

Glossary of Literary Terms

accent – The emphasis or stress placed on a certain syllable; a term applied in poetry

action – The series of events of which a story is composed; action also can refer to the characters' thoughts, feelings, and words as well as their physical movements

active voice – The voice of a verb indicates the relation of the action of the verb to the subject of the clause or sentence. There are two voices: **active** and **passive**. The active voice is a direct statement: "I wrote this essay." The passive voice inverts the normal pattern: "This essay was written by me." The passive voice is easily recognized: the finite verb contains some form of the verb "to be" followed by a past participle – "written." Grammar aside, in general, most writers prefer the active voice to the passive as the active voice is usually more direct and vigorous:

I shall always remember my first visit to Montreal

This is much better than

My first visit to Montreal will always be remembered by me.

This latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise. If the writer tries to make it more concise by omitting "by me,"

My first visit to Montreal will always be remembered.

it becomes indefinite: is it the writer or some person undisclosed or the world at large that will always remember this visit? As passive constructions are frequently indirect and obscure, politicians and civil servants are fond of them; it enables one to make assertions which promise action without committing oneself to perform it, and makes possible the admission of error without anyone having to accept responsibility. For instance,

Passive: Be assured (by whom?) that action will be taken (by whom?).

Active: I assure you that I will act.

Passive: It is to be regretted (by whom?) that an error has been made (by whom?) in your account. The matter will be investigated (by whom?).

Active: I am sorry we made an error in your account. I will look into the matter and correct it immediately.

However, there are valid reasons for using the passive voice: for example, here are three good reasons for using passive.

- (1) When the agent, or the doer of the act, is indefinite or not known
- (2) When the agent is not as important as the act itself
- (3) When the writer wants to emphasize either the agent or the act by putting it at the beginning or end of the sentence.

For example,

It was reported that there were eight survivors.

Here the writer does not know who did the reporting. To avoid the passive by saying, "Someone reported that there were eight survivors," would be to strain the point by seeming to emphasize the mysterious "someone." Also the fact that someone did the reporting is, in this sentence, less important than the content of the report.

The accident *was witnessed* by more than fifty people.

Here the writer wishes to emphasize the large number of witnesses. It could be stated, "More than fifty people witnessed the accident," but the emphasis is clearly greater at the end of the sentence than at the beginning.

allegory – An extended narrative that carries a second meaning along with the surface story. People, places, objects and events represent themselves as well as something else.

Ex: *On one level, Animal Farm is the story of a group of animals that take over a farm. On another level, it is the story of the Russian Revolution.*

alliteration – The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants or consonant clusters, in a group of words:

Ex: *Five miles meandering with a mazy motion.*

Ex: *Silver streaks in the sky.*

allusion – A brief reference, explicit or implicit, to a person, place, event, or to another literary work or passage

Ex: *He met his Waterloo. Achilles' heel.*

ambiguity – With writing, ambiguity can refer to a carelessness that produces two or more meanings where a single one is intended. However, with literature it generally refers to a richness of poetic expression which elevates and complicates diction and phrasing. The various meanings may make up the intended meaning of the writer. The meanings may be contradictory and show a fundamental division in the author's mind and challenge the reader to invent interpretations based on these contradictions.

anachronism – Putting a person, object, or event in a time when he or it does not belong

Ex: *Reference to clocks in Julius Caesar*

analogy – A partial similarity of features on which a comparison may be based

Ex: *'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none go just alike, yet each believes his own.*

anecdotal evidence – An anecdote is a short narrative, sometimes introduced to give a point to a longer work (like an essay), sometimes presented for its own sake or for its interest in relation to the subject under discussion. Anecdotes are usually presented as true (although they frequently rest on hearsay) and are incorporated into essays often as supporting evidence. They can be emotionally compelling: for instance, a story of a lifetime smoker who now has no vocal chords and must breathe through a hole in his neck – this is an essay on smoking legislation.

antagonist – An opponent, the character or force opposite to the protagonist

anthem – A hymn of praise, patriotism, or devotion

anticlimax – An abrupt shift from the important to the insignificant, with a disappointing or amusing effect

anti-Petrarchan – Going against the conventions of describing a woman in idealistic terms and instead describing her in realistic terms.

antithesis – Contrary ideas expressed in a balanced phrase

Ex: *To err is human; to forgive, divine. Many are called; few are chosen*

aphorism – A concise, pointed statement expressing a wise or clever observation about life

Ex: *Silence is the virtue of fools.*

apostrophe – A person not present or a personified non-human object is addressed directly.

Ex: *Frailty, thy name is woman!*

archaic language – Language that is old-fashioned or obsolete. Archaic language is deliberately used to suggest something written in the past.

archaism – A word or phrase no longer in actual use

Ex: *Eftsoons his hand dropt he.*

archetype – An original model or pattern from which copies are made

aside – In the theatre, a short passage spoken in an undertone, usually directed to the audience. By convention, the aside is presumed to be inaudible to other characters on the stage and presumed to be sincere.

assonance – The repetition of similar vowel sounds in words, especially in poetry

Ex: (soft “I” sound) *The cliffs of England stand, glimmering, out in the tranquil bay.*

Ex: (long “I” sound) *Thou foster child of silence and slow time*

atmosphere – The air or mood which prevails at any moment in a work

audience – Simply stated, an audience is the person or people gathered to hear, see, or read a work. A writer must be sensitive to who the intended audience is, as this critically affects stylistic choices, tone, diction, and so on.

autobiography – The description of a life, or a portion of one, written by the person who has lived it, in contrast to a biography, which presents a life as written by another person. Ordinarily, an autobiography is intended for public readership, as opposed to the private account of a life found in a diary, journal, or letters.

ballad – A song which tells a story, often a folktale, composed in stanzas and meant to be sung

ballad stanza – A type of four-line stanza. The first and third lines have four stressed words or syllables; the second and fourth lines have three stresses. The second and fourth lines rhyme.

bathos – Is a descent in literature in which a poet or writer—striving too hard to be passionate or elevated—falls into trivial or stupid imagery, phrasing, or ideas.

bias – An inclination or preference that makes it difficult or impossible to judge fairly in a particular situation, a kind of prejudice. Bias can be detected if statistics are distorted, a quotation is taken out of context, or the author is manipulation evidence in an argument. If an audience detects bias, the author’s credibility weakens and his argument crumbles. Bias is frequently noted in the media, politics, and propaganda.

biography – A detailed account of a person’s life written by another person

blank verse – Lines of iambic pentameter which are unrhymed. It is closest to the natural rhythms of English speech; as a result, it has been more frequently and variously used than any other type

Ex: *Most of Shakespeare’s plays are written in this form.*

cacophony – “Bad sounding.”; the opposite of euphony; the term signifies discordant, jarring, unharmonious language. Here is an example from Tennyson’s *Morte D’Arthur*:

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves
And barren chasms, and all to left and right
The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels –
And on a sudden, lo! The level lake,
And the long glories of the winter moon.

