Literary Terms & Devices Quick-Reference

This quick-reference chart contains concise definitions for all 136 literary devices and terms we cover. Click on the heading for any term to see its complete explanation, plus examples, on www.litcharts.com.

A

Acrostic — An acrostic is a piece of writing in which a particular set of letters—typically the first letter of each line, word, or paragraph—spells out a word or phrase with special significance to the text. Acrostics are most commonly written as a form of poetry, but they can also be found in prose or used as word puzzles.

Allegory — An allegory is a work that conveys a hidden meaning—usually moral, spiritual, or political—through the use of symbolic characters and events. The story of "The Tortoise and The Hare" is a well-known allegory with a moral that a slow and steady approach (symbolized by the Tortoise) is better than a hasty and overconfident approach (symbolized by the Hare).

Alliteration — Alliteration is a figure of speech in which the same sound repeats in a group of words, such as the "b" sound in: "Bob brought the box of bricks to the basement." The repeating sound must occur either in the first letter of each word, or in the stressed syllables of those words.

Allusion — In literature, an allusion is an unexplained reference to someone or something outside of the text. Writers commonly allude to other literary works, famous individuals, historical events, or philosophical ideas, and they do so in order to layer associations and meanings from these sources onto their own work. Allusions can also occur in media other than literature, such as film, visual arts, or even casual conversation. If you've ever responded to betrayal with a dramatic cry of "Et tu, Brute?" ("You too, Brutus?"), then you've made an allusion—to a famous line from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.

Anachronism — An anachronism is a person or a thing placed in the wrong time period. For instance, if a novel set in Medieval England featured a trip to a movie-theater, that would be an anachronism. Although the device can be used for many different purposes, authors often use anachronisms to make it easier for audiences to relate to other historical periods, or to add an element of humor and surprise to a story.

Anadiplosis — Anadiplosis is a figure of speech in which a word or group of words located at the end of one clause or sentence is repeated at or near the beginning of the following clause or sentence. This line from the novelist Henry James is an example of anadiplosis: "Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task."

Analogy — An analogy is a comparison that aims to explain a thing or idea by likening it to something else. For example, a career coach might say, "Being the successful boss or CEO of a company is like being an orchestra conductor: just as the conductor needs to stand up front where everyone—even the musicians in the back row—can see him, a good CEO needs to make sure he or she is visible and available to all of the company's employees." The career coach is not saying that CEOs are exactly like orchestra conductors in every way. Rather, comparing CEOs to conductors through analogy allows the coach to articulate an important leadership quality in a memorable way.

Anapest — An anapest is a three-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed syllable. The word "understand" is an anapest, with the unstressed syllables of "un" and "der" followed by the stressed syllable, "stand": Un-der-stand.

Anaphora — Anaphora is a figure of speech in which words repeat at the beginning of successive clauses, phrases, or sentences. For example, Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech contains anaphora: "So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania..."

Antagonist — An antagonist is usually a character who opposes the protagonist (or main character) of a story, but the antagonist can also be a group of characters, institution, or force against which the protagonist must contend. A simple example of an antagonist is the Queen in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, who opposes and wants to destroy Snow White.

Antanaclasis — Antanaclasis is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated within a sentence, but the word or phrase means something different each time it appears. A famous example of antanaclasis is Benjamin Franklin's statement that: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." In this example, the first time "hang" appears it means "stay" or "stand," while the second time it refers to being "hanged."

Anthropomorphism — Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, and behaviors to animals or other non-human things (including objects, plants, and supernatural beings). Some famous examples of anthropomorphism include Winnie the Pooh, the Little Engine that Could, and Simba from the movie The Lion King.

Antimetabole — Antimetabole is a figure of speech in which a phrase is repeated, but with the order of words reversed. John F. Kennedy's words, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," is a famous example of antimetabole.

Antithesis — Antithesis is a figure of speech that juxtaposes two contrasting or opposing ideas, usually within parallel grammatical structures. For instance, Neil Armstrong used antithesis when he stepped onto the surface of the moon in 1969 and said, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." This is an example of antithesis because the two halves of the sentence mirror each other in grammatical structure, while together the two halves emphasize the incredible contrast between the individual experience of taking an ordinary step, and the extraordinary progress that Armstrong's step symbolized for the human race.

Aphorism — An aphorism is a saying that concisely expresses a moral

principle or an observation about the world, presenting it as a general or universal truth. The Rolling Stones are responsible for penning one of the most catchy aphorisms of all time: "You can't always get what you want." Aphorisms are often (though not always) witty or humorous, and they're used everywhere, from philosophical texts and great works of literature, to pop songs and everyday conversation.

Aphorismus — Aphorismus is a type of figure of speech that calls into question the way a word is used. Aphorismus is used not to question the meaning of a word, but whether it is actually appropriate to use that word in a particular situation. For instance, in Shakespeare's Richard II, King Richard asks "How can you say to me I am a king?" as a way of expressing that, although he is technically a king, he doesn't feel he actually possesses the qualities of a king and that therefore perhaps the word should not apply to him.

Aporia — Aporia is a rhetorical device in which a speaker expresses uncertainty or doubt—often pretended uncertainty or doubt—about something, usually as a way of proving a point. An example of aporia is the famous Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem which begins, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." Browning's pretense that she might not remember all "the ways" is what gives her an opportunity to enumerate them.

Apostrophe — Apostrophe is a figure of speech in which a speaker directly addresses someone (or something) that is not present or cannot respond in reality. The entity being addressed can be an absent, dead, or imaginary person, but it can also be an inanimate object (like stars or the ocean), an abstract idea (like love or fate), or a being (such as a Muse or god).

