

## Literary Terms: A Quick Review

For each term, read the definition and the example provided. Then on a separate piece of paper practice writing your own examples.

### Sample:

***ad misericordiam*:** An appeal to the audience's sympathy; an attempt to persuade another, using a hard-luck story rather than logic or reason. For example, if you slapped your little sister and then told your parents you did it because you're under a lot of stress at school, that would be pleading *ad misericordiam*.

### Example:

"Oh, Mom, everyone in my class is going to the party. Do you want me to be left out?"

**alliteration:** The repetition of accented consonant sounds at the beginning of words that are close to each other, usually to create an effect, rhythm, or emphasis.

Big, bad, barking dog. The noisy gnat knit nine sweaters. (Note in the latter example that the *n* sound is the same, although the spelling is not.)

**allusion:** A reference in literature or in art to previous literature, history, mythology, pop culture/current events, or the Bible.

"It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew."  
(Tennyson, "Ulysses")

Here Tennyson alludes to the Happy Isles, or Elysium, where warriors, according to Greek mythology, spent the afterlife. He also makes an allusion to Achilles, a heroic leader in the Trojan War. Note that the title of the poem, "Ulysses," is an allusion in itself, this time to the hero of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus—aka Ulysses.

**ambiguity:** Quality of being intentionally unclear. Events or situations that are ambiguous can be interpreted in more than one way. This device is especially beneficial in poetry, as it tends to grace the work with the richness and depth of multiple meanings.

"Thou still unravished bride of quietness."  
(Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn")

Does “still” mean that she is dead, that she never was alive, that the vase still exists, or that she is still virginal?

**anachronism:** An element in a story that is out of its time frame; sometimes used to create a humorous or jarring effect. Beware: This can also occur because of careless or poor research on the author’s part.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare mentions caps, which the Romans did not wear. Or, imagine Shakespeare’s Romeo (from *Romeo and Juliet*, which is set in the 16th century) riding to Mantua in a Porsche.

**analogy:** An analogy clarifies or explains an unfamiliar concept or object, or one that cannot be put into words, by comparing it with one which is familiar. By explaining the abstract in terms of the concrete, an analogy may force the reader to think more critically about a concept. Analogies tend to appear more often in prose than in poetry. They enliven writing by making it more interesting, entertaining, and understandable. Similes and metaphors are two specific types of analogies.

“Knowledge always desires increase: it is like fire, which must first be kindled by some external agent, but which will afterwards propagate itself.”—Samuel Johnson

The island in *Lord of the Flies* before the boys arrived is analogous to the Garden of Eden.

**analysis:** The process of examining the components of a literary work.

An analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* might make reference to the novel’s Gothic setting, elements of suspense, the author’s style, romantic and feminist themes, the use of symbolism and figurative language, and the novel’s religious aspects.

**anapest:** The poetic foot (measure) that follows the pattern unaccented, unaccented, accented. The poet is usually trying to convey a rollicking, moving rhythm with this pattern.

“I am monarch of all I survey.”  
(William Cowper, “The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk”)

**anecdote:** A short and often personal story used to emphasize a point, to develop a character or a theme, or to inject humor.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* there is the anecdote about Tom Buchanan’s liaison with the chambermaid during his honeymoon that speaks volumes about his character.

**antagonist:** A character who functions as a resisting force to the goals of the protagonist. The antagonist is often a villain, but in a case where the protagonist is evil (for example, in *Macbeth*), the antagonist may be virtuous (i.e., Macduff).

Iago from *Othello* and Tybalt from *Romeo and Juliet* are antagonists.

**antecedent:** The word or phrase to which a pronoun refers. It often precedes a pronoun in prose (but not necessarily in poetry).

“O that this too, too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew.”  
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

*Flesh* is the antecedent; *itself* is the pronoun that refers to it.

**anticlimax:** An often disappointing, sudden end to an intense situation.

Many critics consider Jim’s capture and rescue in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* an example of an anticlimax.

**antihero:** A protagonist who carries the action of the literary piece but does not embody the classic characteristics of courage, strength, and nobility.

Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Yossarian in *Catch-22*, and Meursault in *The Stranger* are considered to be antiheroes.

