

AP Literature Literary Terms

allegory: a story in which people, things, and actions represent an idea about life; allegories often have a strong lesson.

alliteration (a-LIT-uh-RAY-shuhn): the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words (tongue twisters)

allusion (a-LOO-zhuhn): a reference in a literary work to a person, place, or thing in history or another work of literature. Allusions are often indirect or brief references to well-known characters or events.

analogy: a comparison of two or more like objects that suggests if they are alike in certain respects, they will probably be alike in other ways as well.

anecdote: a brief account of an interesting incident or event that usually is intended to entertain or to make a point.

aside: an actor's speech, directed to the audience, that is not supposed to be heard by other actors on stage. An aside is used to let the audience know what a character is about to do or what he or she is thinking.

assonance: repetition of vowel sounds within a line of poetry.

ballad: is a poem that tells a story and is meant to be sung or recited.

blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter.

caesura: a pause or a sudden break in a line of poetry

cliché: a type of figurative language containing an overused expression or a saying that is no longer considered original.

consonance: the repetition of consonant sounds anywhere within a line of poetry.

couplet (KUP-let): a rhymed pair of lines in a poem.

dialect: a form of language that is spoken in a particular place or by a particular group of people.

dramatic monologue: a literary device that is used when a character reveals his or her innermost thoughts and feelings, those that are hidden throughout the course of the story line, through a poem or a speech. This speech, where only one character speaks, is recited while other characters are present onstage.

elegy (EL-e-je): a literary song or poem that expresses sorrow or lamentation, usually for one who has died.

enjambment: in poetry, the running over of a line or thought into the next of verse

epigram (ep-e-gram): a short poem or verse that seeks to ridicule a thought or event, usually with witticism or sarcasm.

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

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

epitaph: a short poem or verse written in memory of someone

extended metaphor: a figure of speech that compares two essentially unlike things in great length.

fable: a brief tale that teaches a lesson about human nature. Fables often feature animals as characters.

figurative language or **figure of speech:** expressions that are not literally true, such as simile and metaphor.

flashback: an interruption of the chronological sequence of an event of earlier occurrence.

foil: a character who contrasts with another character—usually with the protagonist—in order to highlight particular qualities of the other character.

foot: a unit of meter within a line of poetry

foreshadowing: when the writer provides clues or hints that suggest or predict future event in a story.

free verse: poetry without regular patterns of rhyme and rhythm. Often used to capture the sounds and rhythms of ordinary speech.

genre (ZHAWN-ruh): a type or category of literature. The four main genres are fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama.

haiku: a traditional form of Japanese poetry, usually dealing with nature. A haiku has three lines and describes a single moment, feeling or thing. The first and third lines contain five syllables and the second line contains seven syllables.

heroic couplet or closed couplet: a couplet consisting of two successive rhyming lines that contain a complete thought.

historical fiction: fiction that explores a past time period and may contain references to actual people and events.

humor: the quality that provokes laughter or amusement. Writers create humor through exaggeration, sarcasm, amusing descriptions, irony, and witty dialogue.

hyperbole (hi-per-bo-lee): a figure of speech in which the truth is exaggerated for emphasis or humorous effect.

idiom: a phrase or expression that means something different from what the words actually say (for example, using the phrase “over his head” instead of “He doesn’t understand”)

imagery: the use of words and phrases that appeal to the five senses. Writers use sensory details to help readers imagine how things look, feel, smell, sound, and taste.

irony (i-RAH-nee): a contrast between what is expected and what actually exists or happens. Irony spices up a literary work by adding unexpected twists and allowing the reader to become more involved with the characters and plot. There are many types of irony, including:

1. **verbal irony:** when the speaker means something different than what he or she is saying.
2. **dramatic irony:** when the audience knows something the characters don’t know.
4. **situational irony:** the difference between what is expected to happen and the way events actually work out.

legend: a story handed down from the past about a specific person, usually someone of heroic accomplishments.

limerick: a short humorous poem composed of five lines that usually has the rhyme scheme aabba, created by two rhyming couplets followed by a fifth line that rhymes with the first couplet. A limerick typically has a sing-song rhythm.

lyric (LEER-ick) poetry: a song-like poem written mainly to express the feelings or emotions of a single speaker.

memoir: an autobiographical writing that covers only a piece of the writer’s life.

metaphor (met-AH-for): a type of figurative language in which a comparison is made between two things that are essentially unlike but may have one quality in common. Unlike a simile, a metaphor does not contain an explicit word of comparison, such as “like” or “as”.

meter: the regular pattern of accented and unaccented syllables. (See the Meter and Form handout.)

metonymy: the metaphorical substitution of one word or phrase for another related word or phrase. Example: “The pen is mightier than the sword.” The word “pen” is used in place of “words” and the word “sword” is used to represent the idea of fighting or war.

mood: the feeling that a literary work conveys to readers.