Assonance — Assonance is a figure of speech in which the same vowel sound repeats within a group of words. An example of assonance is: "Who gave Newt and Scooter the blue tuna? It was too soon!"

Asyndeton — An asyndeton (sometimes called asyndetism) is a figure of speech in which coordinating conjunctions—words such as "and", "or", and "but" that join other words or clauses in a sentence into relationships of equal importance—are omitted. The use of asyndeton can speed up the rhythm of a phrase, make it more memorable or urgent, or offer other stylistic effects. For instance, take the sentence: "I expect my dog to chew my pillows, my cat to claw my furniture." Here, the writer omits the "and" from between "pillows" and "my". This omission transforms the sentence from one that merely states what the pets often do, to one that implies exasperation as well as a fatalistic sense that the pets' actions are inevitable and unchangeable.

B

Ballad — A ballad is a type of poem that tells a story and was traditionally set to music. English language ballads are typically composed of four-line stanzas that follow an ABCB rhyme scheme.

Ballade — A ballade is a form of lyric poetry that originated in medieval France. Ballades follow a strict rhyme scheme ("ababbcbc"), and typically have three eight-line stanzas followed by a shorter four-line stanza called an envoi. The last line of each stanza—the refrain—is always the same.

Bildungsroman — Bildungsroman is a genre of novel that shows a young protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood (or immaturity to maturity), with a focus on the trials and misfortunes that affect the character's growth.

Blank Verse — Blank verse is the name given to poetry that lacks rhymes but does follow a specific meter—a meter that is almost always iambic pentameter. Blank verse was particularly popular in English poetry written between the 16th and 20th centuries, including the plays of Shakespeare. These lines from Hamlet are written in blank verse (note the lack of rhyme and the consistent meter of unstressed/stressed syllables): "It is not nor it cannot come to good, / But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

C

Cacophony — A cacophony is a combination of words that sound harsh or unpleasant together, usually because they pack a lot of percussive or "explosive" consonants (like T, P, or K) into relatively little space. For instance, the protagonist of the children's book Tikki Tikki Tembo has a very long, very cacophonous name: Tikki Tikki Tembo No Sarimbo Hari Kari Bushkie Perry Pem Do Hai Kai Pom Pom Nikki No Meeno Dom Barako.

Caesura — A caesura is a pause that occurs within a line of poetry, usually marked by some form of punctuation such as a period, comma, ellipsis, or dash. A caesura doesn't have to be placed in the exact middle of a line of poetry. It can be placed anywhere after the first word and before the last word of a line. In the following line from the prologue of Romeo and Juliet, the comma after "Verona" marks a caesura: "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene."

Catharsis — Catharsis is the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art. Aristotle coined the term catharsis—which comes from the Greek kathairein meaning "to cleanse or purge"—to describe the release of emotional tension that he believed spectators experienced while watching dramatic tragedy. Today, the word "catharsis" can be used in reference to any experience of emotional release or cleansing brought about by a work of art.

Characterization — Characterization is the representation of the traits, motives, and psychology of a character in a narrative. Characterization may occur through direct description, in which the character's qualities are described by a narrator, another character, or by the character him or herself. It may also occur indirectly, in which the character's qualities are revealed by his or her actions, thoughts, or dialogue.

Chiasmus — Chiasmus is a figure of speech in which the grammar of one phrase is inverted in the following phrase, such that two key concepts from the original phrase reappear in the second phrase in inverted order. The sentence "She has all my love; my heart belongs to her," is an example of chiasmus.

Cinquain — The word cinquain can refer to two different things. Historically, it referred to any stanza of five lines written in any type of verse. More recently, cinquain has come to refer to particular types of five-line poems that have precisely defined features, such as their meter or the number of syllables they

contain in each line. The most common of these specific types of cinquains is the American cinquain.

Cliché — A cliché is a phrase that, due to overuse, is seen as lacking in substance or originality. For example, telling a heartbroken friend that there are "Plenty of fish in the sea" is such a cliché that it would probably not be all that comforting for them to hear, even though the saying is meant to be a reassurance. While "cliché" is most often used to describe expressions or phrases, it can be used to label nearly anything related to literature as being boring, tired, or uncreative, including settings, character traits, actions, ideas, images, and plot events or even entire storylines.

Climax (Figure of Speech) — Climax is a figure of speech in which successive words, phrases, clauses, or sentences are arranged in ascending order of importance, as in "Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!"

Climax (Plot) — The climax of a plot is the story's central turning point—the moment of peak tension or conflict—which all the preceding plot developments have been leading up to. In a traditional "good vs. evil" story (like many superhero movies) the climax is typically the moment when the hero finally confronts or does battle with the villain. However, climaxes are not always so easy to spot. For instance, there's widespread disagreement as to whether the climax of Romeo and Juliet occurs in the middle of the play, when Romeo kills his rival Tybalt in a big showdown and then must flee Verona, or at the end of the play, when Romeo finds Juliet unconscious and, thinking her dead, kills himself by drinking poison.

Colloquialism — Colloquialism is the use of informal words or phrases in writing or speech. Colloquialisms are usually defined in geographical terms, meaning that they are often defined by their use within a dialect, a regionally-defined variant of a larger language. Colloquialisms can include aphorisms, idioms, profanity, or other words.

Common Meter — Common meter is a specific type of meter that is often used in lyric poetry. Common meter has two key traits: it alternates between lines of eight syllables and lines of six syllables, and it always follows an iambic stress pattern in which each unstressed syllable is followed by one stressed syllable. The hymn "Amazing Grace" is an example of common meter: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me."