**antithesis:** A concept that is directly opposed to a previously presented idea.

In the popular *Star Wars* movie trilogy, Darth Vader, of the dark side of the Force, represents ideas that are diametrically opposed (that is, antithetical) to those of the Jedi Knights.

**aphorism:** A terse statement that expresses a general truth or moral principle; sometimes considered a folk proverb.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” or Benjamin Franklin’s “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

**apostrophe:** A rhetorical (not expecting an answer) figure of direct address to a person, object, or abstract entity.

John Donne’s sonnet, “Death, Be Not Proud,” or Antony’s address to the dead Caesar in *Julius Caesar*.

**apotheosis:** Elevating someone to the level of a god.

Many people revere Martin Luther King. Helen of Troy is considered the apotheosis of beauty.

**archetype:** A character, situation, or symbol that is familiar to people from all cultures because it occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore.

*Character:*

The archetypal gunslinger, having been forced to kill once more, rides off into the sunset, leaving behind a town full of amazed and awestruck citizens.

*Situation:*

Just when it looks like the battle will be won by the enemy, reinforcements arrive.

*Symbol:*

the dove of peace

**aside:** A short speech or remark made by an actor to the audience rather than to the other characters, who do not hear him or her. Shakespeare's characters often share their thoughts with us in this way.

In a room full of people, Macbeth uses an aside to tell the audience his plans: "To the castle of Macduff I will surprise . . ."

**assonance:** The repeated use of a vowel sound.

How now brown cow. Twice five miles in a mazy motion.

**attitude:** The author's feelings toward the topic he or she is writing about. Attitude, often used interchangeably with "tone," is usually revealed through word choice.

In her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee uses an innocent and unjaded child narrator to express her own attitude toward prejudice. In Liam O'Flaherty's *The Sniper*, the narrator's objectivity and ambiguity in referring to the men as "brothers" underscore the author's attitude toward the horror of civil war.

**aubade:** A poem or song about lovers who must leave one another in the early hours of the morning.

"Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings,  
And Phoebus 'gins arise,  
His steeds to water at those springs  
On chaliced flowers that lies;  
And winking Mary-buds begin  
To ope their golden eyes;  
With every thing that pretty is,  
My lady sweet, arise:  
Arise, arise!"

(Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*)

**ballad:** A folk song or poem passed down orally that tells a story which may be derived from an actual incident or from legend or folklore. Usually composed in four-line stanzas (quatrains) with the rhyme scheme *abcb*. Ballads often contain a refrain.

*Barbara Allen* (anonymous)

**blank verse:** Unrhymed poetry of iambic pentameter (five feet of two syllables each—unstressed and stressed); favored technique of Shakespeare.

"When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,  
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd . . ."  
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

**cacophony:** Harsh, discordant sounds, unpleasant to the ear; the sound of nails scratching a blackboard is cacophonous. Cacophony is used by poets for effect.

"And squared and stuck there squares of soft white chalk,  
And with a fish-tooth, scratched a moon on each,"  
(Browning, "Caliban Upon Setebos")

Notice all the *cacophonous* sounds in these two lines: *sq, st, ck, ft, t, k, sc, ch*.

**carpe diem:** Latin for "seize the day"; frequent in 16th- and 17th-century court poetry. Expresses the idea that you only go around once; refers to the modern saying that "life is not a dress rehearsal."

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today,  
Tomorrow will be dying.  
(Robert Herrick, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time")

**catharsis:** In his *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote that a tragedy should "arouse pity and fear in such a way as to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions in the audience." The term refers to an emotional cleansing or feeling of relief.

Many cry at the end of *Gone With the Wind*, empathizing with Scarlett O'Hara and her losses. They are experiencing catharsis.

**chiasmus:** The opposite of parallel construction; inverting the second of two phrases that would otherwise be in parallel form.

parallel construction: "I like the idea; I don't like its execution."  
chiasmus: "I like the idea; its execution, I don't."

**colloquial:** Of or relating to slang or regional dialect, used in familiar everyday conversation. In writing, an informal style that reflects the way people spoke in a distinct time and/or place.