motif (moh-TEEF): a recurring object, concept, or structure in a work of literature. A motif may also be two contrasting elements in a work, such as good and evil. A motif is important because it allows one to see main points and themes that the author is trying to express, in order that one might be able to interpret the work more accurately.

myth: a traditional story that attempts to explain how the world was created or why the world is the way that it is. Myths are stories that are passed on from generation to generation and are of unknown authorship.

narrative: any writing that tells a story. Most novels and short stories are placed into the categories of first-person and third-person narratives, which are based on who is telling the story and from what perspective.

narrative poetry: poetry that tells a story. A narrative poem can come in many forms and styles, both complex and simple, short or long, as long as it tells a story. Like fiction, narrative poetry contains characters, settings and plots.

ode: a lyric poem of some length, usually of serious or meditative nature and having an elevated style and formal structure.

onomatopoeia: the use of words whose sound suggest their meaning (ex. buzz, bang, hiss).

oxymoron: a form of figurative language combining contradictory words or ideas (ex. jumbo shrimp, bittersweet).

paradox: a statement that seems to contradict itself but is, nevertheless, true.

parallelism: the use of similar grammatical constructions to express ideas that are related or equal in importance. For example: The sun rises. The sun sets.

parody: a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author’s work for comic effect or ridicule.

personification: a figure of speech where animals, ideas or inanimate objects are given human characteristics.

point of view: perspective from which a story is told. There are three main points of view in stories:

1. **first person point of view:** the person telling the story is one of the characters in the story. It is the “I” point of view. It is the most limited among the types because the narrator can only state what he or she sees, feels, and hears.
2. **third person limited:** the person telling the story is not one of the characters in the story. He or she is an outside observer. The reader only knows the thoughts and feelings of ONE character in the story.
3. **third person omniscient:** the person telling the story is also an outside observer, but this narrator is able to know the thoughts and feelings of ALL the characters in the story.

prose: the ordinary form of spoken and written language; that is, language that lacks the special features of poetry. Examples of prose include: essays, stories, articles, speeches, etc.

realistic fiction: imaginative writing set in the real, modern world. The characters act like real people who use ordinary human abilities to cope with problems and conflicts typical of modern life.

refrain: repetition in literature of one or more lines at regular intervals; sometimes called the chorus.

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

sarcasm: the use of praise to mock someone or something; the use of mockery or verbal irony

satire: a literary technique in which ideas or customs are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society.

simile (sim-EH-lee): a simile is a type of figurative language that makes a comparison between two otherwise unlike objects or ideas by connecting them with the words "like" or "as."

soliloquy: a speech delivered by a character who is alone on the stage.

sonnet (sonn-IT): a sonnet is a distinctive poetic style that uses a system or pattern of metrical structure and verse composition usually consisting of fourteen lines, arranged in a set rhyme scheme or pattern. There are two main styles of sonnet, the Italian sonnet and the English sonnet.

1. The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet is usually written in iambic pentameter. It consists first of an octave, or eight lines, which asks a question or states a problem or proposition and follows the rhyme scheme a-b-b-a, a-b-b-a. The sestet, or last six lines, offers an answer, or a resolution to the proposed problem, and follows the rhyme scheme c-d-e-c-d-e.
2. In the English or Shakespearean sonnet the octave and sestet were replaced by three quatrains, each having its own independent rhyme scheme typically rhyming every other line, and ending with a rhyme couplet. Instead of the Italianic break between the octave and the sestet, the break comes between the twelfth and thirteenth lines. The ending couplet is often the main thought change of the poem, and has an epigrammatic ending. It follows the rhyme scheme a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g.

speaker: the voice that talks to the reader in a poem, as the narrator does in a work of fiction. The speaker in the poem is not necessarily the poet.

stanza: a grouping of two or more lines within a poem. A stanza is comparable to a paragraph in prose. Some common stanza forms include. (See the Meter and Form handout for types of stanzas based on number of lines.)

style: how a writer says something; many elements contribute to style, including word choice, sentence length, tone and figurative language

suspense: a feeling of growing tension and excitement. Writers create suspense by raising questions in readers' minds about what might happen.

symbolism: using something specific to stand for something else, especially an idea. A symbol is a person, place, object or action that for something beyond itself. For example, a dove may represent peace. The dove can be seen and peace cannot.

synecdoche: a literary technique in which the whole is represented by naming one of its parts. Example: "You've got to come take a look at my new set of wheels." The vehicle is represented by its parts, or wheels.

tall tale: a humorously exaggerated story about impossible events.

tone: the writer's attitude or feeling about his or her subject.

tragedy: a dramatic work that presents the downfall of a dignified character or characters who are involved in historically or socially significant events. The events in a tragic plot are set in motion by a decision that is often an error in judgment. Succeeding events inevitably lead to a disastrous conclusion, usually death.

understatement: a statement that is restrained in ironic contrast to what might have been said; the opposite of hyperbole. Understatement is usually used for a humorous effect.

voice: an author or narrator's distinctive style or manner of expression. Voice can reveal much about the author or narrator's personality.