Conceit — A conceit is a fanciful metaphor, especially a highly elaborate or extended metaphor in which an unlikely, far-fetched, or strained comparison is made between two things. A famous example comes from John Donne's poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which two lovers are compared to opposite points of a compass needle using a long and elaborate metaphor.

Connotation — Connotation is the array of emotions and ideas suggested by a word in addition to its dictionary definition. Most words carry meanings, impressions, or associations apart from or beyond their literal meaning. For example, the words "child" and "kid" mean the same thing, but to call someone a "kid" has a slightly informal and therefore disrespectful connotation. The nature of connotations is that they are not explicitly defined, so they can be used in both purposeful and accidental ways to convey subtle meaning or subtext: you might call someone a "kid" on

purpose to imply some disrespect, or you may do so without realizing the connotation of your words.

Consonance — Consonance is a figure of speech in which the same consonant sound repeats within a group of words. An example of consonance is: "Traffic figures, on July Fourth, to be tough."

Couplet — A couplet is a unit of two lines of poetry, especially lines that use the same or similar meter, form a rhyme, or are separated from other lines by a double line break.

D

Dactyl — A dactyl is a three-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which a stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed syllables. The word "poetry" itself is a great example of a dactyl, with the stressed syllable falling on the "Po," followed by the unstressed syllables "e" and "try": Po-e-try.

Denotation — Denotation is the literal meaning, or "dictionary definition," of a word. Denotation is defined in contrast to connotation, which is the array of emotions and ideas suggested by a word in addition to its dictionary definition. The words "house" and "home," for example, have the same denotation—a building where people live—but the word "home" has a connotation of warmth and family, while the word "house" does not. A word's denotation does not include any of the subjective or emotional associations that are part of that word's connotation.

Deus Ex Machina — A deus ex machina is a plot device whereby an unsolvable conflict or point of tension is suddenly resolved by the unexpected appearance of an implausible character, object, action, ability, or event. For example, if a character fell off a cliff and a flying robot suddenly appeared out of nowhere to catch them, that would be a deus ex machina. The goal of this device is to bring about resolution, but it can also introduce comedic relief, disentangle a plot, or surprise an audience.

Diacope — Diacope is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated with a small number of intervening words. The first line of Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," is an example of diacope.

Dialogue — Dialogue is the exchange of spoken words between two or more characters in a book, play, or other written work. In prose writing, lines of dialogue are typically identified by the use of quotation marks and a dialogue tag, such as "she said." In plays, lines of dialogue are preceded by the name of the person speaking. Here's a bit of dialogue from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:

Diction — Diction is a writer's unique style of expression, especially his or her choice and arrangement of words. A writer's vocabulary, use of language to produce a specific tone or atmosphere, and ability to communicate clearly with the reader are all essential parts of diction. If a writer favors specific words or phrases and uses them throughout his or her work, those are also considered to be part of the writer's general diction, though a writer might also modify his or her diction to achieve certain effects, such as to create

characters of different types and backgrounds.

Dramatic Irony — Dramatic irony is a plot device often used in theater, literature, film, and television to highlight the difference between a character's understanding of a given situation, and that of the audience. More specifically, in dramatic irony the reader or audience has knowledge of some critical piece of information, while the character or characters to whom the information pertains are "in the dark"—that is, they do not yet themselves have the same knowledge as the audience. A straightforward example of this would be any scene from a horror film in which the audience might shout "Don't go in there!"—since that character doesn't suspect anything, but the audience already knows their fate.

Dynamic Character — A dynamic character undergoes substantial internal changes as a result of one or more plot developments. The dynamic character's change can be extreme or subtle, as long as his or her development is important to the book's plot or themes. For instance, at the beginning of To Kill a Mockingbird the main character, Scout, is a young girl who, like most young kids, is generally self-focused and lacking in empathy, as evidenced by her voyeuristic curiosity in her strange neighbor Boo Radley. By the end of the novel, after seeing the impact of poverty, racism, and other injustices, she has grown and is able to see the world from Boo Radley's point of view.

Dénouement — The dénouement is the final section of a story's plot, in which loose ends are tied up, lingering questions are answered, and a sense of resolution is achieved. The shortest and most well known dénouement, it could be said, is "And they lived happily ever after." Most stories, however, require a longer concluding section to achieve a sense of resolution.

E

Elegy — An elegy is a poem of serious reflection, especially one mourning the loss of someone who died. Elegies are defined by their subject matter, and don't have to follow any specific form in terms of meter, rhyme, or structure.

End Rhyme — End rhyme refers to rhymes that occur in the final words of lines of poetry. For instance, these lines from Dorothy Parker's poem "Interview" use end rhyme: "The ladies men admire, I've heard, / Would shudder at a wicked word."

End-Stopped Line — An end-stopped line is a line of poetry in which a sentence or phrase comes to a conclusion at the end of the line. For example, the poet C.P. Cavafy uses end-stopped lines in his poem "Ithaka" when he writes "Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey. / Without her you wouldn't have set out. / She has nothing left to give you now." If a line of poetry contains a complete phrase whose meaning doesn't change in light of what follows, it is considered to be end-stopped. However, an end-stopped line is often the end of a longer sentence that stretches across several lines.

Enjambment — Enjambment is the continuation of a sentence or clause across a line break. For example, the poet John Donne uses enjambment in his poem "The Good-Morrow" when he continues the opening sentence across the line break between the first and second lines: "I wonder, by my

troth, what thou and I / Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?"

Envoi — An envoi is a brief concluding stanza at the end of a poem that can either summarize the preceding poem or serve as its dedication. The envoi tends to follow the same meter and rhyme scheme as the body of the poem, but nevertheless it remains distinct from the rest of the poem, much like an epilogue in a book. The specific length and rhyme scheme of an envoi depend on the type of poem in which they appear. The most popular poetic forms in which envois appear are ballades and sestinas.