Pap's speech in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is rife with colloquialisms:

"Well, I'll learn her how to meddle. And looky here—you drop that school, you hear? I'll learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better'n what HE is."

"Here's what the law does: The law takes a man worth six thousand dollars and up'ards, and jams him into an old trap of a cabin like this,

and lets him go round in clothes that ain't fitten for a hog. They call that govment!"

**comic relief:** Humor that provides a release of tension and breaks up a more serious episode.

Some of the nurse's speeches in *Romeo and Juliet* and the grave-digging scene in *Hamlet* provide perfectly timed comic relief.

**conceit:** A far-fetched comparison between two seemingly unlike things; an extended metaphor that gains appeal from its unusual or extraordinary comparison.

"Oh stay! three lives in one flea spare  
Where we almost, yea more than married are.  
This flea is you and I, and this  
Our marriage-bed and marriage-temple is."  
(John Donne, "The Flea")

Donne begs his beloved not to kill the flea that has bitten both of them because their blood is mingled in the flea, representing three lives (theirs and the flea's). The conceit is that he compares the flea to a marriage-bed and a temple.

**connotation:** Associations a word calls to mind. *House* and *home* have the same denotation, or dictionary meaning—a place to live. But *home* connotes warmth and security; *house* does not. The more connotative a piece is, the less objective its interpretation becomes. Careful, close reading often reveals the writer's intent.

Some very connotative words are *light*, *fire*, *mother*, *father*, *rose*, *water*, *home*.

**consonance:** Same consonant sound in words with different vowel sounds.

The following word groups reflect consonance: *work*, *stack*, *ark*, *belong*, *among*.

**conventional character:** A character with traits that are expected or traditional. Heroes are expected to be strong, adventurous, and unafraid. Conventional female characters often yearn for a husband, or once married, stay at home and care for their children; conventional men are adventurers. If married, they tend to "wear the pants in the family."

Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a conventional wife and mother who wants to see her daughters married.

**couplet:** Two successive rhyming lines of the same number of syllables, with matching cadence.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast: / Man never is, but always to be blest." (Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*)

**dactyl:** Foot of poetry with three syllables, one stressed and two short or unstressed. Think of the waltz rhythm.

"Just for a handful of silver he left us."  
(Robert Browning, "The Lost Leader")

"This is the forest primeval. / The murmuring pines and the hemlocks."  
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline*)

**denotation:** The dictionary or literal meaning of a word or phrase. Compare to connotation.

*Thin's* denotation is "not fat." *Skinny* and *scrawny* also refer to someone or something that is not fat, but they imply or connote "underfed" or "unattractively thin."

**dénouement:** The outcome or clarification at the end of a story or play; the winding down from climax to ending.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the dénouement occurs after Dimmesdale's death.

**deus ex machina:** Literally, when the gods intervene at a story's end to resolve a seemingly impossible conflict. Refers to an unlikely or improbable coincidence; a cop-out ending.

In Greek mythology, Medea murders her children and is whisked away by a chariot of the gods. In "Sleeping Beauty," the handsome prince kisses the beautiful princess and she awakes from her seemingly eternal slumber.

**diction:** The deliberate choice of a style of language for a desired effect or tone. Words chosen to achieve a particular effect that is formal, informal, or colloquial.

The diction of Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* is formal, whereas Mark Twain's diction is often highly informal.

Hawthorne: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison."

Twain: "While Tom was eating his supper, and stealing sugar as opportunity offered, Aunt Polly asked him questions that were full of guile, and very deep—for she wanted to trap him into damaging revelations."

**didactic:** A didactic story, speech, essay or play is one in which the author's primary purpose is to instruct, teach or moralize.

Many of Aesop's fables fall into this category, ending with moral lessons. For example, "Gratitude and grief go not together" is the moral at the end of "The Wolf and the Crane."

**distortion:** An exaggeration or stretching of the truth to achieve a desired effect.

Gregor Samsa waking up as a large insect in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a distortion of reality.

**enjambment:** In poetry, the running over of a sentence from one verse or stanza into the next without stopping at the end of the first.

