The 31 Literary Devices You Must Know

What Are Literary Devices and Why Should You Know Them?

Literary devices are **techniques that writers use to create a special and pointed effect in their writing, to convey information, or to help readers understand their writing on a deeper level.**

Often, literary devices are used in writing for emphasis or clarity. Authors will also use literary devices to get readers to connect more strongly with either a story as a whole or specific characters or themes.

So why is it important to know different literary devices and terms? Aside from helping you get good grades on your literary analysis homework, there are several benefits to knowing the techniques authors commonly use.

Being able to identify when different literary techniques are being used helps you understand the motivation behind the author's choices. For example, being able to identify symbols in a story can help you figure out why the author might have chosen to insert these focal points and what these might suggest in regard to her attitude toward certain characters, plot points, and events.

In addition, being able to identify literary devices can **make a written work's overall meaning or purpose clearer to you.** For instance, let's say you're planning to read (or re-read) _The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe_ by C.S. Lewis. By knowing that this particular book is a religious allegory with references to Christ (represented by the character Aslan) and Judas (represented by Edmund), it will be clearer to you why Lewis uses certain language to describe certain characters and why certain events happen the way they do.

Finally, literary techniques are important to know because **they make texts more interesting and more fun to read.** If you were to read a novel without knowing any literary devices, chances are you wouldn't be able to detect many of the layers of meaning interwoven into the story via different techniques.

Now that we've gone over why you should spend some time learning literary devices, let's take a look at some of the most important literary elements to know.

List of Literary Devices: 31 Literary Terms You Should Know

Below is a list of literary devices, most of which you'll often come across in both prose and poetry. We explain what each literary term is and give you an example of how it's used. This literary elements list is arranged in alphabetical order.

Allegory

An allegory is a story that is used to represent a more general message about real-life (historical) issues and/or events. It is typically an entire book, novel, play, etc.

Example: George Orwell's dystopian book _Animal Farm_ is an allegory for the events preceding the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist era in early 20th century Russia. In the story, animals on a farm practice animalism, which is essentially communism. Many characters correspond to actual historical figures: Old

Major represents both the founder of communism Karl Marx and the Russian communist leader Vladimir Lenin; the farmer, Mr. Jones, is the Russian Czar; the boar Napoleon stands for Joseph Stalin; and the pig Snowball represents Leon Trotsky.

Alliteration

Alliteration is a series of words or phrases that all (or almost all) start with the same sound. **These sounds are typically consonants to give more stress to that syllable.** You'll often come across alliteration in poetry, titles of books and poems ([Jane Austen](#) is a fan of this device, for example—just look at *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*), and tongue twisters.

Example: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." In this tongue twister, the "p" sound is repeated at the beginning of all major words.

Allusion

Allusion is when an author makes an indirect reference to a figure, place, event, or idea originating from *outside* the text. Many allusions make reference to previous works of literature or art.

Example: "Stop acting so smart—it's not like you're Einstein or something." This is an allusion to the famous real-life theoretical physicist Albert Einstein.

Anachronism

An anachronism occurs when there is an (intentional) error in the chronology or timeline of a text. This could be a character who appears in a different time period than when he actually lived, or a technology that appears before it was invented. Anachronisms are often used for **comedic effect.**

Example: A Renaissance king who says, "That's dope, dude!" would be an anachronism, since this type of language is very modern and not actually from the Renaissance period.

Anaphora

Anaphora is when a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of multiple sentences throughout a piece of writing. It's used to emphasize the repeated phrase and evoke strong feelings in the audience.

Example: A famous example of anaphora is Winston Churchill's "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" speech. Throughout this speech, he repeats the phrase "we shall fight" while listing numerous places where the British army will continue battling during WWII. He did this to rally both troops and the British people and to give them confidence that they would still win the war.

Anthropomorphism

An anthropomorphism occurs when something nonhuman, such as an animal, place, or inanimate object, behaves in a human-like way.

Example: Children's cartoons have many examples of anthropomorphism. For example, Mickey and Minnie Mouse can speak, wear clothes, sing, dance, drive cars, etc. Real mice can't do any of these things, but the two mouse characters behave much more like humans than mice.