Epanalepsis — Epanalepsis is a figure of speech in which the beginning of a clause or sentence is repeated at the end of that same clause or sentence, with words intervening. The sentence "The king is dead, long live the king!" is an example of epanalepsis.

Epigram — An epigram is a short and witty statement, usually written in verse, that conveys a single thought or observation. Epigrams typically end with a punchline or a satirical twist.

Epigraph — An epigraph is a short quotation, phrase, or poem that is placed at the beginning of another piece of writing to encapsulate that work's main themes and to set the tone. For instance, the epigraph of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is taken from Milton's Paradise Lost, and establishes the book's main theme (i.e., the relationship of contempt between creators and their creations): "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me Man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"

Epistrophe — Epistrophe is a figure of speech in which one or more words repeat at the end of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln urged the American people to ensure that, "government of the people, by the people, for the people,shall not perish from the earth." His repetition of "the people" at the end of each clause is an example of epistrophe.

Epizeuxis — Epizeuxis is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated in immediate succession, with no intervening words. In the play Hamlet, when Hamlet responds to a question about what he's reading by saying "Words, words, words," that's an example of epizeuxis.

Ethos — Ethos, along with logos and pathos, is one of the three "modes of persuasion" in rhetoric (the art of effective speaking or writing). Ethos is an argument that appeals to the audience by emphasizing the speaker's credibility and authority. If the speaker has a high-ranking position, is an expert in his or her field, or has had life experience relevant to a particular topic, anything the speaker says or does to ensure that the audience knows about and remembers these qualifications is an example of ethos.

Euphony — Euphony is the combining of words that sound pleasant together or are easy to pronounce, usually because they contain lots of consonants with soft or muffled sounds (like L, M, N, and R) instead of consonants with harsh, percussive sounds (like T, P, and K). Other factors, like rhyme and rhythm, can also be used to create euphony. An example of euphony is the end of Shakespeare's famous "Sonnet 18," which goes "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Exposition — Exposition is the description or explanation of background

information within a work of literature. Exposition can cover characters and their relationship to one another, the setting or time and place of events, as well as any relevant ideas, details, or historical context.

Extended Metaphor — An extended metaphor is a metaphor that unfolds across multiple lines or even paragraphs of a text, making use of multiple interrelated metaphors within an overarching one. So while "life is a highway" is a simple metaphor, it becomes an extended metaphor when you say: "Life is a highway that takes us through green pastures, vast deserts, and rocky mountains. Sometimes your car breaks down or you run out of gas, and sometimes you get lost. Friends are the roadmaps that help you get where you're going." Now you've spread the idea of "life = highway" across multiple sentences and related ideas, and created an extended metaphor.

External Conflict — An external conflict is a problem, antagonism, or struggle that takes place between a character and an outside force. External conflict drives the action of a plot forward.

F

Falling Action — The falling action of a story is the section of the plot following the climax, in which the tension stemming from the story's central conflict decreases and the story moves toward its conclusion. For instance, the traditional "good vs. evil" story (like many superhero movies) doesn't end as soon as the force of evil has been thwarted. Rather, there tends to be a portion of the story in which the hero must restore regular order to the world, clean up the mess they made, or make a return journey home. This is all part of the "falling action."

Figurative Language — Figurative language is language that contains or uses figures of speech. When people use the term "figurative language," however, they often do so in a slightly narrower way. In this narrower definition, figurative language refers to language that uses words in ways that deviate from their literal interpretation to achieve a more complex or powerful effect. This view of figurative language focuses on the use of figures of speech that play with the meaning of words, such as metaphor, simile, personification, and hyperbole.

Figure of Speech — A figure of speech is a literary device in which language is used in an unusual—or "figured"—way in order to produce a stylistic effect. Figures of speech can be broken into two main groups: figures of speech that play with the ordinary meaning of words (such as metaphor, simile, and hyperbole), and figures of speech that play with the ordinary arrangement or pattern in which words are written (such as alliteration, ellipsis, and antithesis).

Flat Character — A character is said to be "flat" if it is one-dimensional or lacking in complexity. Typically, flat characters can be easily and accurately described using a single word (like "bully") or one short sentence (like "A naive and idealistic schoolteacher with a fragile heart of gold"). The important thing about flat characters is that they never transcend or break with the formula that defines them.

Foreshadowing — Foreshadowing is a literary device in which authors hint at plot developments that don't actually occur until later in the story. Foreshadowing can be achieved directly or indirectly, by making explicit statements or leaving subtle clues about what will happen later in the text. The Russian author Anton Chekhov summarized foreshadowing when he wrote, "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off." The description of the gun on the wall, in other words, should foreshadow its later use.

Formal Verse — Formal verse is the name given to rhymed poetry that uses a strict meter (a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables). This two-line poem by Emily Dickinson is formal verse because it rhymes and its lines contain the same number of syllables (ten) with the same stress pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables: "In this short Life that only lasts an hour / How much - how little - is within our power."

Free Verse — Free verse is the name given to poetry that doesn't use any strict meter or rhyme scheme. Because it has no set meter, poems written in free verse can have lines of any length, from a single word to much longer. William Carlos Williams's short poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" is written in free verse. It reads: "so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens."

H

Hamartia — Hamartia is a literary term that refers to a tragic flaw or error that leads to a character's downfall. In the novel Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein's arrogant conviction that he can usurp the roles of God and nature in creating life directly leads to ruinous consequences for him, making it an example of hamartia.

