

## Glossary of Literary Devices, Forms, and Elements

### Devices

**Literary devices** are structures used by writers to convey their messages. When used well, literary devices help readers to appreciate and analyze a piece of writing.

#### Alliteration

The repetition of initial consonant sounds to emphasize and connect words, as well as to create an effect through sound

**Example:** Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary... While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping... – “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe

#### Allusion

A reference to a well-known person, artwork, place, event, or other piece of writing used to add meaning to a story through *intertextuality*

**Example:** The title of William Faulkner’s book *The Sound and the Fury* is from lines in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: “it is a tale/Told by an idiot/full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing.”

#### Characterization

The techniques a writer uses to create and build characters through:

- Their actions and speech
- What other characters say about them, or how they react to them
- What the author writes directly, or through a narrator

#### Dialect

Speech that reflects the pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar from a particular area, ethnic, or social class.

**Example:** "I ain' gwyne to len' no mo' money 'dout I see security. Boun' to git yo' money back a hund'd times, de preacher says! Ef I could git de ten cents back, I'd call it squah, en be glad er de chanst." –Jim, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain

### **Flashback**

Interruption of the plot line to report something that occurred before the beginning of the story

### **Figurative Language**

Language that has meaning beyond the literal; also called “figures of speech”. For example:

- Simile: a comparison of two things using the words “like” or “as”
- Metaphor: a comparison of two things essentially different but with some commonalities (metaphors do not use “like” or “as.”)
- Hyperbole: an extreme exaggeration used for emphasis or humor
- Personification: human qualities attributed to an animal, object, or idea

### **Foreshadowing**

Important hints in a story that prepare the reader for something to come

### **Imagery**

Words or phrases that appeal to the reader’s senses—sight, smell, touch, sound, taste

### **Irony**

Writing that involves surprising, interesting, or amusing contradictions or contrasts. There are two main types of irony:

- Verbal irony--words are used to suggest the opposite of their usual meaning
- Situational irony--something happens that contradicts our expectations

### **Onomatopoeia**

Using words that imitate sounds.

**Examples:** hiss, zoom, buzz, and swish

### **Point of View**

The perspective from which a story is told.

- First person: narrator is a character in the story; uses “I,” “we,” etc.
- Third person: the narrator is outside the story; uses “he,” “she,” “they”
- Third person limited: the narrator tells only what one character thinks, experiences, etc.

- Third person omniscient: the narrator can see into the minds of all characters

### Satire

Writing that humorously addresses human failings, ideas, social customs, politics, or institutions in order to change them or affect opinions about them.

**Example:** [Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"](#) is a classic example of satire, often assigned in college literature and writing classes

A more modern example is the website "McSweeney's. Here is their ["Foolproof Safety Tips for Teachers Returning to the Classroom,"](#) for example.

### Style

The distinctive way that a writer uses language, including word choice, sentence length, syntax, and complexity, as well as the use of figurative language and imagery.

### Suspense

A feeling of excitement, curiosity, or anticipation about what will happen.

### Symbol

A person, place, or thing that represents something beyond itself. A symbol is often something concrete or that represents an abstract idea.

**Example:** In Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, 'a stage' symbolizes the world and 'players' symbolize men and women:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
they have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts...

### Forms

*A **literary form**, sometimes called a genre, is a category of literature. The forms can be defined by their technique, tone, content, or length. The distinctions between genres and forms are flexible.*

### Comedy

Writing that deals with life in a humorous way, often making fun of people's mistakes

**Example:** Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*

**Fable**

A short story that often uses talking animals as the main characters and teaches an explicit moral or lesson

**Example:** Aesop's Fables

**Fantasy**

A story set in an imaginary world in which the characters usually have supernatural powers or abilities

**Example:** *Harry Potter* books, by J.K. Rowling

**Folktale**

A story originally passed from one generation to another by word of mouth. Folktales typically have a moral or lesson

**Historical Fiction**

A fictional story based on a real time and place in history, mixing fact with fiction

**Example:** *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco

**Myth**

A traditional story intended to explain some mystery of nature, religious doctrine, or cultural belief. The gods and goddesses of mythology have supernatural powers, but the human characters usually do not.

**Novel**

A book-length, fictional prose story. Important note: Novel is not a synonym for book. It is just one type of book.

**Prose**

A literary work that uses the familiar spoken form of language, sentence after sentence. Prose's opposite is poetry or verse.

**Realistic Fiction**

Writing that attempts to show life as it really is

### **Science Fiction**

Writing based on real or imaginary scientific developments and often set in the future

**Example:** *1984*, by George Orwell

### **Short Story**

Shorter than a novel, short stories typically have only a few characters and focus on one problem or conflict

**Example:** “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

### **Tall Tale**

A humorous, exaggerated story often based on the life of a real person. The exaggerations build until the character has superhuman powers.

**Example:** Paul Bunyan is an example of a character in a tall tale.

## **Elements**

*A literary element is a part of narrative fiction—a necessary feature of stories and storytelling.*

### **Action**

Everything that happens in a story.

### **Antagonist**

The person or force that works against the protagonist.

### **Character**

One of the people (or animals) in a story.

### **Climax**

The high point in the action of a story.

### **Conflict**

A problem or struggle between two opposing forces in a story. There are four basic conflicts:

- Person Against Person: A problem between characters
- Person Against Self: A problem within a character’s own mind

- Person Against Society: A problem between a character and society, school, the law, or some tradition
- Person Against Nature: A problem between a character and some element of nature--a storm, a flood, etc.

### **Dialogue**

The conversations that characters have with one another.

### **Exposition**

The part(s) of the story in which the characters are introduced, the background is explained, and the setting is described.

### **Falling Action**

The action and dialogue that follow the climax, and lead to the end of the story.

### **Mood**

The feeling a piece of literature creates—such as sadness, joy, excitement, etc.

### **Moral**

The lesson a story teaches.

### **Motif**

An element or idea that is repeated throughout a story. A motif can be expressed by a group of related symbols.

**Example:** Light and darkness are motifs developed in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

### **Narrator**

The person or character telling the story, giving background information, and providing details that support the dialogue.

### **Plot**

The action that makes up the story, following a plan called the plot line.

- Plot line: The action or series of events in a story. There are five parts to most plots: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution

**Protagonist**

The main character in a story, typically a good or heroic type, although not always.

**Resolution**

The part of the story in which the conflicts are solved and the action comes to an end. Also called the *dénouement* (pronounced *den-nyew-mah*)

**Rising Action**

The main part of the story, in which problems arise after a conflict is introduced.

**Setting**

The place and the time in which a story happens.

**Style**

The distinctive way that a writer uses language, including word choice, sentence length, arrangement, and complexity, and the use of figurative language and imagery

**Theme**

The message about life or human nature that is the focus of a story. A theme can typically be stated in one or two words.

**Example:** *Alienation* is a theme in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.