Asyndeton

Asyndeton is when the writer leaves out conjunctions (such as "and," "or," "but," and "for") in a group of words or phrases so that the meaning of the phrase or sentence is emphasized. It is often used for speeches since sentences containing asyndeton can have a powerful, memorable rhythm.

Example: Abraham Lincoln ends the Gettysburg Address with the phrase "...and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth." By leaving out certain conjunctions, he ends the speech on a more powerful, melodic note.

Colloquialism

Colloquialism is the use of informal language and slang. It's often used by authors to **lend a sense of realism to their characters and dialogue.** Forms of colloquialism include words, phrases, and contractions that aren't real words (such as "gonna" and "ain't").

Example: "Hey, what's up, man?" This piece of dialogue is an example of a colloquialism, since it uses common everyday words and phrases, namely "what's up" and "man."

Epigraph

An epigraph is when an author inserts a famous quotation, poem, song, or other short passage or text at the beginning of a larger text (e.g., a book, chapter, etc.). **An epigraph is typically written by a different writer (with credit given) and used as a way to introduce overarching themes or messages in the work.** Some pieces of literature, such as Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, incorporate multiple epigraphs throughout.

Example: At the beginning of Ernest Hemingway's book *The Sun Also Rises* is an epigraph that consists of a quotation from poet Gertrude Stein, which reads, "You are all a lost generation," and a passage from the Bible.

Epistrophe

Epistrophe is similar to anaphora, but in this case, the repeated word or phrase appears at the *end* of successive statements. Like anaphora, it is used to evoke an emotional response from the audience.

Example: In Lyndon B. Johnson's speech, "The American Promise," he repeats the word "problem" in a use of epistrophe: "There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem."

Euphemism

A euphemism is when a more mild or indirect word or expression is used in place of another word or phrase that is considered harsh, blunt, vulgar, or unpleasant.

Example: "I'm so sorry, but he didn't make it." The phrase "didn't make it" is a more polite and less blunt way of saying that someone has died.

Flashback

A flashback is an interruption in a narrative that depicts events that have already occurred, either before the present time or before the time at which the narration takes place. This device is often used to **give the reader more background information and details about specific characters, events, plot points, and so on.**

Example: Most of the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë is a flashback from the point of view of the housekeeper, Nelly Dean, as she engages in a conversation with a visitor named Lockwood. In this story, Nelly narrates Catherine Earnshaw's and Heathcliff's childhoods, the pair's budding romance, and their tragic demise.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is when an author indirectly hints at—through things such as dialogue, description, or characters' actions—what's to come later on in the story. This device is **often used to introduce tension to a narrative.**

Example: Say you're reading a fictionalized account of Amelia Earhart. Before she embarks on her (what we know to be unfortunate) plane ride, a friend says to her, "Be safe. Wouldn't want you getting lost—or worse." This line would be an example of foreshadowing because it implies that something bad ("or worse") will happen to Earhart.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement that's not meant to be taken literally by the reader. It is often used for **comedic effect and/or emphasis.**

Example: "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse." The speaker will not literally eat an entire horse (and most likely *couldn't*), but this hyperbole emphasizes how starved the speaker feels.

Imagery

Imagery is when an author describes a scene, thing, or idea so that it appeals to our senses (taste, smell, sight, touch, or hearing). This device is often used to help the reader **clearly visualize parts of the story by creating a strong mental picture.**

Example: Here's an example of imagery taken from William Wordsworth's famous poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden Daffodils;
Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,
*Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

Irony

Irony is when a statement is used to express an opposite meaning than the one literally expressed by it. There are three types of irony in literature:

- **Verbal irony:** When someone says something but means the opposite (similar to sarcasm).

- **Situational irony:** When something happens that's the opposite of what was expected or intended to happen.

- **Dramatic irony:** When the audience is aware of the true intentions or outcomes, while the characters are *not*. As a result, certain actions and/or events take on different meanings for the audience than they do for the characters involved.

Examples:

- **Verbal irony:** One example of this type of irony can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." In this short story, a man named Montresor plans to get revenge on another man named Fortunato. As they toast, Montresor says, "And I, Fortunato—I drink to your long life." This statement is ironic because we the readers already know by this point that Montresor plans to kill Fortunato.

- **Situational irony:** A girl wakes up late for school and quickly rushes to get there. As soon as she arrives, though, she realizes that it's Saturday and there is no school.