The alliteration and assonance of the first five lines are self-evidently rough; the last two lines, containing the same devices, are mellifluously smooth and euphonious.

caesura – A break or pause in a line of poetry

caricature – See **character**.

carpe diem – Latin phrase meaning “seize the day” or “live for the moment”

case study – A detailed analysis of an individual or group, especially as an exemplary model of medical, psychological, or social phenomena. A case study could be a strategy, for instance, in an argument or persuasion.

catastrophe – The final disaster of a tragedy, usually including a resolution back to order; a tragic dénouement of a play or story

catharsis – The relief that comes after witnessing the catastrophe of a tragedy

cause and effect – A common strategy in argumentative essays, it is the explaining of the “why” of something. Arguments based on causal relationships work in two directions. One can argue from an effect back to a cause, or one can start with a cause and argue that it will produce a particular effect. The nature of cause and effect can get quite complicated and is studied in university logic classes.

character foil – A character who sets off another character by contrast

characterization – Revelation and development of character; in fiction, a person is characterized chiefly by his own words and actions and by other people’s responses to him.

characters –

Allegorical Character – Found in an allegory; they do not have individual personalities but are representations of abstract ideas and may have names such as Pride, Meekness, Lechery, or Napoleon.

Consistent – Continuing actions conform to what the author has already revealed about him/her

Caricature – Consisting of certain selected features exaggerated for comic effect

Dynamic/Developing – A permanent change in some aspect of his character, personality, or outlook as a result of experience

Flat – Can be summed up in one or two statements; no depth

Round – Complex, many sided, real and life-like

Static – Does not change throughout the work

Stock – A stereotyped figure, an easily recognized type

choice of details – Subject matter that the author has chosen to include in order to reveal or emphasize

chorus – Originally a group of men who performed at religious festivals; later, the chorus takes part in the action or it is a commentator, or it is a lyric element.

chronological order – To organize things in the order in which they occurred based on time

cinquain – Any stanza of 5 lines

classic – Literature worthy to be called this has withstood the test of time; a critically acclaimed work

Classical – Classicism emphasizes the traditional and the universal, and places value on reason, clarity, balance, and order. Classicism, with its concern for reason and universal themes, is traditionally opposed to Romanticism, which is concerned with emotions and personal theories. A movement or tendency in art, literature, or music that reflects the principles manifested in the art of ancient Greece and Rome.

cliché – A timeworn expression which had lost its vitality and to some extent its meaning because of overuse

Ex: *Busy as bees. That’s how the cookie crumbles. Don’t judge a book by its cover. Slow and steady wins the race.*

climatic order – Ideas arranged in the order of least to most important, a strategy common in composing an argument

climax – The moment of highest interest and tension in a work

coincidence – A happenstance, unplanned, accidental. Though frequent in life, coincidence in literature may seem a straining against probability. Comedy may exploit coincidence for humor, for instance. However, coincidence can become objectionable (from an artistic point of view) in proportion to its improbability, its importance to the story. It is a kind of plot manipulation.

colloquial language – This is everyday speech and writing. It is plain, relaxed, idiomatic, and may contain slang or cliché. “They’ve had it,” “It’s a cinch,” and “That was sweet” are colloquial. Colloquial language is not used in formal speech or writing.

colloquialism – Word or phrase which would not be suitable for formal speech or writing

Ex: “*That was a really groovy song*”

comedy – In general, a literary work that ends happily with a healthy, amiable armistice between the protagonist and society

comic relief – A comic element inserted into a tragic or somber work, especially a play, to relieve its tension and heighten, by contrast, the tragic emotion

Ex: *porter scene in Macbeth*

compare and contrast – To compare two or more things is to examine their likeness; their **similarities**. Contrast (Latin for “standing against”) is a consideration of images, ideas, or other literary elements standing in opposition to one another, or considered for their **differences**.

These two strategies are often paired as a device for explanation or clarification. For instance, a compare and contrast essay of two stories or two poems may be an illuminating exercise, for the similarities may highlight important differences, or vice versa, thus leading to a better understanding of literature.

Furthermore, literature selected could be similar in plot but different in theme, similar in subject but different literary value, and so on. In writing such an essay, it would be best to choose elements that are significant and worthy of examination.

comparison – Latin for “with an equal.” It is a consideration of separate things in the light of their **similarities**.

Similarity is the basic principle behind inductive argument and analogy.

conceit (metaphysical) – A kind of metaphor that makes a comparison between two startlingly different things; it may be a brief metaphor, but it usually provides the framework for an entire play.

conflict – The underlying struggle which the action of a work expresses, usually involving the protagonist

Character vs. Character

Character Vs Environment

Character vs. Self

connotation – Use of language to imply another meaning other than the actual words used; the suggestions and associations that have surrounded a word

Ex: *Mother as opposed to mommy.*

consonance – The repetition of similar consonant sounds in words. Sometimes the term refers to the repetition of consonant sounds in the middle or at the end of words.

Ex 1: *Its back was all humpy, dumpy and lumpy.*

Ex 2: *And all the air a solemn stillness holds.*

contrast – The juxtaposition of disparate or opposed images, ideas, or both, to heighten or clarify a scene, theme, or episode. Contrast is frequently paired with **comparison** as a device for explanation and clarification. See **compare and contrast**.

couplet – A pair of successive lines of verse that rhyme

courtly love – A lover vows eternal faithfulness and adoration

denotation – The specific, exact, and concrete dictionary meaning of a word or phrase, independent of any associated or secondary meanings

dénouement (falling action or conclusion) – The unravelling; the events following the climax of a plot

deus ex machina – Person(s), God(s), or events come just in time to solve a difficulty in a story or play. Literally means God from the machinery (which refers to a stage device in ancient theatre that lowered a figure onto the stage).