I like to see it lap the Miles  
And lick the Valleys up—  
And stop to feed itself at Tanks—  
*And then, prodigious, step*

*Around a Pile of Mountains*  
(Emily Dickinson, "I like to see it lap the Miles")

**epigram:** A short, clever poem with a witty turn of thought.

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,  
A medley of extemporanea;  
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;  
And I am Marie of Roumania.  
(Dorothy Parker, "Comment")

**epigraph:** A brief quotation found at the beginning of a literary work, reflective of theme.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* opens with the epigraph "Sixty Million and more," which says volumes about slavery. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the following lines from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" appear at the beginning of the book, foretelling the story's theme:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

**epiphany:** Eureka! A sudden flash of insight. A startling discovery and/or appearance; a dramatic realization.

Jocasta's sudden realization that her husband is her son is an epiphanous moment in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.



**epistolary novel:** A novel in letter form written by one or more of the characters. The novelist can use this technique to present varying first-person points of view and does not need a narrator.

C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are epistolary works.

**essay:** A short composition on a single topic expressing the view or interpretation of the writer on that topic. The word comes from the French *essayer* ("to attempt," "to try"). It is one of the oldest prose forms.

Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is one of the most famous essays ever written.

**euphemism:** Substitution of an inoffensive word or phrase for another that would be harsh, offensive, or embarrassing. A euphemism makes something sound better than it is but is usually more wordy than the original.

"He passed on" rather than "he died." A dishwasher calling herself a "utensil maintenance technician."

**euphony:** The quality of a pleasant or harmonious sound of a word or group of words as an intended effect. Often achieved through long vowels and some consonants, such as "sh."

"The gray sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low"  
(Robert Browning, "Meeting at Night")

**farce:** A kind of comedy that depends on exaggerated or improbable situations, physical disasters, and sexual innuendo to amuse the audience. Many situation comedies on television today might be called farces.

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Brandon Thomas' *Charley's Aunt*, Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway*

**figurative language:** Unlike literal expression, figurative language uses *figures of speech* such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, personification, and hyperbole. Figurative language appeals to one's senses. Most poetry contains figurative language.

Sweet daughter of a rough and stormy sire,  
Hoar Winter's blooming child; delightful Spring!  
Whose unshorn locks with leaves  
And swelling buds are crowned . . .  
(Anna Laetitia Barbauld, "Ode to Spring")

**first person:** A character in the story tells the story, using the pronoun *I*. This is a limited point of view since the narrator can relate only events that he or she sees or is told about.

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is written in first person. The narrator is Nick Carraway:

"Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets. . . . I saw him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without."

**flashback:** Interruption of a narrative by the introduction of an earlier event or by an image of a past experience.

Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* uses this technique at crucial points to help the reader better understand John Wade and what happened in the past to make him the way he is now.

**flat character:** A simple, one-dimensional character who remains the same, and about whom little or nothing is revealed throughout the course of the work. Flat characters may serve as symbols of types of people, similar to stereotypical characters.

Mrs. Micawber, in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, is the ever-loyal wife who repeatedly says "I never will desert Mr. Micawber." Mme. Ratignolle is portrayed as a Mother Earth figure throughout Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Another example is the morally reprehensible Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*.

**foil:** A character whose contrasting personal characteristics draw attention to, enhance, or contrast with those of the main character. A character who, by displaying opposite traits, emphasizes certain aspects of another character.

Fortinbras is Hamlet's foil; Tybalt serves as Romeo's.

**foreshadowing:** Foreshadowing hints at what is to come. It is sometimes noticeable only in hindsight, but usually it is obvious enough to set the reader wondering.

The rosebush at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* foreshadows some of the tale; so does the picture of David and Bathsheba in Dimmesdale's bedroom.

**free verse:** Poetry that does not have regular rhythm or rhyme.

On a flat road runs the well-train'd runner,  
He is lean and sinewy with muscular legs,  
He is thinly clothed, he leans forward as he runs,  
With lightly closed fists and arms partially rais'd.  
(Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*)

**genre:** The category into which a piece of writing can be classified—poetry, prose, drama. Each genre has its own conventions and standards.

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a poem; Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is prose; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is a drama.

