

Literary Devices and Terms

Literary devices are specific language techniques which writers use to create text that is clear, interesting, and memorable.

Alliteration - repeated consonant sound at the beginning of words or within words; used to establish mood and rhythm in a story; true alliteration has three words beginning with the same sound (two words beginning with the same sound would be called **alliterative**)

Examples: bucking bronco; miserable morning; Bed, Bath, and Beyond

Allusion - a reference in one story to a well-known character or event from another story, history, or place

Examples: the rise of the baseball team from last place to first was a real Cinderella story; at times teachers need the wisdom of Solomon to make decisions

Ambiguity - when a single event or expression can mean two different things to two different people

Example: When it is announced that another baby is on the way, Father remarks, "That could create some problems." He means problems with money, but his young son thinks, "You're right, dad! I don't want to share my room and toys with anybody!"

Analogy - comparing one thing to another very different thing in order to explain it better

Examples: a school is like a garden, where children are lovingly raised and cared for; the rabbit shot from its hole like a rocket; the confetti fell like snow in a blizzard as the parade passed through the city streets (these three analogies are all written as **similes**)

Aphorism - a brief statement expressing some truth as shown in a story; it can be a **moral**, or **proverb**, or **maxim**.

Examples: Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.
Everyone is afraid of something.
Don't make a big fuss if someone isn't like us.

Atmosphere - mood or feeling developed through descriptions of the setting and senses (how things feel, taste, smell, sound, look)

Example: Camping in those woods, time went slow. The thick forest air just sat on you, hot and wet like a wool blanket, while mosquitoes droned in your ears and stung you on the back where you could never quite reach to smack them.

Caricature - exaggeration or distortion of a physical trait or behavior, to make a character appear comic or ridiculous

Example: her nose was needle sharp, with nostrils as small and black as a mouse's eyes

Character - a person or player (it can also be an animal, an imaginary creature) in a story; **character** can also be used as a word meaning "personal traits," as in "Write a paragraph about the character of the Big Bad Wolf."

Circular Story - a story which begins and ends at the same place, usually following a character through different adventures or events; although the character arrives back where he/she started, he or she should now have a different perspective or feeling based upon experiences

Example: A poor farmer travels to the city where he observes many expensive buildings and belongings, all owned by the same man. He is jealous of that man until he sees a funeral, and learns that the rich man is dead. Although the man was extremely wealthy, he could enjoy none of that in death. The poor farmer returns home, happy with what little he owns because he is alive to enjoy it.

Climax - the most exciting moment of the story, where the main character faces his/her ultimate challenge

Example: In Cinderella, the clock begins striking twelve, and Cinderella must rush home before the handsome prince finds out her secret. That is the climax. The following day, when the prince finds her again and fits the glass slipper on her foot, is the outcome, or solution, of the story.

Conflict - the problem, or challenge, that the main character faces

Example: The main character may be challenged by another character (two kids running in a race), by nature (a boy struggling to survive in the wilderness), or by him/herself (a girl who must get over her fear of speaking in front of an audience)

Dialogue - spoken lines between characters, set with quotation marks; each new speaker's lines appear in a new paragraph; when one person speaks for an extended time (to himself or the audience) it is called a **monologue**

Example: "Where are you going?" Nicole asked.
"To the library," replied Jeremy.

Dramatic Irony is when the reader knows things that the characters in a story do not

Example: We learn that Mary really likes Frankie because she writes about him in her diary all the time. Frankie, however, is scared to ask Mary to the dance because she is so popular and "cool." We wish we could tell Frankie what we, as the readers, know!

Episode - a small event that is part of a larger story; it can stand alone as almost a "mini-story" (events which repeat are typically called episodes)

Example: In the *Three Little Pigs*, the wolf tries blowing down the pigs' houses in three separate episodes; he is successful the first two times but unsuccessful the last (notice that the three events are alike).

Event - an action in a story that moves the story forward; usually something happens to the main character, or the main character takes action against someone or something else

Example: In the book *Ruby the Copycat*, Ruby sees her friend wear a certain dress, so Ruby comes to school in a similar dress. Her friend tells a story about a wedding, so Ruby tells a very similar story. Each time Ruby sees her friend do something and copies it, that is an **event** in the story. The most important event is called the **Climax**, and the final event is called the **Outcome**, or **Solution**.