- **Dramatic irony:** In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo commits suicide in order to be with Juliet; however, the audience (unlike poor Romeo) knows that Juliet is not actually dead—just asleep.
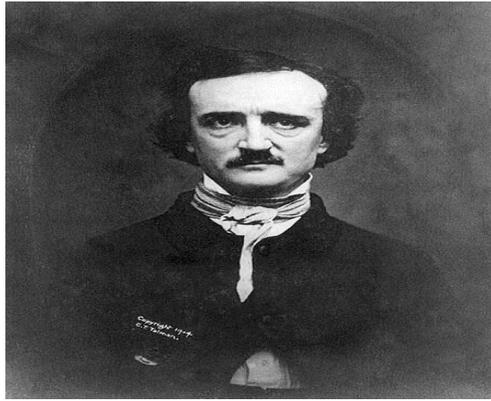
 Poe was a fan of irony—and ravens.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the comparing and contrasting of two or more different (usually opposite) ideas, characters, objects, etc. This literary device is often used to help **create a clearer picture of the characteristics of one object or idea by comparing it with those of another.**

Example: One of the most famous literary examples of juxtaposition is the opening passage from Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair …"

Malapropism

Malapropism happens when an incorrect word is used in place of a word that has a similar sound. This misuse of the word typically results in a statement that is both nonsensical and humorous; as a result, this device is commonly used in comedic writing.

Example: "I just can't wait to dance the flamingo!" Here, a character has accidentally called the flamenco (a type of dance) the flamingo (an animal).

Metaphor/Simile

Metaphors are when ideas, actions, or objects are described in non-literal terms. In short, it's when an author compares one thing to another. The two things being described usually share something in common but are unlike in all other respects.

A simile is a type of metaphor in which an object, idea, character, action, etc., is compared to another thing using the words "as" or "like."

Both metaphors and similes are often used in writing for clarity or emphasis.

Examples:

"What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun." In this line from *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo compares Juliet to the sun. However, because Romeo doesn't use the words "as" or "like," **it is not a simile—just a metaphor.**

"She is as vicious as a lion." Since this statement uses the word "as" to make a comparison between "she" and "a lion," **it is a simile.**

Metonym

A metonym is when a related word or phrase is substituted for the actual thing to which it's referring. This device is usually used for poetic or [rhetorical effect](#).

Example: "The pen is mightier than the sword." This statement, which was coined by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839, contains two examples of metonymy: "the pen" refers to "the written word," and "the sword" refers to "military force/violence."

Mood

Mood is the general feeling the writer wants the audience to have. The writer can achieve this through description, setting, dialogue, and [word choice](#).

Example: Here's a passage from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit:* "It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle. The door opened on to a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel: a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats -- the hobbit was fond of visitors." In this passage, Tolkien uses detailed description to set create a cozy, comforting mood. From the writing, you can see that the hobbit's home is well-cared for and designed to provide comfort.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is a word (or group of words) that represents a sound and **actually resembles or imitates the sound it stands for.** It is often used for dramatic, realistic, or poetic effect.

Examples: Buzz, boom, chirp, creak, sizzle, zoom, etc.

Oxymoron

An oxymoron is a combination of two words that, together, express a contradictory meaning. This device is often used for emphasis, for humor, to create tension, or to illustrate a paradox (see next entry for more information on paradoxes).

Examples: Deafening silence, organized chaos, cruelly kind, insanely logical, etc.

Paradox

A paradox is a statement that appears illogical or self-contradictory but, upon investigation, might actually be true or plausible.

Note that a paradox is different from an oxymoron: **a paradox is an entire phrase or sentence, whereas an oxymoron is a combination of just two words.**

Example: Here's a famous paradoxical sentence: "This statement is false." If the statement is true, then it isn't actually false (as it suggests). But if it's false, then the statement is true! Thus, this statement is a paradox because it is **both true and false at the same time.**

Personification

[Personification](#) is when a nonhuman figure or other abstract concept or element is described as having human-like qualities or characteristics. (Unlike anthropomorphism where non-human figures *become* human-like characters, with personification, the object/figure is simply *described* as being human-like.) Personification is used to help the reader create a clearer mental picture of the scene or object being described.

Example: "The wind moaned, beckoning me to come outside." In this example, the wind—a nonhuman element—is being described as if it is human (it "moans" and "beckons").