**heroic couplet:** In poetry, a rhymed couplet written in iambic pentameter (five feet, each with one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable).

Alexander Pope used this form almost exclusively in his poetry:  
 "The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,  
 With loads of learned lumber in his head."  
 (*An Essay on Criticism*)

**hubris:** Insolence, arrogance, or pride. In Greek tragedy, the protagonist's hubris is usually the tragic flaw that leads to his or her downfall.

The swaggering protagonist of *Oedipus Rex* is ultimately made to suffer because of his hubris. He defies moral laws by unwittingly killing his father and marrying his mother, and then bragging about how his father's murderer will be punished.

**hyperbole:** An extreme exaggeration for literary effect that is not meant to be interpreted literally.

"A greenhouse arrived from Gatsby's."  
 (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*)

By using this hyperbolic term to describe the abundance of flowers sent to Nick's, where Gatsby would soon meet Daisy, Fitzgerald conveys the extent of Gatsby's anxiety about seeing Daisy and his wish for everything to be perfect.

**iambic pentameter:** A five-foot line made up of an unaccented followed by an accented syllable. It is the most common metric foot in English-language poetry.

"When I have fears that I may cease to be  
 Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain."  
 (John Keats, "When I Have Fears")

**imagery:** Anything that affects or appeals to the reader's senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell.

Wait for a while, then slip downstairs  
 And bring us up some chilled white wine,  
 And some blue cheese, and crackers, and some fine  
 Ruddy-skinned pears.  
 (Richard Wilbur, "A Late Aubade")

**in medias res:** In literature, a work that begins in the middle of the story.

The *Odyssey*, *Medea*, and *Oedipus Rex* all begin *in medias res*.

**interior monologue:** A literary technique used in poetry and prose that reveals a character's unspoken thoughts and feelings. An interior monologue may be presented directly by the character, or through a narrator. (See also *stream of consciousness*.)

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
(Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess")

**internal rhyme:** A rhyme that is within the line, rather than at the end. The rhyming may also be within two lines, but again, each rhyming word will be within its line, rather than at the beginning or end.

*Within the line:*  
A **narrow fellow** in the grass  
Occasionally rides;  
(Emily Dickinson, "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass")

*Within two lines:*  
We had gone back and forth all **night** on the ferry.  
It was bare and **bright** and smelled like a stable—  
(Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Recuerdo*)

**inversion:** A switch in the normal word order, often used for emphasis or for rhyme scheme.

Strong he was.

**Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet:** Fourteen-line poem divided into two parts: the first is eight lines (*abbaabba*) and the second is six (*cdecde* or *cdecde*).

**From *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

	Rhyme Scheme
The first time that the sun rose on thine oath	a
To love me, I looked forward to the moon	b
To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon	b
And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.	a
Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;	a
And, looking on myself, I seemed not one	b
For such man's love!—more like an out-of-tune	b
Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth	a
To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,	c
Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.	d
I did not wrong myself so, but I placed	c
A wrong on <i>thee</i> . For perfect strains may float	d
'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced—	c
And great souls, at one stroke, may do and dote.	d

**litotes:** Affirmation of an idea by using a negative understatement. The opposite of hyperbole.

He was not averse to taking a drink.  
She is no saint.

**lyric poem:** A fairly short, emotionally expressive poem that expresses the feelings and observations of a single speaker.

He clasps the crag with crookèd hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.  
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.  
(Tennyson, "The Eagle")

**metamorphosis:** A radical change in a character, either physical or emotional.

In Kafka's aptly titled *The Metamorphosis*, a man is transformed overnight into a large bug. In Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a gentle doctor experiences repeated violent shifts in personality after imbibing a potent solution.

**metaphor:** A figure of speech which compares two dissimilar things, asserting that one thing *is* another thing, not just that one is *like* another. Compare with analogy and simile.

"Life's but a walking shadow"  
(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

**meter:** The rhythmical pattern of a poem. Just as all words are pronounced with accented (or stressed) syllables and unaccented (or unstressed) syllables, lines of poetry are assigned similar rhythms. English poetry uses five basic metric feet.

iamb—unstressed, stressed: *before*  
trochee—stressed, unstressed: *weather*  
anapest—unstressed, unstressed, stressed: *contradict*  
dactyl—stressed, unstressed, unstressed: *satisfy*  
spondee—equally stressed: One-word spondees are very rare in the English language; a spondaic foot is almost always two words, for example, "Woe, woe for England . . ."