Hubris — Hubris refers to excessive pride or overconfidence, which drives a person to overstep limits in a way that leads to their downfall. In Greek mythology, the legend of Icarus involves an iconic case of hubris: Icarus is given artificial wings made of wax and feathers so that he can fly (a superhuman feat), but he ignores his father's warnings and flies too close to the sun, melting his wings and drowning in the ocean.

Hyperbole — Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which a writer or speaker exaggerates for the sake of emphasis. Hyperbolic statements are usually quite obvious exaggerations intended to emphasize a point, rather than be taken literally. For example, in the hyperbolic statement, "My backpack weighs a ton," the speaker doesn't actually think the backpack weighs a ton, nor does he or she intend the listener to think so. The backpack-wearer simply wants to communicate, through the use of hyperbole, that he or she is carrying a very heavy load.

I

Iamb — An iamb is a two-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which one unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. The word "define" is an iamb, with the unstressed syllable of "de" followed by the stressed syllable, "fine": De-fine.

Idiom — An idiom is a phrase that conveys a _figurative_ meaning that is difficult or impossible to understand based solely on a literal interpretation of the words in the phrase. For example, saying that something is "beyond the pale" is an idiomatic way of saying that it is improper or "over the line," but you would only know that if someone had explained it to you, or if you had been able to infer its meaning based on context.

Imagery — Imagery, in any sort of writing, refers to descriptive language that engages the human senses. For instance, the following lines from Robert Frost's poem "After Apple-Picking" contain imagery that engages the senses of touch, movement, and hearing: "I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend. / And I keep hearing from the cellar bin / The rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in."

Internal Rhyme — Internal rhyme is rhyme that occurs in the middle of lines of poetry, instead of at the ends of lines. A single line of poetry can contain internal rhyme (with multiple words in the same line rhyming), or the rhyming words can occur across multiple lines. An example of internal rhyme would be "I drove myself to the lake / and dove into the water."

Irony — Irony is a literary device or event in which how things seem to be is in fact very different from how they actually are. If this seems like a loose definition, don't worry—it is. Irony is a broad term that encompasses three different types of irony, each with their own specific definition: _verbal irony_, _dramatic irony_, and situational irony. Most of the time when people use the word irony, they're actually referring to one of these specific types of irony.

J

Juxtaposition — Juxtaposition occurs when an author places two things side by side as a way of highlighting their differences. Ideas, images, characters, and actions are all things that can be juxtaposed with one another. For example, it's a common plot device in fairy tales such as Cinderella to juxtapose the good-natured main character with a cruel step-sibling. The differences between the characters, as well as their close relation to one another, serve to highlight the main character's good qualities.

K

Kenning — A kenning is a _figure of speech_ in which two words are combined in order to form a poetic expression that refers to a person or a thing. For example, "whale-road" is a kenning for the sea. Kennings are most commonly found in Old Norse and Old English poetry.

L

Line Break — A line break is the termination of one line of poetry, and the beginning of a new line.

Litotes — Litotes is a _figure of speech_ and a form of _understatement_ in which a sentiment is expressed _ironically_ by negating its contrary. For example, saying "It's not the best weather today" during a hurricane would be an

example of litotes, implying through ironic understatement that the weather is, in fact, horrible.

Logos — Logos, along with _ethos_ and _pathos_, is one of the three "modes of persuasion" in rhetoric (the art of effective speaking or writing). Logos is an argument that appeals to an audience's sense of logic or reason. For example, when a speaker cites scientific data, methodically walks through the line of reasoning behind their argument, or precisely recounts historical events relevant to their argument, he or she is using logos.

M

Metaphor — A metaphor is a _figure of speech_ that compares two different things by saying that one thing is the other. The comparison in a metaphor can be stated explicitly, as in the sentence "Love is a battlefield." Other times, the writer may make this equation between two things implicitly, as in, "He was wounded by love." The comparisons created by metaphor are not meant to be taken literally. Rather, metaphors are _figurative_—they create meaning beyond the literal meanings of their words. For instance, these examples are, of course, not saying that love is actually a field of battle or that the person actually got a physical injury from love. Instead, they capture how love can be painful, a struggle, even a showdown between opponents, and—as many good metaphors do—through their comparison they make description more vivid, more relatable, or reveal new ways of seeing the world.

Meter — Meter is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of some poetry. These stress patterns are defined in groupings, called feet, of two or three syllables. A pattern of unstressed-stressed, for instance, is a foot called an _iamb_. The type and number of repeating feet in each line of poetry define that line's meter. For example, iambic pentameter is a type of meter that contains five _iambs_ per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

Metonymy — Metonymy is a type of _figurative language_ in which an object or concept is referred to not by its own name, but instead by the name of something closely associated with it. For example, in "Wall Street prefers lower taxes," the New York City street that was the original home of the New York Stock Exchange stands in for (or is a "metonym" for) the entire American financial industry.

Mood — The mood of a piece of writing is its general atmosphere or emotional complexion—in short, the array of feelings the work evokes in the reader. Every aspect of a piece of writing can influence its mood, from the _setting_ and the _imagery_ to the author's _word choice_ and _tone_. For instance, a story that begins "It was a dark and stormy night" will probably have an overall dark, ominous, or suspenseful mood.

Motif — A motif is an element or idea that recurs throughout a work of literature. Motifs, which are often collections of related symbols, help develop the central _themes_ of a book or play. For example, one of the central themes in _Romeo and Juliet_ is that love is a paradox containing many contradictions. As part of developing this theme, Shakespeare describes the experience of love by pairing contradictory, opposite symbols next to each other throughout the play, such as night and day, moon and sun, crows and swans.

All of these paired symbols fall into a broader pattern of "dark vs. light," and that broader pattern is called a motif. The motif (in this case "darkness and light") reinforces the theme: that love is paradox.