Repetition

Repetition is when a word or phrase is written multiple times, usually for the purpose of emphasis. It is often used in poetry (for purposes of rhythm as well).

Example: When Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote the score for the hit musical *Hamilton,* gave his speech at the 2016 Tony's, [he recited a poem he'd written](#) that included the following line:

And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside.

Satire

Satire is genre of writing that **criticizes something**, such as a person, behavior, belief, government, or society. Satire often employs irony, humor, and hyperbole to make its point.

Example: *The Onion* is a satirical newspaper and digital media company. It uses satire to parody common news features such as opinion columns, editorial cartoons, and click bait headlines.

Soliloquy

A type of monologue that's often used in dramas, a soliloquy is when a character speaks aloud to himself (and to the audience), thereby revealing his inner thoughts and feelings.

Example: In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's speech on the balcony that begins with, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" is a soliloquy, as **she is speaking aloud to herself** (remember that she doesn't realize Romeo's there listening!).

Symbolism

Symbolism refers to the use of an object, figure, event, situation, or other idea in a written work to represent something else—**typically a broader message or deeper meaning that differs from its literal meaning.**

The things used for symbolism are called "symbols," and they'll often appear multiple times throughout a text, sometimes changing in meaning as the plot progresses.

Example: In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, [the green light that sits across from Gatsby's mansion symbolizes Gatsby's hopes and dreams](#).

Synecdoche

A synecdoche is a literary device in which part of something is used to represent the whole, or vice versa. It's similar to a metonym (see above); however, **a metonym doesn't have to represent the whole—just something associated with the word used.**

Example: "Help me out, I need some hands!" In this case, "hands" is being used to refer to people (the whole human, essentially).

Tone

While mood is what the audience is supposed to feel, **tone is the writer or narrator's attitude towards a subject**. A good writer will always want the audience to feel the mood they're trying to evoke, but the

audience may not always agree with the narrator's tone, especially if the narrator is an unsympathetic character or has viewpoints that differ from those of the reader.

Example: In an essay disdaining Americans and some of the sites they visit as tourists, Rudyard Kipling begins with the line, "Today I am in the Yellowstone Park, and I wish I were dead." If you enjoy Yellowstone and/or national parks, you may not agree with the author's tone in this piece.

How to Identify and Analyze Literary Devices: 4 Tips

In order to fully interpret pieces of literature, you have to understand a lot about literary devices in the texts you read. Here are our top tips for identifying and analyzing different literary techniques:

Tip 1: Read Closely and Carefully

First off, you'll need to make sure that you're reading very carefully. **Resist the temptation to skim or skip any sections of the text.** If you do this, you might miss some literary devices being used and, as a result, will be unable to accurately interpret the text.

If there are any passages in the work that make you feel especially emotional, curious, intrigued, or just plain interested, **check that area again for any literary devices at play.**

It's also a good idea to reread any parts you thought were confusing or that you didn't totally understand on a first read-through. Doing this ensures that you have a solid grasp of the passage (and text as a whole) and will be able to analyze it appropriately.

Tip 2: Memorize Common Literary Terms

You won't be able to identify [literary elements in texts](#) if you don't know what they are or how they're used, so **spend some time memorizing the literary elements list above.** Knowing these (and how they look in writing) will allow you to more easily pinpoint these techniques in various types of written works.

Tip 3: Know the Author's Intended Audience

Knowing what kind of audience an author intended her work to have can help you figure out what types of literary devices might be at play.

For example, if you were trying to analyze a children's book, **you'd want to be on the lookout for child-appropriate devices, such as repetition and alliteration.**

Tip 4: Take Notes and Bookmark Key Passages and Pages

This is one of the most important tips to know, especially if you're reading and analyzing works for English class. As you read, take notes on the work in a notebook or on a computer. Write down any passages, paragraphs, conversations, descriptions, etc., that jump out at you or that contain a literary device you were able to identify.

You can also take notes directly in the book, if possible (but don't do this if you're borrowing a book from the library!). I recommend circling keywords and important phrases, as well as starring interesting or particularly effective passages and paragraphs.

Lastly, **use sticky notes or post-its to bookmark pages** that are interesting to you or that have some kind of notable literary device. This will help you go back to them later should you need to revisit some of what you've found for a paper you plan to write.