

# Handbook of Literary Terms

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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Allegory**—A narrative in which the characters and settings stand for abstract ideas or moral qualities. In addition to the literal meaning of the story, an allegory contains a symbolic, or **allegorical**, meaning.

**Alliteration**—Repetition of the same or very similar consonant sounds usually at the beginnings of words that are close together in a poem.  
Example



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Allusion**—Reference to a statement, a person, a place, or an event from literature, history, religion, mythology, politics, sports, science, or pop culture.

**Ambiguity**—An element of uncertainty in a text, in which something can be interpreted in a number of different ways.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Analogy**—Comparison made between two things to show how they are alike in some respects.

**Anecdote**—Very, very brief story, usually told to make a point.

**Aside**—Words that are spoken by a character in a play to the audience or to another character but that are not supposed to be overheard by the others onstage.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Assonance**—Repetition of similar vowel sounds that are followed by different consonant sounds, especially in words that are close together in a poem.

**Author**—The writer of a literary work.

**Autobiography**—An account of the writer's own life.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Ballad**—Song that tells a story. Ballads usually tell sensational stories of tragedy or adventure.

Types of ballads

**Biography**—An account of a person's life, written or told by another person.

**Blank Verse**—Poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter.





# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Character**—Person in a story, poem, or play. The process of revealing the personality of a character in a story is called **characterization**.

Direct and indirect characterization

Static vs. dynamic character

Flat vs. round character

Motivation

**Climax**—Moment of great emotional intensity or suspense in a plot.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Comedy**—In general, a story that ends happily.  
More about comedy

**Comic Relief**—Comic scene or event that breaks up a serious play or narrative.

**Conflict**—Struggle or clash between opposing characters or opposing forces.  
External and internal conflict





# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Connotation**—All the meanings, associations, or emotions that have come to be attached to some words, in addition to their literal dictionary definitions, or **denotations**.

**Couplet**—Two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme.



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**Description**—Type of writing intended to create a mood or emotion or to re-create a person, a place, a thing, an event, or an experience. Description works by creating images that appeal to the senses of sight, smell, taste, hearing, or touch.

**Dialect**—Way of speaking that is characteristic of a particular region or a particular group of people. More about dialect



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Dialogue**—The conversation between characters in a story or play.

**Diction**—A writer's or speaker's choice of words. Diction is an essential element of a writer's **style**, the overall way in which a writer uses language.

**Drama**—Story that is written to be acted for an audience.  
Elements of a dramatic plot



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**Dramatic Monologue**—A poem in which a speaker addresses one or more silent listeners, often reflecting on a specific problem or situation.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Epic**—Long story told in elevated language (usually poetry), which relates to the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular society.

**Epithet**—Adjective or descriptive phrase that is regularly used to characterize a person, place, or thing. We speak of “Honest Abe,” for example, and “America the Beautiful.”



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Essay**—Short piece of nonfiction prose that examines a single subject from a limited point of view.

Personal essay

Formal essay

**Exposition**—Type of writing that explains, gives information, defines, or clarifies an idea.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Fable**—Very brief story in prose or verse that teaches a moral, or a practical lesson about how to get along in life.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Figure of Speech**—Word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another and is not meant to be understood on a literal level. Most figures of speech, or **figurative language**, involve some sort of imaginative comparison between seemingly unlike things. The most common figures of speech are

- Simile
- Metaphor
- Personification



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**Flashback**—Scene in a movie, play, short story, novel, or narrative poem that interrupts the present action of the plot to flash backward and tell what happened at an earlier time.

**Flash-Forward**—Scene in a movie, play, short story, novel, or narrative poem that interrupts the present action of the plot to shift into the future.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Foil**—Character who is used as a contrast to another character.

**Folk Tale**—Story that has no known author and was originally passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth.

**Foreshadowing**—The use of clues to hint at events that will occur later in a plot.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Free Verse**—Poetry that does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Genre**—The category that a work of literature is classified under. Five major genres in literature are nonfiction, fiction, poetry, drama, and myth.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Haiku**—Japanese verse form consisting of three lines and, usually, seventeen syllables (five in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third).

**Hyperbole**—Figure of speech that uses exaggeration to express strong emotion or to create a comic effect. Hyperbole is also called **overstatement**.



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**Iambic Pentameter**—Line of poetry that contains five iambs. Iambic pentameter is by far the most common verse line in English poetry.  
Example

**Idiom**—Expression peculiar to a particular language that means something different from the literal meaning of each word. “It’s raining cats and dogs” is an idiom of American English.



