, it is generally more useful to consider its **structure**, rather than simply “what happens.”

Point-of-view: The identity of the narrative voice; the person or entity through whom the reader experiences the story. May be third-person (no narrator; omniscient or limited) or first-person (narrated by a character in the story who either merely observes or directly participates). Point-of-view is a commonly misused term; it does *not* refer to the author’s (or characters’) feelings, opinions, perspectives, biases, etc.

*Though it is written in **third-person**, Animal Farm is told from the **point-of-view** of the common animals, unaware of what is really happening as the pigs gradually and secretly take over the farm.*

*Writing the story in **first-person point-of-view** enables the reader to experience the soldier’s fear and uncertainty, limiting the narrative to what only he saw, thought and felt during the battle.*

Protagonist: The main character in a story, the one with whom the reader is meant to identify. The person is not necessarily “good” by any conventional moral standard, but he/she is the person in whose plight the reader is most invested.

Setting: The time and place where a story occurs. The setting can be specific (e.g., New York City in 1930) or ambiguous (e.g., a large urban city during economic hard times). Also refers directly to a description thereof.

*The novel is **set** in the South during the racially turbulent 1930’s, when blacks were treated unfairly by the courts.*

*With the island, Golding creates a pristine, isolated and uncorrupted **setting**, in order to show that the boys’ actions result from their own essential nature rather than their environment.*

Speaker: The “voice” of a poem; *not* to be confused with the poet him/herself. Analogous to the narrator in prose fiction.

Structure: The manner in which the various elements of a story are assembled.

*The individual tales are told within the **structure** of the larger framing story, where the 29 travelers gather at the Inn at Southwark on their journey to Canterbury, telling stories to pass the time.*

*The play follows the traditional Shakespearean five-act plot **structure**, with exposition in Act I, development in Act II, the climax or turning point in Act III, falling action in Act IV, and resolution in Act V.*

Theme: The main idea or message conveyed by the piece. A theme is generally stated as a complete sentence; an idea expressed as a single word or fragmentary phrase is a **motif**.

*Orwell's **theme** is that absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

*The idea that human beings are essentially brutal, savage creatures provides the central **theme** of the novel.*

Tone: The apparent emotional state of the speaker/narrator/narrative voice, as conveyed through the language of the piece.

*The poem has a bitter and sardonic **tone**, revealing the speaker's anger and resentment.*

*The **tone** of Gulliver's narration is unusually matter-of-fact, as he seems to regard these bizarre and absurd occurrences as ordinary or commonplace.*

Tragedy: Where a story ends with a negative or unfortunate outcome that was essentially avoidable, usually caused by a flaw in the central character's personality. *Tragedy* is really more of a dramatic genre than a literary element; a play can be referred to as a tragedy, but tragic events in a story are essentially part of the plot, rather than a literary device in themselves.

Tragic hero/tragic figure: A protagonist who comes to a bad end as a result of his own behavior, usually caused by a specific personality disorder or character flaw.

*Willy Loman is one of the best-known **tragic figures** in American literature, oblivious to and unable to face the reality of his life.*

Tragic flaw: The single characteristic (usually negative) or personality disorder that causes the downfall of the protagonist.

*Othello's **tragic flaw** is his jealousy, which consumes him so thoroughly that he is driven to murder his wife rather than accept, let alone confirm, her infidelity.*