N

Narrative — A narrative is an account of connected events. Two writers describing the same set of events might craft very different narratives, depending on how they use different narrative elements, such as tone or point of view. For example, an account of the American Civil War written from the perspective of a white slaveowner would make for a very different narrative than if it were written from the perspective of a historian, or a former slave.

O

Onomatopoeia — Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech in which words evoke the actual sound of the thing they refer to or describe. The "boom" of a firework exploding, the "tick tock" of a clock, and the "ding dong" of a doorbell are all examples of onomatopoeia.

Oxymoron — An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which two contradictory terms or ideas are intentionally paired in order to make a point—particularly to reveal a deeper or hidden truth. The most recognizable oxymorons are adjective-noun pairs, as in the phrase "proud humility." But oxymorons can also occur over the course of a clause or sentence, as in "That silence after your joke was deafening." In both examples, the oxymoron joins opposite ideas to make a point (such as that an awkward silence can have a presence comparable to a loud sound).

P

Paradox — A paradox is a figure of speech that seems to contradict itself, but which, upon further examination, contains some kernel of truth or reason. Oscar Wilde's famous declaration that "Life is much too important to be taken seriously" is a paradox. At first it seems contradictory because important things are meant to be taken seriously, but Wilde's paradoxical suggestion is that, the more important something is, the more important it is not to take it seriously.

Parallelism — Parallelism is a figure of speech in which two or more elements of a sentence (or series of sentences) have the same grammatical structure. These "parallel" elements can be used to intensify the rhythm of language, or to draw a comparison, emphasize, or elaborate on an idea. The following well-known adage is an example of parallelism: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." The grammatical structures of the first and second sentences parallel each other.

Parataxis — Parataxis is a figure of speech in which words, phrases, clauses, or sentences are set next to each other so that each element is equally important. Parataxis usually involves simple sentences or phrases whose relationships to one another—relationships of logic, space, time, or cause-

and-effect—are left to the reader to interpret. Julius Caesar's declaration, "I came, I saw, I conquered," is an example of parataxis.

Parody — A parody is a work that mimics the style of another work, artist, or genre in an exaggerated way, usually for comic effect. Parodies can take many forms, including fiction, poetry, film, visual art, and more. For instance, Scary Movie and its many sequels are films that parody the conventions of the horror film genre.

Pathetic Fallacy — Pathetic fallacy occurs when a writer attributes human emotions to things that aren't human, such as objects, weather, or animals. It is often used to make the environment reflect the inner experience of a narrator or other characters. For example, if a writer mourning the death of a loved one writes that "the flowers on the grave drooped in sadness," this would be an example of pathetic fallacy, since the flowers do not, in fact, feel sad.

Pathos — Pathos, along with logos and ethos, is one of the three "modes of persuasion" in rhetoric (the art of effective speaking or writing). Pathos is an argument that appeals to an audience's emotions. When a speaker tells a personal story, presents an audience with a powerful visual image, or appeals to an audience's sense of duty or purpose in order to influence listeners' emotions in favor of adopting the speaker's point of view, he or she is using pathos .

Personification — Personification is a type of figurative language in which non-human things are described as having human attributes, as in the sentence, "The rain poured down on the wedding guests, indifferent to their plans." Describing the rain as "indifferent" is an example of personification, because rain can't be "indifferent," nor can it feel any other human emotion. However, saying that the rain feels indifferent poetically emphasizes the cruel timing of the rain. Personification can help writers to create more vivid descriptions, to make readers see the world in new ways, and to more powerfully capture the human experience of the world (since people really do often interpret the non-human entities of the world as having human traits).

Plot — Plot is the sequence of interconnected events within the story of a play, novel, film, epic, or other narrative literary work. More than simply an account of what happened, plot reveals the cause-and-effect relationships between the events that occur.

Point of View — Point of view refers to the perspective that the narrator holds in relation to the events of the story. The three primary points of view are first person, in which the narrator tells a story from their own perspective ("I went to the store"); second person, in which the narrator tells a story about you, the reader or viewer ("You went to the store"); and third person, in which the narrator tells a story about other people ("He went to the store"). Each point of view creates a different experience for the reader, because, in each point of view, different types and amounts of information are available to the reader about the story's events and characters.

Polyptoton — Polyptoton is a figure of speech that involves the repetition of words derived from the same root (such as "blood" and "bleed"). For instance, the question, "Who shall watch the watchmen?" is an example of polyptoton because it includes both "watch" and "watchmen."

Polysyndeton — Polysyndeton is a [figure of speech](#) in which coordinating conjunctions—words such as "and," "or," and "but" that join other words or clauses in a sentence into relationships of equal importance—are used several times in close succession, particularly where conjunctions would normally not be present at all. For instance, the following sentence contains polysyndeton: "We ate roast beef and squash and biscuits and potatoes and corn and cheese and cherry pie."

Protagonist — The protagonist of a story is its main character, who has the sympathy and support of the audience. This character tends to be involved in or affected by most of the choices or conflicts that arise in the narrative. For example, Snow White is the protagonist of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

Pun — A pun is a [figure of speech](#) that plays with words that have multiple meanings, or that plays with words that sound similar but mean different things. The comic novelist Douglas Adams uses both types of pun when he writes: "You can tune a guitar, but you can't tuna fish. Unless of course, you play bass." In the first sentence, Adams puns on the similar sounds of "tune a" and "tuna," while in the second he puns on the two meanings of the word "bass"—the musical instrument, and the fish.

Q

Quatrain — A quatrain is a four-line stanza of poetry. It can be a single four-line stanza, meaning that it is a stand-alone poem of four lines, or it can be a four-line stanza that makes up part of a longer poem.