Ex: *Ralph’s rescue in Lord of the Flies.*

dialect – Speech patterns that display characteristics such as social class, level of education, nationality, race, gender, or age. Also see **register**.

dialogue – Conversation between two or more people

diary – A daily record of events and observations, especially personal ones. Examples include the diaries of Samuel Pepys, providing a portrait of everyday life in seventeenth-century England, and the diary of Anne Frank, recording events prior to her death in a concentration camp in World War II.

diction – Choice of words used by an author

didactic – Writing whose purpose is to teach

dilemma – A situation in which a character/person finds himself where all the options/choices are equally undesirable. It could be said that you are “between a rock and a hard place,” in a “no-win situation”.

direct presentation – See **characterization**. The author tells the readers straight out, by exposition or analysis, what a character is like, or the author may have another character do likewise.

direct statements – Statements directed at the reader which are meant to tell the reader the exact message to be conveyed, including all details.

dissonance – A combination of sounds that is not harmonious; a harshness and unpleasantness of sound

drama – Any work on stage or, specifically, a play that is of a serious nature that deals with a problem of importance but aims at tragic exaltation

dramatic form – A drama may be a tragedy, comedy, farce, pantomime, and so on. A typical form, or structure, focuses on a simple narrative outline of a protagonist, or hero, in conflict with an antagonist, or opposing character. One dramatic structure is Freytag’s pyramid, a diagrammatic way of presenting the action in five units:

1. **Exposition** – The unfolding of events necessary to understand later plot development
2. **Rising Action** – The complication of events after the exciting force has initiated the conflict between protagonist and antagonist
3. **Climax** – The high point of the pyramid, the major crisis that brings about the turn in the fortunes of the protagonist
4. **Falling Action** – The events leading away from the climax, as the protagonist attempts to escape his or her fate
5. **Catastrophe** – The final disaster, involving also, usually a resolution, or restoration of order to the disturbed world of the play

In this way of understanding dramatic structure, the five essential movements of the action are reflected in the five-act structure of a tragedy, but it must be remembered that the scheme is only generally applicable, for not all tragedies have five acts and those with five do not always follow the pattern precisely as outlined. In comedy, farce and other forms, including nondramatic ones such as the novel, the same pattern can be observed, provided proper allowances are made.

dramatic monologue – A poetic form in which a single character, speaking to a silent listener at a critical moment, reveals both a dramatic situation and his or her own character

editorial – A newspaper or magazine commentary on an issue of public concern. Frequently unsigned, an editorial carries the weight of the editor or staff, and is generally identified as a matter of opinion by its placement or style. “Editorializing” is a term used frequently to describe the presentation of opinions in similar authoritative manner in, for example, a news story, essay, or work of fiction.

elegy – A mournful, melancholy poem, especially a song of lament for the dead

elements of fiction – The basic ingredients of a story – character, conflict, setting, atmosphere, theme, plot

emotional appeal – This is a strategy of persuasion that stirs an audience’s emotions in the hope of moving people to action. Emotion can effectively be roused if the writer understands his or her audience. The writer can then tap into such things as humor, anger, sadness, the sense of the just versus the unjust, patriotism, vested interests and so on.

epic – A lengthy narrative poem in which the action, characters, and language are on a heroic level and the style is exalted and even majestic

epigram – A witty, ingenious and pointed saying that is expressed tersely (briefly). It is often in the form of a poem
Ex: *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread* (This was a specialty of Alexander Pope.)

epigraph – A quotation or motto at the beginning of a chapter, book, short story, or poem that makes some point about the work

epiphany – A moment of realization, of deep insight, usually seen in a character

episode – An incident, usually one of a series, in a story

epitaph – A brief poem or other form of writing praising a deceased person; a commemorative inscription on a tomb or monument

escapist literature – Literature that is designed to help the reader escape the daily cares and problems of reality. It requires limited involvement on the part of the reader. Reading for pleasure only.

essay – A literary composition on a single subject; usually short, in prose, and nonexhaustive. The word derives from French “Essai,” meaning “an attempt,” first used in modern sense by Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essais* (1580-1588) are classics of the genre. There are many types of essays, some including the argumentative essay, descriptive essay, expository essay, narrative essay, formal or informal essay, personal essay, persuasive essay, and so on. Here are some distinctions:

Argumentative Essay – An argumentative essay attempts to lead the reader to share the writer’s belief, especially through the use of logic, using such devices as inductive or deductive reasoning, facts, statistics, and so on.

Descriptive Essay – The descriptive essay is often classified as one of the major types of prose, the others being **argument**, **exposition**, and **narration**, which, however, all use description. A descriptive essay would be noteworthy for its rendition in words, especially of observations of the human or natural environment, its use of imagery and sense impressions (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste). The objective is to provide the readers with a picture of what it is like to be there. This could encapsulate such things as a beautiful scene to the precise and concrete description needed by a police officer, medical doctor, or scientist.

Expository Essay – It is explanatory writing. Most essays require some element of exposition, and such strategies as cause and effect, compare and contrast, definition, and logic-just to name a few-all contribute in the necessary explaining of something.

Formal Essay – An essay dealing seriously with a subject, characterized by careful organization and formal diction and sentence structure. Many essays on literature are formal, keeping the focus on the literature discussed rather than the writer’s personal response.

Informal Essay – It is usually brief and is written as if the writer is talking informally to reader about some topic, using a conversational style and a personal or humorous tone. In an informal essay, the writer might digress from the topic at hand, or express some amusing, startling, or absurd opinions. Thus, an informal essay reveals as much about the personality of its author as it does about its subject.

Narrative Essay – An essay in the shape of a narrative, or story. The purpose in telling a story may be to illustrate a point, persuade, entertain, reinforce a thesis, and so on.

Personal Essay – Usually in the first person point of view, an informal essay on a personal subject; it can be light and humorous, familiar and intimate in tone, subjective, and so on. Again, Montaigne’s *Essais* remain a model collection. The personal essay can be synonymous with the **informal essay**.