Evidence - information from the text that **supports**, or **proves**, an inference or fact

Example: We know that the Wolf wants to eat Little Red Riding Hood because

- a) Red Riding Hood's mother warned her about wolves in the forest
- b) the Wolf tried tricking her once in the forest
- c) he has already eaten her grandmother
- d) he drools when he sees her
- e) he says things such as, "All the better to eat you with!"

Flashback - interruption of the present action to insert an episode that took place earlier; this gives the reader needed information to understand a current event, or a character's motivation

Example: I could tell that Jimmy wasn't going to back down. He stood up to bullies before, like back in first grade when Roger Neary used to eat everybody's snack. One day Jimmy had caught Roger in *his* snack bag, and...

Flash-Forward - a sudden jump forward in time, usually used to eliminate unnecessary events between the more interesting events of a story

Example: Quietly, Janice slid the book into her backpack. A week later, the teacher asked if anyone had seen her copy of *The Magic Mouse*. "I've looked everywhere," she explained, "and I just can't find it."

Foreshadowing - clues used to alert the reader about events that will occur later; used to build suspense

Example: I laughed as we snuck out the back door. The plan had worked out perfectly. Nothing could possibly go wrong now!

Hyperbole - obvious exaggeration which is not meant to be taken literally

Example: I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!

Imagery - mental pictures which are created by descriptions of the senses, so that we can see and feel what the character is experiencing

Example: Even the dark, shiny leaves which usually clung to the chimney of my grandmother's house hung dry and brittle on that hot summer day.

Inference - conclusions which can be drawn by the reader based upon limited clues or facts presented by the author; the reader is encouraged to discover things for him/herself without being directed by the author

Example: Mark's father was surprised the following week when, all of a sudden, Mark quit begging for a dog. He began spending much more of his time out at the old barn by the creek, and had even begun to ask for seconds and thirds at suppertime.

Internal Rhyme - two or more words rhyme in the same line

Example: I bring fresh showers to the thirsting flowers.

Irony - contrast between the expected outcome and the actual way things turn out (see **Dramatic Irony**)

Example: In the book *Holes*, no one in the courtroom believes that Stanley Yelnats is innocent. Once he gets to Camp Green Lake he lies about committing the crime, but then no one there believes he is guilty! He just can't seem to win.

Metaphor - a suggested comparison between two unlike things in order to point out a similarity; a metaphor DOES NOT use the word **like, as ___ as, or than.**

Example: Hot orange coals burned at the edge of the woods as the wolves watched and waited with hungry eagerness. (the wolves' eyes are compared to orange coals because of their brightness and color)

Motive - a character's reason for doing what he/she does

Example: "So why did you tear up Janie's paper?" demanded the teacher.

Margaret said nothing and stared at her shoes. The teacher would never understand. She could never understand how it felt to be the new kid in school, and to have one student turn all the others against you. All because you...

Onomatopoeia - words that imitate, or sound like, the actions they describe

Examples: bang, slurp, ping, slam, hiss, squish

Outcome - the last event of the story which tells how the story ends; it explains whether the main character met his/her challenge

Example: “And they all lived happily ever after,” is a common outcome in fairy tales.

Paradox - a statement that reveals a kind of truth although at first it seems to be self-contradictory and untrue

Examples: It was the best mistake he ever made (he learned a lot from this error).

Good fences make good neighbors (fences *do* separate people, but they help people get along by making boundaries clear).

Parallel Story - a narrative or picture story enclosed within another story, where both stories are of equal interest

Example: In a story about kids putting on a play, both the onstage scene is shown, and the backstage happenings.

Parody - a humorous story that makes fun of another well-known story by imitating it; characters, plot, theme, setting, may all be copied or changed for humorous effect

Examples: *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by John Scieszka has the story of the Three Little Pigs explained from the wolf’s point of view, and in his version it was all a big misunderstanding and he was innocent.

Personification - a description in which an object (or animal, or idea, or force of nature) takes on human characteristics or actions

Examples: the tornado stooped to snatch the house; the sun hid its face behind the clouds; the rain tapped against the window with its wet, insistent fingers

Plot - what happens in a story, told in a sequenced, chronological order

Example: Samantha received a new skateboard for her birthday. A week later, however, she lost it. She looked everywhere but couldn’t find it. Then one day...