R

Red Herring — A red herring is a piece of information in a story that distracts readers from an important truth, or leads them to mistakenly expect a particular outcome. Most often, the term red herring is used to refer to a "false clue"—a piece of evidence that misleads readers to believe that a crime (or other action) was committed by someone other than the actual culprit.

Refrain — In a poem or song, a refrain is a line or group of lines that regularly repeat, usually at the end of a stanza in a poem or at the end of a verse in a song. In a speech or other prose writing, a refrain can refer to any phrase that repeats a number of times within the text.

Repetition — Repetition is a literary device in which a word or phrase is repeated two or more times. Repetition occurs in so many different forms that it is usually not thought of as a single [figure of speech](#). Instead, it's more useful to think of repetition as being a category that covers a number of more specific figures of speech, all of which use repetition in different ways.

Rhetorical Question — A rhetorical question is a [figure of speech](#) in which a question is asked for a reason other than to get an answer—most commonly, it's asked to make a persuasive point. For example, if a person asks, "How many times do I have to tell you not to eat my dessert?" he or she does not want to know the exact number of times the request will need to be repeated. Rather, the speaker's goal is to emphasize his or her growing frustration and—ideally—change the dessert-thief's behavior.

Rhyme — A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words. Rhyming is particularly common in many types of poetry, especially at the ends of lines, and is a requirement in [formal verse](#). The most familiar and widely-used form of rhyming is perfect rhyme, in which the stressed syllables of the words, along with all subsequent syllables, share identical sounds, as in "pencil" and "stencil." Perfect rhyme is so common, in fact, that the word "rhyme" is often used simply to refer to perfect rhymes. However, there are actually a variety of other types of rhymes, such as imperfect rhyme or [slant rhyme](#), which also involve the repetition of similar sounds but in ways that are not quite as precise as perfect rhyme.

Rhyme Scheme — A rhyme scheme is the pattern according to which end rhymes (rhymes located at the end of lines) are repeated in works poetry. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, such that all the lines in a poem that rhyme with each other are assigned a letter, beginning with "A." For example, a four-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third line, and the second line rhymes with the fourth line has the rhyme scheme ABAB, as in the poem "Roses are red, / Violets are blue. / Shakespeare is dead? / I had no clue."

Rising Action — The rising action of a story is the section of the plot leading up to the [climax](#), in which the tension stemming from the story's central conflict grows through successive plot developments. For example, in the story of "Little Red Riding Hood," the rising action includes everything that takes place after Little Red sets off for Grandma's house—up to the moment she comes face to face with the Big Bad Wolf. In other words, most of the story is rising action, which is often case.

Round Character — A character is said to be "round" if they are lifelike or complex. Round characters typically have fully fleshed-out and multi-faceted personalities, backgrounds, desires, and motivations. Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's [The Great Gatsby](#) is a round character. A wealthy man who throws lavish parties for high-society New Yorkers, at first glance Gatsby may seem quite simple, but over the course of the book he is revealed to have a deep and complicated personal history that gives rise to some surprising motivations: his relentless pursuit of wealth and stature is driven by his desire to get close to the woman he loves.

S

Satire — Satire is the use of humor, irony, sarcasm, or ridicule to criticize something or someone. Public figures, such as politicians, are often the subject of satire, but satirists can take aim at other targets as well—from societal conventions to government policies. Satire is an entertaining form of social commentary, and it occurs in many forms: there are satirical novels, poems, and essays, as well as satirical films, shows, and cartoons. Alec Baldwin's impersonation of Donald Trump on Saturday Night Live is an example of satire.

Sestet — A sestet is a six-line [stanza](#) of poetry. It can be any six-line stanza—one that is, itself, a whole poem, or one that makes up a part of a longer poem. Most commonly, the term refers to the final six lines of a [sonnet](#).

Setting — Setting is where and when a story or scene takes place. The where

can be a real place like the city of New York, or it can be an imagined location, like Middle Earth in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Similarly, the when can be a real time period (past or present) or imagined (the future). Other aspects that determine a setting include landscape, architecture, time of day, social context, and weather. For example, the setting of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice is the upper-middle class countryside of 19th century England, while the setting of Edward Albee's The Zoo Story is a park bench in New York's Central Park.

Sibilance — Sibilance is a figure of speech in which a hissing sound is created within a group of words through the repetition of "s" sounds. An example of sibilance is: "Sadly, Sam sold seven venomous serpents to Sally and Cyrus in San Francisco."

Simile — A simile is a figure of speech that directly compares two unlike things. To make the comparison, similes most often use the connecting words "like" or "as," but can also use other words that indicate an explicit comparison. Eleanor Roosevelt's line, "A woman is like a teabag—you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water," is an example of simile. Roosevelt compares two unlike things, women and teabags, to describe how women reveal the full extent of their strength in tough situations.

Slant Rhyme — Traditionally, slant rhyme referred to a type of rhyme in which two words located at the end of a line of poetry themselves end in similar—but not identical—consonant sounds. For instance, the words "pact" and slicked" could be slant rhymed. The term has expanded over time to include additional types of similar sounds. More precisely, slant rhyme today now includes words whose last syllables contain assonance ("unpack" and "detach") as well as words whose last syllables contain final consonants that have consonance ("country" and "contra").

Soliloquy — A soliloquy is a literary device, most often found in dramas, in which a character speaks to him or herself, relating his or her innermost thoughts and feelings as if thinking aloud. In some cases, an actor might direct a soliloquy directly to the audience, such that rather than the audience "overhearing" the character's spoken thoughts, the character is actively sharing his or her thoughts with the audience. Usually, no other characters are present when one character is giving a soliloquy. If other characters are present, the play is typically—though not always—staged to indicate that these characters cannot hear the soliloquy being spoken.