Persuasive Essay – Some make a distinction between argument and persuasion. Argument is the term applied to the logical approach to convincing a person while persuasion is the term applied to the emotional approach, convincing a person by way of the heart. Stirring an audience’s emotions might involve arousing their anger over an issue, or presenting a situation that may arouse sadness. Most good writing is a blend of all of these approaches: to persuade a young audience of the dangers of smoking, a writer may vividly describe a smoker’s lungs, narrate a sad story of a smoker dying of lung cancer, and logically present statistics on the likelihood of dying young.

euphemism – Speaking in pleasing or favorable terms of an unpleasant or bad thing.
Ex: *“He passed away” as opposed to “he died”*

euphony – Melodious sound, the opposite of cacophony. A major feature of verse, but also a consideration in prose, euphony results from smooth-flowing meter or sentence rhythm as well as attractive sounds with emphasis on vowels and on liquid consonants and semi-vowels (l, m, n, r, w, y) as opposed to the harsher sounds of stops (b, d, g, k, p, t) and fricatives (f, s, v, z). Tennyson's famous "Lotus-Eaters" is notable for its euphony. Here's an example:

The Lotus blooms below the barren peak:
The Lotus blows by every winding creak:
All day the wind breathes low with mellow tone
Thro' every hollow cave and alley lone,
Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotus-dust is blown.

Here, the assonance of the "o" sound combined with consonance and rhyme create a kind of drowsy sonority.

existentialism – A philosophical school of thought emphasizing that man is responsible for his own actions and free to choose his development and destiny

expert testimony – This is a strategy often used in argumentative or persuasive essays. Expert testimony can incorporate such things as an authority in a field (such as a scientist), reliable statistics, or laws. If the writer does not possess the expertise in a given field, he or she can still present a convincing argument through the selective citation of expert testimony.

exposition – It is explaining an idea or developing a thought. It is an important approach to essay writing, of course. The term can also be applied to a literature, as in drama, where an explanation of present or past events is necessary to understand the plot development.

external conflict – Is the external problem that is standing in the way of the character and his or her goals

fable – A brief narrative, in either prose or verse, which illustrates some moral truth. The characters of fables are often animals who speak and act like human beings. The most famous fables are those of Aesop (c. 620-560 B.C.) and a famous longer fable is George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

fantasy – A fantasy transcends the bounds of known reality. It conjures up a strange and marvelous world, which one enters by falling down a rabbit hole or climbing up a beanstalk; it may introduce strange powers and occult forces into the world of ordinary reality, allowing one to foretell the future, or communicate with the dead, or turn into another creature, or become a wizard. It introduces human beings into a world where the ordinary laws of nature are suspended or superceded and where the landscape and its creatures are unfamiliar, or it introduces ghosts or fairies or dragons or werewolves or talking animals or invaders from Mars. Fables, ghost stories, science fiction are types of fantasy.

farce – Any play which evokes laughter by such devices of low comedy such as physical buffoonery, rough wit, or the creation of ridiculous situations, and which is little concerned with subtlety of characterization or probability of plot

Ex: *Taming of the Shrew*

figurative language – Language/wording which employs devices called "figures of speech" such as metaphors, similes, metonymy, oxymoron, etc. It is not intended to be interpreted in a literal sense. By appealing to the imagination, figurative language provides new ways of looking at the world.

flashback – Narrative technique where the chronological order of events is interrupted to relate an earlier event; a looking back in time

foil – A character whose behavior, attitudes, and/or opinions contrast with those of another character in order to help the reader better understand the characters and the motivations. See **character foil**.

Ex: *Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff*

foreshadowing – Events or dialogue that hint as to what is to come in the work

form – A fixed metrical arrangement, such as a haiku, a sonnet, the ballad. The essential structure of a work of art.

formal language – This refers to level of language. Much academic writing is formal. It is serious and carefully organized. There are no contractions, no colloquialisms; sentences are complete; paragraphs are well developed; first person view is generally not used.

frame – Story that contains another story or series of stories; the opening section of the story
Ex: *The “Induction” of The Taming of the Shrew*

free verse – Verse that lacks regular meter and line length but relies upon natural rhythms

genre – A style or type of literary work
Ex: *Novel, drama, play, mystery, romance, sci-fi etc.*

graphic text – A work told in pictures; it may be based on drawings, paintings, photographs, etchings, and so on. Reading the visual text of the work becomes as important as the written text. The most famous graphic novel is *Mous: A Survivor’s Tale* by Art Spiegelman, an exploration of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust told in comic strip style.

haiku – Japanese verse containing three lines with specified syllables (5 – 7 – 5)

hero or heroine – In classical mythology, a person of superhuman powers, sometimes a demigod, perhaps attaining immortality. Later, the term came to mean a brave leader or a person of great physical or moral strength, a sense it often still carries today. Used in reference to literature today, the term can simply mean the “leading character,” carrying with it no sense of superiority to others; a less ambiguous term, a more neutral sense, is the term **protagonist**.

heroic couplet – A couplet (two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme) written in iambic pentameter

historical reference – Any reference to an actual event from the past. In a historical novel, for instance, actual events from the past are incorporated into a fictional narrative which reconstructs and imagines the time depicted.

humor or humour – In its most common use, it is something designed to induce laughter or amusement. It can refer to the ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is comical or funny. When pluralized, humors, the term refers to the cardinal humors of ancient medical theory: blood, phlegm, yellow bile (choler), black bile (melancholy). From ancient times until the nineteenth century, the humors were believed to be largely responsible for health and disposition. Hippocrates (c. 460-c. 370 B.C.) thought an imbalance produced illness. Galen (c. A.D. 130-200) suggested that character types are produced by dominance of fluids: **sanguine**, or kindly, cheerful, amorous; **phlegmatic**, or sluggish, unresponsive; **choleric**, or quick tempered; **melancholic**, or brooding, dejected. In literature, especially in the Renaissance, characters were portrayed according to the humors that dominated them. See **wit**.

hyperbole – Obvious and deliberate exaggeration or overstatement
Ex: *tons of love, a thousand thanks.*

iambic pentameter – A line of five poetic feet of two syllables, the first unaccented, the second accented
Ex: *Shall I / compare / thee to / a sum / mer’s day?*

idealization – When situations, characters, or ideas are made unreal or perfect or especially desirable

idiom – A phrase or expression whose meaning cannot be understood from the ordinary meanings of its individual words
Ex: *Give it a whirl; How do you do?*

image – A direct presentation of a sensory experience

imagery – Forming of mental images or figures; use of language to appeal to the senses, mostly visual

imitative harmony – See **onomatopoeia**.

in medias res – A technique plunging into the middle of the story and only later using flashback to tell what happened previously. In medias res is Latin for “in the middle of things.”

Ex: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

indeterminate ending – A plot term for an ending in which no definitive conclusion is reached. The story does not simply stop, but the conclusion need not be in terms of a resolved conflict, a tidy finish. A story may be much more effective without a resolution as it may force the reader to ponder possibilities.

indirect presentation – See **characterization**. Authors present their characters either directly or indirectly. In indirect presentation, the authors show us the characters in action; we infer what they are like from what they think or say or do. This is an effective way of dramatizing a character as readers are more likely to believe a character is, say, greedy, if they see the character behaving in a selfish manner.

induction – An introduction or prologue. It serves as a “frame” for a work; (see **Prologue**).

informal language – A level of language that is usually less serious in tone and purpose than formal expression. It may have colloquialism, jargon, slang, contractions, a conversational tone and so on.

interior monologue – See **Stream of Consciousness**

internal conflict – See **conflict**. It is the conflict arising from *within* a character’s consciousness. It may arise from the character’s moral conscience, a dilemma, a desire to conform, peer pressure, an opposition of ideas, fear and so on.

internal rhyme – Correspondence in sound created by two or more words in the same line of verse; rhyme falling in the middle and at the end of the line.

interpretive fiction – Unlike escape fiction, interpretive literature has meaningful, usually realistic plots, conflicts, settings, and characters. It may be serious or comedic, but it is written to broaden and deepen and sharpen our awareness of life. It illuminates the human condition and brings the reader closer to understanding ourselves and our world.

inversion – The technique of reversing, or inverting, the normal word order of a sentence to create a certain tone or to emphasize a particular word or point

Ex: *Across the field marched the band.*

invocation – At the beginning of an epic (or other poem), a call to a muse, god, or spirit for inspiration

Ex: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

irony –

Dramatic – The audience is aware of something of which character is not (yet) aware

Situational – The opposite happens to what was originally expected, a twist of fate

Verbal – To mean the opposite of what is said

jargon – A term of contempt applied to speech or writing considered ugly-sounding, unintelligible, or meaningless; Often the language of a trade or profession that uses unnecessarily complex or inflated terminology

Ex: *My Pentium II has a 3 gig hard drive, 126 megs of RAM but only a 14.4 modem.*

jingle – Piece of verse that repeats sounds, contains numerous rhymes, and is light-hearted and nonsensical

Ex: “*We love to see you smile.*”

juxtaposition – The deliberate placing of situations, characters, settings, moods, or points of view side by side in order to clarify meaning, purpose, character, or point of view

kenning – In Old English poetry, an elaborate phrase that describes persons, things, or events in a metaphorical and indirect way.

Ex: “*So mankind’s enemy*” in *Beowulf* is *Grendel*.

latinate – Of, relative to, resembling, or derived from Latin

legend – A folk story concerning historical or reputedly historical figures, with less of the supernatural and more authenticity than myth. For instance, the story of Paul Bunyan is regarded as legend, for it is believed that there was an extraordinary lumberjack who served as the model.

limerick – A form of light verse, a stanza of five lines rhyming *aabba*

literal language – The precise, plain meaning of a word or phrase in its simplest, original sense, considered apart from its figurative sense. Literal language is opposed to figurative language.

locale – The place in which the action of a story occurs

logic – There are two main kinds.

Deduction – accepts a general principle as true, and then uses it to explain a specific case or cases.

Induction – derives a general principle from the evidence of specific examples.

lyric – Any short, non-narrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling; a short subjective poem with a song like outburst of feeling

melodrama – A drama that has stereotyped characters, exaggerated emotions, and a conflict that pits an all-good hero or heroine against an all-evil villain. The good characters always win, and the evil ones are always punished. Originally, melodramas were so called because melodies accompanied certain actions (“melos” means “song” in Greek). Also, each character in a melodrama had a theme melody, which was played each time he or she made an appearance on stage.

metaphor – Direct or implied comparison of two unlike things, stating that one object is something else, without using the words such as “like”, “than”, or “as”

Ex: *He is a lion in battle. Her eyes were two deep, blue seas.*

metaphysical – 17th century poetry of John Donne and others who wrote in a similar style; characterized by verbal wit and an excessive, ingenious structure, irregular meter, colloquial language, elaborate imagery, and a drawing together of dissimilar ideas.

meter – A generally regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry

metonymy – Speaking of a thing by the name of some other thing closely connected to it

Ex: *From the cradle to the grave. The pen is mightier than the sword.*

microcosm – Literally “little world”. In literature, it is a small group of characters who represent the world or a particular society.

Ex: *The boys in Lord of the Flies*

mixed metaphor – A use in the same expression of two or more metaphors that are incongruous or illogical

Ex: *The cold autumn sky was warm with color.*

The only thing that the government will listen to is muscle.

mock epic – A long humorous poem in which a slight or trivial subject is treated in a lofty or exalted manner.

