

Literary Terms

Accent	The way a character would sound if he/she spoke
Alliteration	The repetition of a consonant sound, usually at the beginning of two or more words in a line of verse. “ D oom is d ark and d eeper than any sea- d ingle.”—W.H. Auden
Allusion	A reference to some person, place, or event with literary, historical, or geographical significance.
Ambiguity	When a word or phrase can have more than one meaning.
Analogy	A comparison of ideas or objects which are essentially different but which are alike in one significant way.
Apostrophe	Direct address to someone/something either present or absent.
Aphorism	A brief saying embodying a moral, a concise statement of a principle given in pointed words; a wise saying that bears repetition; a bumper sticker saying. “Imitation is suicide”—Emerson
Aside	A short speech or remark by a character in drama, directed at the audience or another character, which by convention is supposed to be inaudible by the other characters on stage.
Assonance	Repetition of non-initial (internal) vowel sounds (out of sight, out of mind; mad as a hatter).
Ballad	A narrative that has sprung from an unknown source and has been transmitted by word of mouth (often altered in the process); was intended to be sung. It is usually about a single person or event and often mourns someone’s death or misfortune.
Blank verse	Unrhymed verse that is most commonly written in iambic pentameter. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou are more lovely and more temperate”—Shakespeare
Caesura	A pause or break within a line of poetry, usually dictated by the natural rhythm of language.
Catharsis	Purging of emotions usually associated with tragedy.
Chiasmus	Figure of Speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in order to make a larger point; clauses display inverted parallelism. Greek = “to shape like the letter X” “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country”—J.F.K.
Connotation	The implied or suggested meaning of a word or expression through emotional, literary, or sound association.
Consonance	Repetition of final consonant sounds (struts and frets; odds and ends).
Contrast	A strong difference between ideas/themes/characters etc.
Denotation	The literal, “dictionary” meaning of a word or expression.
Dialect	Non-standard use of words and grammar, spoken by members of a regional group, nation, or social class.
Dialogue	A conversation
Didactic	A work designed to present a moral, religious, political or some other sort of doctrine or teaching.
Elegy	A poem of subjective or meditative nature, especially one of grief.
Elision	When one words runs into another
Enjambment	A line of verse in which the natural pause does not coincide with the end of the line; a “run-on” to the next line.
Epic	A long narrative poem about heroic individuals performing acts of great consequence.
End Rhyme	The rhyming of words at the ends of lines of verse.

Episodic	A work characterized by loosely connected scenes.
Euphemism	A mild and inoffensive word or expression used in place of that which is harsh or unpleasant. "To pass away" is a euphemism for "to die."
Figurative Language	Language used in such a way as to force words out of their literal meanings and, by emphasizing their connotations, to bring new insight to the subject described.
Figures of Speech	The general term for a number of literary and poetic devices in which words or groups of words are used in order to say something other than the literal meaning of words, and often to create images in the readers mind. Examples include metaphor (including metonymy and synecdoche), simile, personification, etc,
Foot	A literal division consisting of one accented syllable and all unaccented syllables associated with it.
Free verse	Verse which does not conform to any fixed pattern. Poetic devices such as rhyme and rhythm occur only incidentally.
Heroic couplet	A pair of rhymed verse lines in iambic pentameter
Hubris	Greek concept of excessive pride.
Hyperbole	A figure of speech employing obvious exaggeration, for example: "His mind was a million miles away."
Iamb	Two-syllable metrical foot consisting of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. (u /)
Iambic Pentameter	A metrical line of five iambs, commonly used in Shakespearean and Miltonic verse. (u / u / u / u / u /) "Two households, both alike in dignity" "The course of true love never did run smooth" --Shakespeare
Iambic Tetrameter	A metrical line of verse consisting of four iambs. "A waste of breath the years behind In balance with this life, this death." --W.B. Yeats
Idiom / Colloquialism	A language or manner of speaking that is typical of a particular region or group of people.
Imagery	A general term for any representation of a particular thing with its attendant and evocative detail, usually appealing to the five senses. It may be a metaphor, a simile, or a straightforward description.
Internal rhyme	Rhyming of words within, rather than at the end of, lines.
Indentation	Writing away from the margin.
Irony	<i>Situational Irony</i> : A mode of expression in which the author says one thing and means the opposite. The term also applies to a situation or the outcome of an event (or series of events) that is contrary to what is naturally hoped or expected. <i>Dramatic Irony</i> : Theatrical device where the audience understands or is more aware than a character on the stage
Juxtaposition	The placement of things side by side to bring out a meaning that is not initially evident when they stand alone (especially for contrast).
Lineation	Arrangement in lines
Litotes	Understatement for emphasis. "Running a marathon in two hours is no small accomplishment" The fountain was "not without flowers"—Horace
Lyric	Any short poem that seems to be especially musical while expressing, in most instances, the poet's clearly revealed thoughts and feelings.
Metaphor	An implied comparison between two things: "Out, out brief candle, life's but a walking shadow." --Shakespeare
Meter	Any regular pattern of rhythm.
Metonymy	A figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of