**metonymy:** A figure of speech that replaces the name of something with a word or phrase closely associated with it. Similar to synecdoche (many authors do not distinguish between the two).

"the White House" instead of "the president" or "the presidency";  
"brass" to mean "military officers"; "suits" instead of "supervisors"

**myth:** A story, usually with supernatural significance, that explains the origins of gods, heroes, or natural phenomena. Although myths are fictional stories, they contain deeper truths, particularly about the nature of humankind.

The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone explains the seasons.

**narrative poem:** A poem that tells a story.

Noyes's *The Highwayman*; Longfellow's *Paul Revere's Ride*

**near, off, or slant rhyme:** A rhyme based on an imperfect or incomplete correspondence of end syllable sounds.

Common in the work of Emily Dickinson, for instance:  
 It was not death, for I stood up,  
 And all the dead lie down.  
 It was not night, for all the bells  
 Put out their tongues for noon.  
 ("It Was Not Death")

**onomatopoeia:** Words that imitate sounds.

*meow, clip-clop, whirr, clang, pop, bang*

**oxymoron:** A figure of speech that combines two contradictory words, placed side by side: *bitter sweet, wise fool, living death.*

Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,  
 Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!  
 (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

**parable:** A short story illustrating a moral or religious lesson.

The story of the Good Samaritan and the tale of the Prodigal Son are both parables.

**paradox:** A statement or situation that at first seems impossible or oxymoronic, but which solves itself and reveals meaning.

"Fair is foul and foul is fair"  
 (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

"The Child is father of the Man."  
 (Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold")

"My only love sprung from my only hate!"  
 (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

**parallelism:** The repeated use of the same grammatical structure in a sentence or a series of sentences. This device tends to emphasize what

is said and thus underscores the meaning. Can also refer to two or more stories within a literary work that are told simultaneously and that reinforce one another.

*In a sentence:* "I came, I saw, I conquered." (Plutarch)  
We went to school, to the mall, and then to a movie.

*In a literary work:* Presented alternately within *King Lear* are the stories of both King Lear and his daughters, and Gloucester and his sons.

**parody:** A comical imitation of a serious piece with the intent of ridiculing the author or his work.

Fielding's *Shamela* is, in large part, a parody of Richardson's overly sentimental *Pamela*. Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* parodies the epic poem. Epic poetry, especially the work of John Milton, which focused mainly on Christian parables, was particularly popular at the time Pope wrote this piece. *The Rape of the Lock* is about the foibles of 18th-century high society—hardly traditional "epic" material!

**pastoral:** A poem, play, or story that celebrates and idealizes the simple life of shepherds and shepherdesses. This highly conventional form was popular until the late 18th century. The term has also come to refer to an artistic work that portrays rural life in an idyllic or idealistic way.

Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Milton's *Lycidas*

**pathos:** The quality of a literary work or passage which appeals to the reader's or viewer's emotions—especially pity, compassion, and sympathy. Pathos is different from the pity one feels for a tragic hero in that the pathetic figure seems to suffer through no fault of his or her own.

King Lear is a tragic figure, but Cordelia's situation represents pathos. Hamlet is tragic, Ophelia pathetic. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet and Desdemona represent pathos.

**periodic sentence:** A sentence that delivers its point at the end; usually constructed as a subordinate clause followed by a main clause.

At the piano she practiced scales.

**personification:** The attribution of human characteristics to an animal or to an inanimate object.

Wordsworth's daffodils "tossing their heads in a sprightly dance" in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"

**point of view:** Perspective of the speaker or narrator in a literary work.

First person: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*:

"Raw and chill was the winter morning: my teeth chattered as I hastened down the drive."

(The story is told by Jane herself.)

Third person limited: Bret Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat":

"Mr. Oakhurst seldom troubled himself with sentiment, still less with propriety; but he had a vague idea that the situation was not fortunate."