Ex: *Rape of the Lock by Alexander Pope*

mock heroic – A comic literary form that treats the trivial in the grand, heroic style of the epic. A mock epic may also be referred to as a **mock heroic** poem.

monologue – An extended speech by one person with or without an audience. Most prayers, much lyric verse, and all laments are monologues, but apart from these, four main kinds can be distinguished:

- (1) **Monodrama** – a theatrical entertainment in which there is only one character.
- (2) **Soliloquy**
- (3) **Solo Address** to an audience in a play
- (4) **Dramatic Monologue**

mood – The predominant emotion that a story arouses in a reader; see also **atmosphere**.

moral – The implied judgment of behavior made by a story – distinct from theme

motif – A theme, character or verbal pattern which recurs in literature or folklore. A motif may be a theme which runs through a number of different works. A recurring element within a single work is also called a motif.

mystery – Work of fiction in which the evidence related to a crime or to a mysterious event is so presented that reader has an opportunity to solve the problem, the author's solution being the final phase of the piece. The mystery is an age-old popular genre and is related to several other forms. Elements of mystery may be present in narratives of horror or terror, pseudoscientific fantasies, crime stories, accounts of diplomatic intrigue, affairs of codes and ciphers and secret societies. In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes' mysteries, the climax is the solving of the crime, and Holmes' explanation of how he figured it all out is the dénouement.

myth – A traditional story containing ideas or beliefs about ancient times or about natural events

narration – One of the major modes of prose writing; it is the telling of a story. Other modes are argument, description, and exposition.

narrative – A story; a spoken or written account of something

narrator – One who narrates or tells a story; can also refer to a character who guides the audience through a play, often commenting on the action and sometimes participating in it

near rhyme (half, slant, imperfect) – Are not true rhymes; they may result from the poet's ineptitude or from his desire to create a particular effect.

nom de plume – A fictitious name employed by a writer, a pen name or pseudonym

objective – Language or writing that is purely factual, not influenced by feelings or opinions

octave – an eight line poem or stanza; usually refers to the first eight lines in a Petrarchan sonnet

ode – A form of lyric poem with a dignified theme that is phrased in formal style to praise its subject

onomatopoeia – A word whose sound seems to resemble the sound it denotes; sound effects
Ex: "*Snap, crackle, pop*" or "*the leaves rustled in the wind*"

oxymoron – Two contradictory words or phrases combined to produce a meaning or a rhetorical effect by means of concise paradox as in "eloquent silence". It combines opposite or contradictory ideas or terms for effect. An oxymoron suggests a paradox, but it does so briefly, usually in two or three words, such as "living death," "dear enemy," "sweet sorrow," and "wise fool."
Ex: *She is terribly happy. He is a cheerful pessimist. Mom is an unwilling volunteer.*

parable – A short allegory told to explain or illustrate an idea

paradox – A statement that may be true but seems to say two opposite things; it conflicts (absurdly) with common sense yet contains a truth.
Ex: *More haste, less speed. My father is a stranger in his own home.*

parallelism – The use of phrases, clauses, or sentences that are similar or complementary in structure or in meaning

parallel structure – Use of similar structures or phrases throughout a work to list, to unify, or to emphasize; in a single sentence, a list stemming from the same verb or noun.

parallel syntax – Use of the same wording or punctuation in more than one sentence

paraphrase – To restate something that has been stated earlier, in other words; the rewording of a passage, giving the meaning in another form

parody – Any humorous satirical or off-beat imitation of a person, event, or serious literary work

passive voice – See **active voice**.

pastoral – A poem dealing with the life of shepherds or with simple, rural existence

pathos – That quality in a work of literature which evokes from the reader feelings of pity, tenderness, and sympathy.

Ex: *the death of Lady Macduff is pathetic; that of Macbeth is tragic.*

pentameter – A line of five metrical feet. The pentameter line, the most widely used in English poetry, is the basis of such special metrical forms in blank verse, the heroic couplet, and the sonnet.

persona – The person who speaks in literary work, generally the author's "mask"

personification – Abstractions, animals, ideas, or inanimate objects are endowed with human form, character, traits, or sensibilities

Ex: *The waves danced along the shore.*

persuasion – Attempts to convince through emotion rather than pure logic

persuasive technique – See **essay (persuasive)**. Essentially, this would be any technique used to convince an audience of a thesis. It can involve logic, the emotional appeal, expert testimony, compare and contrast, pro and con, diction, and so on.

plagiarism – (Latin *plagiarius*: "kidnapper, literary thief") An act or instance of taking the writings of another person and passing them off as one's own. Plagiarism is intellectual dishonesty; plagiarism can result not only in a fail on an essay but also expulsion from a college or university. Plagiarism involves not just copying out something already written; it can be submitting an essay not written entirely by you; it can be using the ideas of another—even if you do not use the exact words of the original author. To avoid plagiarism, follow the rule that *all outside information must be acknowledged*. Keep accurate notes of what you are reading when conducting research and make sure you add your sources to the Works Cited page, and cite quotations appropriately.

platitud – A flat, stale or trite statement uttered as though it were fresh and important

Ex: *An apple a day keeps the doctor away.*

play on words – See **pun**.

plot – Plot is the sequence of incidents or events of which a story is composed, presented in a significant order. A conventional plot has rising action, a climax, and falling action. Some stories have a great deal of plot (many events) while some stories may have very little plot. Plot answers, "What happened?"

poetic justice – The good are rewarded and the evil are punished.

poetic license – The liberty, usually limited to verse, taken by a poet to achieve certain effects

point of view – Perspective from which a work is written.

First Person – From character/protagonist's point of view, in 1st person; ("I" or "we")

Objective – Narration, recorded events as observed, without bias or insight.

Omniscient – All knowing, "god-like" as told by the author, in 3rd person; "He", "she", "it", or "they")

Limited Omniscient – All knowing for one character, from whose view the story is told in 3rd person.

pro and con argument – To be "pro" is to be in favor or support of something. To be "con" is to be against or in opposition to something. As a writing strategy, it can be a persuasive technique of comparison and contrast. In arguing any point, it can be effective to show the "other side" of an issue in order to dismiss it, or for the author to show a willingness to explore all sides of an issue.

prologue – (Greek: "before speech") The opening section of a work, a kind of introduction which is part of the work and not prefatory. In many plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a prologue states a moral point or anticipates the theme and action. In Greek tragedy, it is the opening scene containing either a monologue or dialogue which is devoted to an exposition and portrayal of character.

propaganda – Basically, propaganda is devoted to the spreading of a particular idea or belief. It appeals to emotion in the form of information, ideas, and arguments that are spread by organized groups or individuals and designed to convince and persuade to action. When literature is propaganda and when it is not as much

debated issue. If an author sets out to make a case for a particular religious, social, or political point of view—and he is *seen* to be doing this—perhaps in the process he sacrifices verisimilitude by contriving character and situation to serve his agenda; then it might be said that the result is a work of propaganda. See **bias**.

prose – Literary expression not marked by rhyme or by metrical regularity. Prose is the type of language used in novels, short stories, articles, etc.

protagonist – The central character(s). He or she does NOT have to be the “good guy”.
Ex: *The Godfather*

proverb – A short, pithy saying, frequently embodying the folk wisdom of a group or nation: “A stitch in time saves nine,” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,” “When the cat’s away, the mice will play.” Many ancient ones are collected in the Old Testament, Book of Proverbs.

pun – A play on words; words used in a double sense to create a humorous effect
Ex: *The omelet is “egg”ceptional.*

purpose – In literature, it is the main effect the work is intended to achieve. Authors usually have a specific intention. They may wish to enlighten, entertain, persuade, inform, and so on.

quatrain – A stanza or poem of four lines; most common stanzaic form in English.

question and answer – Like the **rhetorical question**, this is a stylistic technique in a composition. Questions are an effective way of arousing interest or concern in a subject which can then be answered within the essay.

realism – The objective and materialistic portrayal of reality, usually concerning ordinary people and things

refrain – A line, or part of a line, or a group of lines that are repeated over the course of a poem or song

register – Speech patterns appropriate to particular situations
Ex: *Teenagers are more likely to use slang when talking to their friends than when talking to their grandparents.*

repartée – Dialogue characterized by clever and witty replies

repetition – The repeated use of a certain structure, phrase, theme, sentence, etc

requiem – Any chant, hymn, or musical service for the dead

research – To engage in looking for information, usually to support an essay. This involves reading and putting together source materials to support a discussion. It is a way of bringing together expert opinion and organizing the information in a meaningful way, and not facing your audience alone. Research can be time-consuming, using such sources as the library, the Internet, personal interviews, and so on. An essay based on research requires documentation (a system of acknowledging your sources) usually cited at the end of the essay as a “Works Cited” page.

resolution – Synonymous with **dénouement**

rhetoric – The principles governing the use of language for effective speaking and writing

rhetorical question – Something phrased as a question only for dramatic effect and not to seek an answer
Ex: “*Who cares?*” = *nobody cares*

rhyme – Similarity of sound in words; two words rhyme when their accented vowels and all succeeding sounds are identical.
Ex: *fly, cry, my, sigh, die, high.*

rhyme scheme – The pattern of rhymes used in a poem, usually indicated by letters of the alphabet. The last word in the first line is marked “a”; all end words that rhyme with this word are also marked “a”. The first line that introduces a new rhyme is marked “b”. This process continues throughout the poem. If the first line rhymes with the third and the second with the fourth, the rhyme scheme is “abab.”

rhythm – Resulting from uniform repetition of a beat or accent; the measured flow of words in poetry; can be expressed in terms of well-known rhythms. See **meter**.

Ex: *The poem's rhythm is like that of a nursery rhyme (or rap song, etc).*

rising action – The rising action precedes the climax of a work. During this stage, background information is given, conflicts are introduced, and suspense is built up. Because it does so much, it is typically longer than the falling action.

rite of passage – An experience or ceremony which marks the transition from one stage of life to another

Romanticism – A movement that flourished in literature, philosophy, music, and art in Western culture during most of the nineteenth century, beginning as a revolt against classicism.

sarcasm – A cutting personal remark, from Greek *sarkazein*, “to tear flesh.” Because the “tearing” is frequently ironic, people often misapply the term to any ironic statement. “You ugly little thing” addressed to a dwarf would be sarcastic but not ironic.

satire – Illustrating the discrepancy between what something is like and what something should be

Ex: *Animal Farm*

scapegoat – A person who is made to bear blame or punishment that should rightly fall on others (named after the goat which, in ancient Jewish religious custom, was allowed to escape into the wilderness after the high priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people on it)

sensory words – Words that appeal directly to the five senses

setting – A place and time in which a play or story is set, as well as the mood and atmosphere that accompany them. Setting = *STAMP* (Setting, Time, Atmosphere, Mood, Place).

sestet – A six line poem or stanza; usually used to refer to the last six lines of an Italian sonnet

simile – A direct comparison of two unlike things which have one or more points of resemblance using words such as “like”, “as” or “than”.

Ex: *The sprinter was as swift as a fox.*

slang – The special vocabulary of a class or group of people (for example, truck drivers, jazz musicians, salespeople, drug dealers); generally considered substandard, low, or offensive when measured against formal, educated usage. Some slang, however, is familiar to all, especially during the periods when it is in vogue. Frequently faddish (“grody to the max”), sometimes slang is also very long-lived and passes into standard usage: “movie.”

“He dresses in contemporary fashion” is formal

“He’s always got the latest clothes” is colloquial.

“His duds are always sweet” is slangy.

slapstick – Low comedy characterized by physical action, such as slipping on a banana

Ex: *The Three Stooges, Jim Carey*

soliloquy – An extended speech in which a character alone on stage expresses his thoughts. It may reveal private emotions of the speaker, or it may often simultaneously give information.

sonnet –

English/Shakespearean – A poem of 14 lines arranged in three quatrains (a quatrain is a stanza of 4 lines) and a couplet, with the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg*.

Italian/Petrarchan – A poem of 14 lines arranged in an octave (8 lines) and a sestet (6 lines). Line 9, the turning point of the poem, is called the **volta**. It usually rhymes *abbaabba, cdecde* (or *cdcdcd*).

speaker – The person who is understood to be speaking in a particular work. A distinction can be made with the term **persona** who is invariably distinct from the author; it is the voice chosen by the author for a particular purpose. Speaker and persona can be synonymous.

Spenserian stanza – A nine line stanza with the following rhyme scheme: ababbcbcc; the first eight lines are written in iambic pentameter – the ninth line is written in iambic hexameter, and is called an **Alexandrine**.

stanza – The arrangement of lines of verse in a pattern. A stanza forms a division of a poem in much the same way that a paragraph forms a division in prose. Commonly, sub-sections of poems, especially song lyrics are called verses.

statistical evidence – Is a important writing strategy in argumentative and persuasive essays in particular. It adds support as well as authority. If accurate and legitimately gathered, statistics confirm a fact. What we must guard against is the use of statistics in making unwarranted inferences made from a fact. The fact that a novel has been at the top of the best-seller list for twelve months supports the fact that many people have bought it. That fact, however, does not extend to it being the best novel published in a past year, or that you will love that book.

stereotype – A set of characteristics or a fixed idea considered to represent a particular kind of person

stream of consciousness – A technique for the depiction of the thoughts and feelings which flow, with no apparent logic, through the mind of a character

style – The individual manner in which an author expresses himself or herself. In fiction, style is basically determined by such grammatical and sensory aspects as diction, sentences, and images.

stylistic technique – A huge, all-encompassing term for the characteristic way an author writes. This refers to aspects of a writer's method of expression. It is an immense area involving diction, sentence type and length, description, dialogue, archaic language, connotations, figurative language, and so on. A writer's stylistic technique can be readily noticeable by those who have read that author.

subjective – With regard to language and tone, this adjective refers to personal or emotional expression—as opposed to objective, impersonal expression. When applied to writing, subjectivity suggests that the writer is primarily concerned with conveying personal experience and feeling—as in an autobiography, or an autobiographical novel. Objectivity suggests that the writer is “outside” of and detached from what he is writing about: he or she is writing about other people rather than about himself or herself.

surprise ending – The twist at the end of a story: a sudden and unexpected turn of fortune or action. The legitimacy of a surprise ending may be judged by the fairness with which the surprise is achieved and by the significance of the purpose that it serves. The surprise should be worthwhile, furnishing insight, not simply surprise for surprise's sake.

suspense – A state of uncertainty, anticipation, or curiosity concerning the outcome of a plot or the resolution of a conflict. Suspense is in some measure a part of the effect of all stories, as the reader is impelled forward by the questions, “What will happen?” “When?” “In what manner?” Suspense is a marked feature of a murder mystery, for instance, wherein suspense is created around who committed the murder.

symbol – A concrete object representing an abstract idea. Ex: *Red rose = Love*.

symbolism – A term ordinarily applied to self-conscious uses more common in literature than in other writing generally. In this sense, symbolism is a heightened use of symbol, presenting the word first for its ordinary meaning (as when the word “rose” stands for the flower) and then for some idea lying behind the ordinary meaning (as when the word “rose” stands for the flower rose, which stands for beauty). Symbols used in this way fall into three classes:

- (1) **Natural symbols** – present things not for themselves, but for the ideas people commonly associate with them: a star for hope, a cloud for despair, night for death, a sunrise for a new beginning.
- (2) **Conventional symbols** – present things for the meanings people within a particular group have agreed to give them: a national flag for the ideas of home or patriotism associated with it, or a Christian cross or Star of David for the associations they evoke in people familiar with the appropriate religion.
- (3) **Literary Symbols** – Sometimes build upon natural or conventional symbols, adding meanings appropriate primarily within the work at hand, but sometimes they also create meanings within a work for things that have no natural or conventional meaning outside it, as Melville does with his white whale, for instance, in *Moby Dick*.

synecdoche – A part is used to represent a whole or a whole represents a part

Ex1: *He asked for her hand in marriage.*

Ex2: *Canada is playing Russia in the finals.*

syntax – The way in which words are arranged to form sentences, clauses, or phrases; sentence structure

tercet – A stanza of three lines rhyming together or connected by rhyme

terza rima – An Italian verse form consisting of a series of three-line stanzas in which the middle line of each stanza rhymes with the first and third lines of the following stanza.

tetrameter – A line of four metrical feet

Ex: Though the following lines contain a variety of feet, they are all tetrameter.

Fe/Fi/Fo/Fum!

I smell/the blood/of an Eng/lishman

Be he/alive/or be/he dead

I'll grind/his bones/to make/my bread.

theme – The central insight or controlling idea of a piece of literature. It must be expressed in the form of a statement (not a single word, not a command, not a moral). It can be obvious but the idea is implied rather than stated by the author. A theme should be generally applicable to our lives; it should contain a degree of universality.

Ex: A common theme in *Lord of the Flies* and *Macbeth* is that the potential for evil lies within all people.

thesis – A statement or theory put forward and supported by arguments

thesis statement – This is the sentence expressing an essay's main point, its main focus. A good thesis statement is specific, but not self-evident. It should avoid being too general, too vague, too obvious. A good thesis statement helps the reader, providing focus and unity. Good thesis statements are challenging to write well:

“English teachers are important.” This is too general a statement and needs to be made more specific: “The English teacher is responsible for the two most important skills we possess as adults: reading and writing”.

“Eating a balanced diet of fruit and vegetables is good for the health.” This does not work well as a thesis statement as it is too obvious, self-evident. Not many would argue with this.

“Permissive parents are the cause of juvenile crime.” This is too general, too open for refutation. An improved thesis statement might be, “Overly permissive parents are one cause of juvenile crime.”

“In this essay, I am going to discuss violence in hockey.” This is wordy, general, and vague. A revision might be, “Violence in hockey should be held as accountable as violence in society.”

third person narrative – First person is the use of “I” or “we.” Second person is “you.” Third person is “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they.” Many narratives are told in first person, few in second person. Third person narrative is extremely common, of course. In general, a distinction is made depending on how “omniscient” the third person narrator is; the distinctions are the objective point of view, the limited omniscient point of view, and the omniscient point of view. See **point of view**.

tone – The attitude a writer takes toward his or her subject, characters, or audience

topic statement – States the main idea of the paragraph; is usually placed at the beginning

tragedy – In general, a literary work in which the protagonist meets an unhappy or disastrous end

trimeter – A line of verse consisting of three metrical feet

trochaic – See **trochee**.

trochee – One stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable (' ~)
Ex: *PATtern*

understatement – Presenting something as less significant than it really is
Ex: *He could only die once, after all.*

universality – Quality, not limited to place or time, which gives significance and appeal to literature

verisimilitude – Appearance of truth or reality; a situation made believable by parallels or connections to real life

vernacular – Language of a country or district; homely speech; common spoken language

verse – A single line of a poem, especially when referring to metered lines; lines arranged in metrical patterns; the term “verse” is sometimes distinguished from poetry. Verse is commonly used as a synonym for stanza, especially when referring to song lyrics. A metonym for “poetry” itself.

villanelle – An intricate verse form of French origin, consisting of several three-line stanzas and a concluding four-line stanza

voice – See “persona”.

volta – Line nine in an Italian sonnet; literally meaning the “turning point”

wit – A brilliance and quickness of perception combined with a cleverness of expression.

word play – See **play on words**; see **pun**.