	another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated. Ex. "The White House" has decided to remain silent on the issue." White House=President
Monologue	A poem or passage in a drama, in which a single character or actor speaks alone and, usually, at some length about his internal thoughts.
Moral	The lesson taught by a literary work.
Motif	A recurrent idea in literature; a particular theme or character that reappears in a single work or in several works.
Narrative Poem	A story told in verse form.
Octave	First eight lines of a sonnet, particularly the Italian sonnet.
Ode	A lengthy, dignified lyric poem or song expressing exalted or enthusiastic emotion, often about some person or occasion worthy of esteem.
Onomatopoeia	Words that sound like their meaning "boom" "roar" "snap"
Oxymoron	Two contradictory terms put together for effect.
Paradox	A statement which seems on the surface contradictory, yet if interpreted figuratively, it involves an element of truth. "Much madness is divinest sense"—Dickinson "So foul and fair a day I have not seen"—Shakespeare
Parody	A humorous imitation or burlesque of a serious piece of literature or art.
Pastoral	Literature that deals with rural life, usually in a sympathetic fashion.
Pathetic fallacy	When the surroundings reflect the mood of the characters. Attribution of sentimental feelings to non-human objects.
Pathos	That quality in prose or poetry that evokes in the reader a feeling of pity and compassion. (pathos = Greek for "feelings/emotions")
Pentameter	Metrical line of five feet.
Personification	A figure of speech in which places, things, animals, or ideas are endowed with human qualities. "The hills united their bonnets"—Emily Dickinson
Perspective	A way of looking at something
Picaresque	Loosely woven adventure story, usually with a type of journey involved.
Proverb	A brief, traditional saying.
Pun	A play on words; the use of a word or words that are similar in form or sound different in meaning. "He crashed his checks and checked his cash."
Qualeism	A statement that is really cool and/or awesome
Quatrain	A line or a group of lines that is repeated at the end of each stanza in a poem; for example, the refrain "in the dust, in the cool tombs" closes each of the four stanzas of Carl Sandburg's poem.
Repetition	Words, phrases, sentences or structures repeated for emphasis
Rhetorical Question	A question that is asked for its dramatic effect and to which no answer is expected.
Rhyme	Exact repetition of sounds in at least the final accented syllables of two or more words. Different types inc. end rhyme, full rhyme, internal rhyme
Rhythm	A series of stresses or emphasis in a group of words, arranged so that the reader expects a similar series to follow. These moments of emphasis may be of grammatical structure, meaning, imagery, or feeling, as well as of sound.
Satire	Any piece of writing that criticizes manners, individuals, or political and social institutions by holding them up for ridicule.
Scansion	The analysis of the rhythmic patterns of verse: its arrangement of accented and unaccented syllables.
Sestet	The concluding six lines of a sonnet, particularly the Italian sonnet.
Simile	A comparison between two things using "like" or "as," and sometimes "as,"

	"than," "seems" or "as if" (Frost's favorite).
Slant Rhyme	Shares the same vowel sound but different ending consonant sounds (An "almost rhyme")
Soliloquy	A dramatic convention that allows a character to speak his thoughts aloud to the audience.
Sonnet	A poem with a traditional form of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. "If it's square, it's a sonnet" –Thomas Foster
Spondee	Metrical foot of two accented syllables. (/ /)
Standard English	Standard use of English words and grammar
Stanza	A group of lines of verse, generally four or more, arranged according to a fixed pattern.
Symbol	An object that stands for, or represents, an idea, belief, superstition, social or political institution, etc. A pair of scales, for example, is often a symbol for justice.
Synecdoche	A figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole, for example, "All hands on deck" hands = crew
Trochee	Two-syllable metrical foot consisting of one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. (/ u)
Tone	The feeling conveyed by the author's attitude towards his subject and the particular way in which he writes about it; the revelation of an author's feelings through his choice of words and images and through emphasis; for example: sarcastic, sentimental, flippant.