Sonnet — A sonnet is a type of fourteen-line poem. Traditionally, the fourteen lines of a sonnet consist of an octave (or two quatrains making up a stanza of 8 lines) and a sestet (a stanza of six lines). Sonnets generally use a meter of iambic pentameter, and follow a set rhyme scheme. Within these general guidelines for what makes a sonnet, there are a wide variety of variations. The two most common sonnet variations are the Italian sonnet (also called a Petrarchan sonnet), and the English sonnet (also called a Shakespearean sonnet). The main difference between the Italian and English sonnet is in the rhyme schemes they use.

Spondee — A spondee is a two-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which both syllables are stressed. The word "downtown" is a spondee, with the stressed syllable of "down" followed by another stressed syllable, "town": Down-town.

Stanza — A stanza is a group of lines form a smaller unit within a poem. A single stanza is usually set apart from other lines or stanza within a poem by a double line break or a change in indentation.

Static Character — A character is said to be "static" if they do not undergo any substantial internal changes as a result of the story's major plot developments. Antagonists are often static characters, but any character in a story can be static. For instance, in Romeo and Juliet, it can be argued that Romeo is a static character: he's defined by his impulsiveness and emotionally volatility, and rather than changing these traits, he ultimately dies because of them.

Stream of Consciousness — Stream of consciousness is a style or technique of writing that tries to capture the natural flow of a character's extended thought process, often by incorporating sensory impressions, incomplete ideas, unusual syntax, and rough grammar.

Syllogism — A syllogism is a three-part logical argument, based on deductive reasoning, in which two premises are combined to arrive at a conclusion. So long as the premises of the syllogism are true and the syllogism is correctly structured, the conclusion will be true. An example of a syllogism is "All mammals are animals. All elephants are mammals. Therefore, all elephants are animals." In a syllogism, the more general premise is called the major premise ("All mammals are animals"). The more specific premise is called the minor premise ("All elephants are mammals"). The conclusion joins the logic of the two premises ("Therefore, all elephants are animals").

Symbolism — Symbolism is a literary device in which a writer uses one thing—usually a physical object or phenomenon—to represent something more abstract. A strong symbol usually shares a set of key characteristics with whatever it is meant to symbolize, or is related to it in some other way. Characters and events can also be symbolic. A famous example of a symbol in literature occurs inTo Kill a Mockingbird, when Atticus tells his children Jem and Scout that it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because mockingbirds cause no harm to anyone; they just sing. Because of these traits, mockingbirds in the novel symbolize innocence and beauty, while killing a mockingbird symbolizes an act of senseless cruelty.

Synecdoche — Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which, most often, a part of something is used to refer to its whole. For example, "The captain commands one hundred sails" is a synecdoche that uses "sails" to refer to ships—ships being the thing of which a sail is a part. A less common form of synecdoche occurs when a whole is used to refer to a part. An example of this is when the word "mortals" is used to mean humans—"mortals" technically includes all animals and plants (anything that dies), so using "mortals" to mean humans is a synecdoche that uses a category to stand in for one of its subsets.

T

Theme — A theme is a universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. One key characteristic of literary themes is their universality, which is to say that themes are ideas that not only apply to the specific characters and events of a book or play, but also express broader

truths about human experience that readers can apply to their own lives. For instance, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (about a family of tenant farmers who are displaced from their land in Oklahoma) is a book whose themes might be said to include the inhumanity of capitalism, as well as the vitality and necessity of family and friendship.

Tone — The tone of a piece of writing is its general character or attitude, which might be cheerful or depressive, sarcastic or sincere, comical or mournful, praising or critical, and so on. For instance, an editorial in a newspaper that described its subject as "not even having the guts to do the job himself," has a tone that is both informal and critical.

Tragic Hero — A tragic hero is a type of character in a tragedy, and is usually the protagonist. Tragic heroes typically have heroic traits that earn them the sympathy of the audience, but also have flaws or make mistakes that ultimately lead to their own downfall. In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Romeo is a tragic hero. His reckless passion in love, which makes him a compelling character, also leads directly to the tragedy of his death.

Trochee — A trochee is a two-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable. The word "poet" is a trochee, with the stressed syllable of "po" followed by the unstressed syllable, "et": Po-et.

U

Understatement — Understatement is a figure of speech in which something is expressed less strongly than would be expected, or in which something is presented as being smaller, worse, or lesser than it really is. Typically, understatement is used to call attention to the very quality it pretends to downplay. For instance, if you had just eaten the most delicious meal of your life and licked the plate clean, you might jokingly tell the chef that "It was edible," making use of understatement to humorously express how much you appreciated the meal.

V

Verbal Irony — Verbal irony occurs when the literal meaning of what someone says is different from—and often opposite to—what they actually mean. When there's a hurricane raging outside and someone remarks "what lovely weather we're having," this is an example of verbal irony.

Villanelle — A villanelle is a poem of nineteen lines, and which follows a strict form that consists of five tercets (three-line stanzas) followed by one quatrain (four-line stanza). Villanelles use a specific rhyme scheme of ABA for their tercets, and ABAA for the quatrain. The first and third lines of the first tercet function as repeating refrains, which alternate as the final line of each subsequent tercet and appear again as the two final lines of the concluding quatrain. Although villanelles often do use meter, they don't have to use any one type of meter in particular.

Z

Zeugma — A zeugma is a figure of speech in which one "governing" word or phrase modifies two distinct parts of a sentence. Often, the governing word will mean something different when applied to each part, as in the sentence, "He took his coat and his vacation." The verb "to take" makes sense with and governs both "coat" and "vacation," but is appropriate to each in a different way.