Poetic Justice - an outcome in a story where good is rewarded, and evil is punished

Example: the wolf is boiled in the pot at the end of the *Three Little Pigs*; good Cinderella marries the handsome prince; the lazy grasshopper suffers a hungry winter because he did not work hard like the ant to store up food

Point of View - the perspective from which a story is seen or told; there are three main forms:

First Person: (**I** and **me** are used; the narrator is actually a part of the story)

I woke up first, alarmed that I had slept too late and missed my chance. A look at my brother's bed told me he was still asleep, snuggled up under the covers.

Third Person: (he and she are used; the narrator simply helps tell the story, and lets all character speak for themselves)

Pete woke up first. A look at his brother's bed told him that Sam was still asleep, snuggled up under the covers.

Omniscient: (he and she are used; BUT the narrator not only lets characters speak, but can also "get inside their heads" to read their thoughts)

Pete woke up first, feeling somewhat alarmed that he might have overslept and missed his chance. He looked at his brother's bed and was glad to see that Sam was still asleep, snuggled up under the covers.

Portmanteau Word - a portmanteau is suitcase which opens like a book, and when the two sides are shut and fastened, it is ready for travel; a **portmanteau word** is one in which two real words are combined, but some letters deleted, in order to form a new word

Examples: fog + smoke = smog
 drip + sizzle = drizzle
 horrid + tremendous = horrendous

The term portmanteau word was coined (invented) by Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland*. Today, many famous brand names are actually portmanteaus:

Examples: Gogurt = go + yogurt

Compound words are different, since they do NOT eliminate letters when joining the two smaller words.

Examples: dog + house = doghouse
 life + guard = lifeguard

Pun - a humorous use of a word or phrase that has more than one meaning (or two similarly spelled words that sound alike)

Examples: “If you really want to keep warm, try bear skin,” said the trapper.
 “But won’t I be really cold in my bare skin?” asked the boy.

 Why is it easy for an elephant to travel?
 He can carry his own trunk.

Repetition - the author purposely repeats words or phrases; the author is trying to create rhythm or suspense, or is trying to really emphasize a certain idea.

Example: It was all gone. Burned to ashes. He had no clothing, no blankets, no bow, no hatchet, no map. It was all gone.

Setting - the time and place of a story; the time may simply be “present day”

Example: Over a hundred years ago, Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin...

Simile - a comparison between two unlike things, using **like**, **as ___ as**, or **than** in the comparison

Example: the leaf spun to the ground like a descending helicopter;
 more nervous than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs;
 he was as mad as a hornet

Solution - see [Outcome](#)

Stereotype/ Reverse Stereotype - a **stereotype** is when a person is portrayed in a fixed way

Example: the old woman had gray hair, a cane, and sat in a rocking chair

A **Reverse Stereotype** is when a person is portrayed exactly opposite to a fixed

generalization (the usual way we would consider them)

Example: Bobby's grandmother laced up the red boxing gloves. She danced on her toes as she approached the bully, and smiled as she said, "Okay, you big oaf. I'm gonna give you what you deserve..." And with one swing, she knocked the bully to the ground.

Symbol - any person, object, or action that has additional meaning beyond itself

Example: As a boy sits in class on the first day of school, he stares out the window at a basketball sitting on the blacktop in the playground. As he gazes at it, the basketball reminds him of all the fun times he had over the summer. The basketball becomes a symbol of summer.

Theme - the meaning of a story, what it reveals about human nature; plot is what happens in the story, while theme is what it means

Example: Plot: young soldier fights his first battle
Theme: war is useless; fighting solves nothing

Tone - the author's attitude toward a subject, revealed by choice of words and details

Example: The girl cast a lonely thin shadow on the gray brick wall, as her classmates tumbled merrily in the brightly flowered fields beyond the school. (the author feels sorry for the girl who isn't playing with the other children)

Trait - a word which describes a character's personality, or how she/he acts in the story; it must always be backed up with evidence (support or proof) from the story

Example: Beatrice is very patient with her little sister, Ramona. Ramona is sometimes stubborn and doesn't do what she is told, but Beatrice never yells or complains. Instead, she finds clever ways to get Ramona to behave. (the word **patient** is the trait; the second and third sentences provide the *evidence*, or proof, from the story)

Understatement - when the author presents something as less significant (important) than it really is

Example: Mr. Brumble looked at both test papers, back and forth, back and forth, noting that all the answers were exactly the same. He put the papers down on his desk, crossed his arms and said, “Boys, we have a little problem here.”

Other Literary Devices: