

AP Literature & Composition

Literary Terms by Subject (Prose)

General

Allegory A narrative or description having a second or symbolic meaning beneath the surface one

Allusion A reference, explicit or implicit, to something in previous literature or history

Anecdote A short account of an interesting or humorous incident

Artistic unity That condition of a successful literary work whereby all its elements work together for the achievement of its central purpose

Cacophony A harsh, discordant, unpleasant-sounding choice and arrangement of sounds

Euphony A smooth, pleasant-sounding choice and arrangement of sounds

Genre A type or class, as poetry, drama, etc.

Imagery The representation through language of sensory experience

Mood The pervading impression of a work

Moral A rule of conduct or maxim for living expressed or implied as the “point” of a literary work. Compare *Theme*.

Prose Non-metrical language; the opposite of *verse*

Theme The main idea, or message, of a literary work. Themes often explore timeless and universal ideas and may be implied rather than stated explicitly.

Tone The writer’s or speaker’s attitude toward the subject, the audience, or herself or himself; the emotional coloring, or emotional meaning, of a work

Topic The subject matter or area of a literary work. *Not to be confused with theme.*

Setting The context in time and place in which the action of a story occurs

Symbol (literary) Something that means more than what it is; an object, person, situation, or action that in addition to its literal meaning suggests other meanings as well, a figure of speech which may be read both literally and figuratively.

Verse Metrical language; the opposite of *prose*

Voice The distinctive style or manner of expression of an author or a character in a book

Character

Antagonist Character in a story or poem who opposes the main character (protagonist). Sometimes the antagonist is an animal, an idea, or a thing.

Character (1) Any of the persons involved in a story or play [sense 1] (2) The distinguishing moral qualities and personal traits of a character [sense 2]

Characterization The process of conveying information about characters

Deuteragonist the second most important character, after the protagonist, often a foil or eventual antagonist

Direct presentation of character A method of characterization in which the author, by exposition or analysis, tells us directly what a character is like, or has someone else in the story do so

Dynamic character A character (sense 1) who during the course of a story undergoes a permanent change in some aspect of character (sense 2) or outlook.

Flat character A character (sense 1) whose character (sense 2) is summed up in one or two traits

Foil a character who contrasts with another character (usually the protagonist) in order to highlight various features of that other character's personality, throwing these characteristics into sharper focus.

Hero A man who is endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for bold exploits, and favored by the gods

Hubris Overbearing and excessive pride

Indirect presentation of character That method of characterization in which the author shows us a character in action, compelling us to infer what the character is like from what is said or done by the character

Protagonist The main character of a novel, play, or film

Round character A character (sense 1) whose character (sense 2) is complex and many sided.

Static character A character who is the same sort of person at the end of a story as at the beginning.

Stock character A stereotyped character.

Tragic Flaw A flaw in the character of the protagonist of a tragedy that brings the protagonist to ruin or sorrow

Dialogue

Aside A brief speech in which a character turns from the person being addressed to speak directly to the audience; a dramatic device for letting the audience know what a character is really thinking or feeling as opposed to what the character pretends to think or feel

Colloquial Informal, conversational language

Dialogue (1) Conversation between characters in a drama or narrative. (2) A literary work written in the form of a conversation.

Dialect A regional variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary

Diction Word choice

Euphemism Substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for a harsh, blunt, or offensive one

Figure of speech Broadly, any way of saying something other than the ordinary way; more narrowly (and for the purposes of this class) a way of saying one thing and meaning another.

Hyperbole A figure of speech in which exaggeration is used in the service of truth

Invective Denunciatory or abusive language.

Monologue (1) A dramatic soliloquy. (2) A literary composition in such form

Proverb A short, pithy saying that expresses a basic truth or practical precept

Pun A play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word and sometimes on the similar sense or sound of different words

Sarcasm Bitter or cutting speech; speech intended by its speaker to give pain to the person addressed

Soliloquy a device often used in drama where by a character relates his or her thoughts and feelings to him/herself and to the audience without addressing any of the other characters.

Slang A kind of language esp. occurring in casual or playful speech, usu. made up of short-lived coinages and figures of speech deliberately used in place of standard terms

Understatement A figure of speech that consists of saying less than one means, or of saying what one means with less force than the occasion warrants.

Dramatic Structure

Exposition The part of a play (usually at the beginning) that provides the background information needed to understand the characters and the actions.

Conflict A clash of actions, desires, ideas, or goals in the plot of a story or drama. Conflict may exist between the main character and some other person or persons; between the main character and some external force—physical nature, society, or “fate”; or between the main character and some destructive element in his or her own nature. A struggle that takes place in a character’s mind is called *internal conflict*.

Rising action That development of plot in a story that precedes and leads up to the climax

Climax The turning point or high point of a plot

Falling Action The falling action immediately follows the climax and shows the aftereffects of the events in the climax

Denouement (Also called the resolution) the conclusion of the story. Conflicts are resolved, creating normality for the characters and a sense of catharsis for them and the reader. Sometimes a hint as to the characters’ future is given

Irony

Irony A situation, or a use of language, involving some kind of incongruity or discrepancy. Three kinds of irony are distinguished in this class:

Dramatic irony An incongruity of discrepancy between what a character says or thinks and what the reader knows to be true (or between what a character perceives and what the author intends the reader to perceive).

Irony of situation A situation in which there is an incongruity between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between the actual situation and what would seem appropriate.

Verbal irony A figure of speech in which what is said is the opposite of what is meant

Narrative Mode

Epistolary novel a novel written as a series of documents.

First person point of view The story is told by one of its characters, using the first person.

Flashback A literary device in which an earlier event is inserted into a narrative.

Flashforward A literary device in which a later event is inserted into a narrative.

In medias res (into the middle of things) is a Latin phrase denoting the literary and artistic narrative technique wherein the relation of a story begins either at the mid-point or at the conclusion, rather than at the beginning, establishing setting, character, and conflict via flashback and expository conversations.

Limited omniscient point of view The author tells the story, using the third person, but is limited to a complete knowledge of one character in the story and tells us only what that one character thinks, feels, sees, or hears.

Linear structure a plot that follows a straight-moving, cause and effect, chronological order

Objective point of view The author tells the story, using the third person, but is limited to reporting what the characters say or do; the author does not interpret their behavior or tell us their private thoughts or feelings.

Omniscient point of view The author tells the story, using the third person, knowing all and free to tell us anything, including what the characters are thinking or feeling and why they act as they do

Narrator the speaker or the “voice” of an oral or written work. Although it can be, the narrator is not usually the same person as the author. The narrator is one of three types of characters in a given work, (1) participant (protagonist or participant in any action that may take place in the story), (2) observer (someone who is indirectly involved in the action of a story), or (3) non participant (one who is not at all involved in any action of the story). The narrator is the direct window into a piece of work.

Nonlinear structure is when the plot is presented in a non-causal order, with events presented in a random series jumping to and from the main plot with *flashbacks* or *flashforwards*; or in any other manner that is either not chronological or not cause and effect, for example, *in medias res*.

Point of View The angle of vision from which a story is told.

Stream of consciousness Narrative which presents the private thoughts of a character without commentary or interpretation by the author

Unreliable narrator a narrator whose credibility has been seriously compromised. Unreliable narrators are usually first-person narrators.

Plot

Anticlimax A sudden descent from the impressive or significant to the ludicrous or inconsequential

Catastrophe The concluding action of a classical tragedy containing the resolution of the plot

Comic Relief A humorous incident introduced into a serious literary work in order to relieve dramatic tension or heighten emotional impact

Dilemma A situation in which a character must choose between two courses of action, both undesirable

Deus ex machina (god from the machine) The resolution of a plot by use of a highly improbable chance or coincidence (so named from the practice of some Greek dramatists of having a god descend from heaven at the last possible minute—in the theater by means of a stage machine—to rescue the protagonist from an impossible situation).

Indeterminate ending An ending in which the central problem or conflict is left unresolved

Inversion A reversal in order, nature, or effect

Motivation An emotion, desire, physiological need, or similar impulse that acts as an incitement to action

Mystery An unusual set of circumstances for which the reader craves an explanation; used to create suspense

Paradox A statement or situation containing apparently contradictory or incompatible elements

Plot The sequence of incidents or events of which a story is composed

Plot manipulation A situation in which an author gives the plot a twist or turn unjustified by preceding action or by the characters involved

Plot device An object, character, or event whose only reason for existing is to advance the story. Often breaks *suspension of disbelief*.

Prologue An introduction or a preface, esp. a poem recited to introduce a play

Red herring a literary tactic of diverting attention away from an item or person of significance

Scene A subdivision of an act in a dramatic presentation in which the setting is fixed and the time continuous

Suspense That quality in a story that makes the reader eager to discover what happens next and how it will end

Suspension of Disbelief An unspoken agreement between writer and reader: "I agree to believe your make-believe if it entertains me."

Subplot A plot subordinate to the main plot of a literary work

Surprise An unexpected turn in the development of a plot

Genre

Comedy A type of drama, opposed to tragedy, having usually a happy ending, and emphasizing human limitation rather than human greatness.

- **Comedy of manners** Comedy that ridicules the manners (way of life, social customs, etc.) of a certain segment of society
- **Satire** A kind of literature that ridicules human folly or vice with the purpose of bringing about reform or of keeping others from falling into similar folly or vice.
- **Scornful comedy** A type of comedy whose main purpose is to expose and ridicule human folly, vanity, or hypocrisy
- **Romantic comedy** A type of comedy whose likable and sensible main characters are placed in difficulties from which they are rescued at the end of the play
- **Farce** A type of comedy that relies on exaggeration, horseplay, and unrealistic or improbable situations to provoke laughter

Escapist literature Literature written purely for entertainment, with little or no attempt to provide insights into the true nature of human life or behavior.

Fable A short narrative making an edifying or cautionary point and often employing animal characters that act like human beings

Fantasy A kind of fiction that pictures creatures or events beyond the boundaries of known reality

Interpretive literature Literature that provides valid insights into the nature of human life or behavior

Myth any 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 normally involve religion. Most myths were first spread by oral tradition and then were written down in some literary form. Many ancient literary works are, in fact, myths as myths appear in every ancient culture of the planet.

Novel a book of long narrative in literary prose.

Novella (also called a short novel), a written, fictional, prose narrative longer than a novelette but shorter than a novel.

Parable A simple story illustrating a moral or religious lesson

Tragedy Drama in which a noble protagonist — a person of unusual moral or intellectual stature or outstanding abilities — falls to ruin during a struggle caused by a *tragic flaw* (or hamartia) in his character or an error in his rulings or judgments.

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Literary Terms by Subject (Verse)

Style

Apostrophe A figure of speech in which someone absent or dead or something nonhuman is addressed as if it were alive and present and could reply

Connotation What a word suggests beyond its basic definition; a word's overtones of meaning

Denotation The basic definition or dictionary meaning of a word

Ekphrasis The poetic representation of a painting or sculpture in words

Epigram (1) A short, witty poem expressing a single thought or observation. (2) A concise, clever, often paradoxical statement.

Extended figure (also known as sustained figure) A figure of speech (usually **metaphor, simile, personification, or apostrophe**) sustained or developed through a considerable number of lines or through a whole poem

Figurative language Language employing figures of speech; language that cannot be taken literally or only literally

Figure of speech Broadly, any way of saying something other than the ordinary way; more narrowly (and for the purposes of this class) a way of saying one thing and meaning another

Juxtaposition Positioning opposites next to each other to heighten the contrast

Metaphor A figure of speech in which an implicit comparison is made between two things essentially unlike

Metonymy A figure of speech in which some significant aspect or detail of an experience is used to represent the whole experience

Onomatopoeia The use of words that supposedly mimic their meaning in their sound (for example, boom, click, plop).

Personification A figure of speech in which human attributes are given to an animal, an object, or a concept

Rhythm Any wavelike recurrence of motion or sound

Sentimentality Unmerited or contrived tender feeling; that quality in a story that elicits or seeks to elicit tears through an oversimplification or falsification of reality

Simile A figure of speech in which an explicit comparison is made between two things essentially unlike. The comparison is made explicit by the use of some such word or phrase as like, as, than, similar to, resembles, or seems

Synecdoche A figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole. In this class it is subsumed under the term *Metonymy*.

Syntax Word organization and order.

Structure

Alliteration The repetition at close intervals of the initial consonant sounds of accented syllables or important words (for example, map-moon, kill-code, preach-approve)

Anapest A metrical foot consisting of two unaccented syllables followed by one accented syllable (for example, understand)

Anapestic meter A meter in which a majority of the feet are anapests

Approximate rhyme (also known as imperfect rhyme, near rhyme, slant rhyme, or oblique rhyme) A term used for words in a rhyming pattern that have some kind of sound correspondence but are not perfect rhymes (for example, arrayed-said)

Assonance The repetition at close intervals of the vowel sounds of accented syllables or important words (for example, hat-ran-amber, vein-made).

Ballad meter Stanzas formed of *quatrain*s of iambs in which the first and third lines have four stresses (tetrameter) and the second and fourth lines have three stresses (trimeter). Usually, the second and fourth lines rhyme (abcb), although ballad meter is often not followed strictly.

Blank verse Poetry with a meter, but not rhymed, usually in iambic pentameter

Consonance The repetition at close intervals of the final consonant sounds of accented syllables or important words (for example, book-plaque-thicker)

Couplet Two successive lines, usually in the same meter, linked by rhyme

Dactyl A metrical foot consisting of one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables (for example, merrily)

Dactylic meter A meter in which a majority of the feet are dactyls

End rhyme Rhymes that occur at the ends of lines

End-stopped line A line that ends with a natural speech pause, usually marked by punctuation — the opposite of *enjambment*

Enjambment Or run-on line, a line which has no natural speech pause at its end, allowing the sense to flow uninterrupted into the succeeding line — the opposite of an *end-stopped line*

English (or Shakespearean) sonnet A sonnet rhyming ababcdcdefefgg. Its content or structure ideally parallels the rhyme scheme, falling into three coordinate quatrains and a concluding couplet; but it is often structured, like the *Italian sonnet*, into octave and sestet, the principal break in thought coming at the end of the eighth line.