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**Imagery**—Language that appeals to the senses. Most images are visual, but images can also appeal to the senses of hearing, touch, taste, or smell or even to several senses at once.

Example

**Inversion**—Reversal of the normal word order of a sentence.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Irony**—Contrast between expectation and reality—between what is said and what is really meant, between what is expected to happen and what really does happen, or between what appears to be true and what is really true.

Verbal irony

Situational irony

Dramatic irony



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Lyric Poetry**—Poetry that does not tell a story but is aimed only at expressing a speaker's emotions or thoughts.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Metaphor**—Figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things, in which one thing becomes another thing without the use of the word *like*, *as*, *than*, or *resembles*.

Implied metaphor

Extended metaphor

Dead metaphor

Mixed metaphor





# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Meter**—Generally regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry.

**Mood**—A story's atmosphere or the feeling it evokes. Mood is often created by a story's setting.

**Myth**—Traditional story that is rooted in a particular culture, is basically religious, and usually serves to explain a belief, a ritual, or a mysterious natural phenomenon.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Narration**—Type of writing or speaking that tells about a series of related events.

**Narrator**—The voice telling a story.

**Nonfiction**—Prose writing that deals with real people, things, events, and places.  
Forms of nonfiction



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Novel**—Fictional prose narrative usually consisting of more than fifty thousand words. In general, the novel uses the same basic literary elements as the story but develops them more fully.

Plot

Character

Setting

Theme

Point of view



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Onomatopoeia**—Use of a word whose sound imitates or suggests its meaning. *Crack, pop, fizz, zoom, and chirp* are examples of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is an important element in the music of poetry.  
Example



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Paradox**—Statement or situation that seems to be a contradiction but reveals a truth.

**Parallelism**—Repetition of words, phrases, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure or that state a similar idea. Parallelism, or **parallel structure**, helps make lines rhythmic and memorable and heightens their emotional effect.  
Example



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Persona**—Mask or voice assumed by a writer.

**Personification**—Kind of metaphor in which a nonhuman thing or quality is talked about as if it were human.

Example





# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Plot**—Series of related events that make up a story or drama. Plot is what happens in a short story, novel, or play.

Elements of plot

Plot diagram



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Poetry**—Type of rhythmic, compressed language that uses figures of speech and imagery to appeal to the reader's emotions and imagination.

Rhyme

Meter

Free verse

Lyric poem

Narrative poem



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Point of View**—Vantage point from which a writer tells a story. In broad terms there are three possible points of view:

- Omniscient
- First person
- Third person limited

**Protagonist**—Main character in fiction or drama. The character or force that blocks the protagonist is the **antagonist**.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Pun**—Play on the multiple meanings of a word or on two words that sound alike but have different meanings.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Refrain**—Repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines.

**Rhyme**—Repetition of accented vowel sounds, and all sounds following them, in words close together in a poem.

Example

Types of rhyme

Rhyme scheme



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Rhythm**—Musical quality in language produced by repetition.  
Meter





# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Satire**—Type of writing that ridicules something—a person, a group of people, humanity at large, an attitude or failing, a social institution—in order to reveal a weakness.

**Scene Design**—Sets, lights, costumes, and props, which bring a play to life onstage.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Setting**—The time and place of a story or play.

**Short Story**—Short, concentrated fictional prose narrative.

Plot in a short story

**Simile**—Figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things, using a word such as *like*, *as*, *resembles*, or *than*.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Soliloquy**—Long speech in which a character who is onstage alone expresses his or her thoughts aloud.

**Sonnet**—Fourteen-line lyric poem that is usually written in iambic pentameter and that has one of several rhyme schemes.

**Speaker**—Voice that is talking to us in a poem.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Stanza**—Group of consecutive lines in a poem that form a single unit.

**Style**—The particular way in which a writer uses language. Style is created mainly through diction (word choice), use of figurative language, and sentence patterns.

**Suspense**—Uncertainty or anxiety the reader feels about what is going to happen next in a story.



# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Symbol**—Person, place, thing, or event that stands for itself and for something beyond itself as well.

Examples



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Tall Tale**—Exaggerated, far-fetched story that is obviously untrue but is told as though it should be believed.

**Theme**—Central idea of a work of literature.  
More about theme

**Tone**—Attitude a writer takes toward a subject, a character, or the audience. Tone is conveyed through the writer's choice of words and details.





# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Tragedy**—Play that depicts serious and important events in which the main character comes to an unhappy end.



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# Handbook of Literary Terms

**Voice**—The writer's or speaker's distinctive use of language in a text. Voice is created by a writer's tone and choice of words.



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