Feminine rhyme A rhyme in which the stress is on the penultimate (second from last) syllable of the words (picky, tricky)

Foot The basic unit used in the scansion or measurement of verse. A foot usually contains one accented syllable and one or two unaccented syllables

Free verse Nonmetrical verse. Poetry written in free verse is arranged in lines, may be more or less rhythmical, but has no fixed metrical pattern or expectation

Half rhyme (Sometimes called slant rhyme, sprung, near rhyme, oblique rhyme, off rhyme or imperfect rhyme), is consonance on the final consonants of the words involved

Heroic couplet Poems constructed by a sequence of two lines of (usually rhyming) verse in iambic pentameter. If these couplets do not rhyme, they are usually separated by extra white space.

Iamb A metrical foot consisting of one unaccented syllable followed by one accented syllable (for example, rehearse)

Iambic meter A meter in which the majority of feet are iambs, the most common English meter

Internal rhyme A rhyme in which one or both of the rhyme-words occur within the line

Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet A sonnet consisting of an octave rhyming abbaabba and of a sestet using any arrangement of two or three additional rhymes, such as cdcdcd or cdecde

Masculine rhyme (also known as single rhyme) A rhyme in which the stress is on the final syllable of the words (rhyme, sublime)

Meter Regularized rhythm; an arrangement of language in which the accents occur at apparently equal intervals in time

Octave (1) An eight-line stanza. (2) The first eight lines of a sonnet, especially one structured in the manner of an Italian sonnet

Perfect rhyme A rhyme in which is when the later part of the word or phrase is identical sounding to another. Types include *masculine* and *feminine*, among others.

Pentameter A metrical line containing five feet

Quatrain (1) A four-line stanza. (2) A four-line division of a sonnet marked off by its rhyme scheme.

Refrain A repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines, normally at some fixed position in a poem written in stanzaic form

Rhyme The repetition of an identical or similarly accented sound or sounds in a work. Lyricists may find multiple ways to rhyme within a verse. *End rhymes* have words that rhyme at the end of a verse-line. *Internal rhymes* have words that rhyme within it.

Rhyme scheme Any fixed pattern of rhymes characterizing a whole poem or its stanzas

Scansion The process of measuring verse, that is, of marking accented and unaccented syllables, dividing the lines into feet, identifying the metrical pattern, and noting significant variations from that pattern

Sestet (1) A six-line stanza (2) The last six lines of a sonnet structured on the Italian model

Spondee A metrical foot consisting of two syllables equally or almost equally accented (for example, true-blue).

Stanza A group of lines whose metrical pattern (and usually its rhyme scheme as well) is repeated throughout a poem

Syntax The arrangement of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences; sentence construction

Terza Rima A three-line stanza form borrowed from the Italian poets. The rhyme scheme is: aba, bcb, cdc, ded, etc.

Tetrameter A metrical line containing four feet

Trimeter A metrical line containing three feet

Triple meter A meter in which a majority of the feet contain three syllables. (Actually, if more than 25 percent of the feet in a poem are triple, its effect is more triple than duple, and it ought perhaps to be referred to as triple meter.) Anapestic and dactylic are both triple meters.

Trochaic meter A meter in which the majority of feet are trochees

Trochee A metrical foot consisting of one accented syllable followed by one unaccented syllable (for example, barter)

Genre

Ballad a narrative folk song. The ballad is traced back to the Middle Ages. Ballads were usually created by common people and passed orally due to the illiteracy of the time. Subjects for ballads include killings, feuds, important historical events, and rebellion.

Elegy A type of literature defined as a song or poem, written in elegiac couplets, that expresses sorrow or lamentation, usually for one who has died.

Epic A long poem in a lofty style about the exploits of heroic figures. These often come from an oral tradition of shared authorship or from a single, high-profile poet imitating the style.

Lyric a song-like poem written mainly to express the feelings of emotions or thought from a particular person, thus separating it from narrative poems. These poems are generally short, averaging roughly twelve to thirty lines, and rarely go beyond sixty lines. These poems express vivid imagination as well as emotion and all flow fairly concisely.

Narrative poem A poem 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. A few examples of a narrative poem are epics, ballads, and metrical romances.

Ode Usually a lyric poem of moderate length, with a serious subject, an elevated style, and an elaborate stanza pattern. The ode often praises people, the arts of music and poetry, natural scenes, or abstract concepts.

Sonnet A fixed form of fourteen lines, normally iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme conforming to or approximating one of two main types—the Italian or the English