(The story is told from Mr. Oakhurst's point of view, but through a narrator.)

Third person omniscient: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

"Elizabeth related to Jane the next day what had passed between Mr. Wickham and herself."

(The story is told by an all-seeing narrator.)

**protagonist:** The main or principal character in a work; often considered the hero or heroine.

Hamlet, Macbeth, Oedipus, Anna Karenina, and Tom Sawyer are the protagonists of the eponymous works in which they appear.

**pun:** Humorous play on words that have several meanings or words that sound the same but have different meanings.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio's "You will find me a grave man" refers both to the seriousness of his words and the fact that he is dying.

**quatrain:** Four-line stanza.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare  
To die, and leave their children free,  
Bid Time and Nature gently spare  
The shaft we raise to them and thee.  
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn")

**refrain:** Repetition of a line, stanza, or phrase.

In Poe's "The Raven," the following phrase appears as a refrain: "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'"

**repetition:** A word or phrase used more than once to emphasize an idea.

Coleridge's "Water, water everywhere" in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* serves to emphasize the sense of frustration that the poet seeks to convey in describing a situation where a man is dying of thirst while surrounded by water.



**rhetorical question:** A question with an obvious answer, so no response is expected; used for emphasis or to make a point.

“Were it not madness to deny  
To live because we’re sure to die?”  
(Etherege, “To a Lady Asking Him How Long He Would Love Her”)

**satire:** The use of humor to ridicule and expose the shortcomings and failings of society, individuals, and institutions, often in the hope that change and reform are possible.

Swift’s suggestion in “A Modest Proposal” that Irish babies be butchered and sold as food to wealthy English landlords in order to alleviate poverty in Ireland is a classic example of satire because Swift was really savagely attacking the English for exploiting the Irish. Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* satirizes Victorian social hypocrisy. If you’ve ever watched “Saturday Night Live,” you’ve enjoyed satire.

**sestet:** A six-line stanza of poetry; also, the last six lines of a sonnet.

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st;  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”  
(Shakespeare, Sonnet XVIII)

**shift:** In writing, a movement from one thought or idea to another; a change.

Tennyson’s poem *Ulysses* begins with Ulysses speaking of—and to—himself, then shifts to lines about his son (which are directed toward an unspecified audience), and finally ends with Ulysses addressing his aged mariners, urging them to continue their adventures.

**simile:** A comparison of unlike things using the word *like*, *as*, or *so*.

“O, my Love is like a red, red rose.”  
(Robert Burns, “A Red, Red Rose”)

**soliloquy:** A character’s speech to the audience, in which emotions and ideas are revealed. A monologue is a soliloquy only if the character is alone on the stage.

Macbeth’s famous “Is this a dagger I see before me?” speech, Act II, scene i

**sonnet, English or Shakespearean:** Traditionally, a fourteen-line love poem in iambic pentameter, but in contemporary poetry, themes and form vary. A conventional Shakespearean sonnet’s prescribed rhyme scheme is *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*. The final couplet (*gg*) sums up or

resolves the situation described in the previous lines. Milton, Donne, Sidney, Rossetti, and the Brownings also wrote sonnets, but not necessarily in Shakespearean form. (Also see *Italian [Petrarchan] sonnet*.)

EXAMPLE: (Boldfaced syllables are accented, showing five feet per line.)

Sonnet XCI	Rhyme Scheme
Some <b>glory in</b> their <b>birth</b> , some <b>in</b> their <b>skill</b> ,	a
Some <b>in</b> their <b>wealth</b> , some <b>in</b> their <b>body's force</b> ;	b
Some <b>in</b> their <b>garments</b> , <b>though</b> new-fangled <b>ill</b> ;	a
Some <b>in</b> their <b>hawks</b> and <b>hounds</b> , some <b>in</b> their <b>horse</b> ;	b
And every <b>humour hath</b> his <b>adjunct pleasure</b> ,	c
Wherein it <b>finds a joy above</b> the <b>rest</b> ;	d
But <b>these</b> particulars are <b>not</b> my <b>measure</b> ,	c
All <b>these</b> I <b>better in</b> one <b>general best</b> .	d
Thy <b>love</b> is <b>better than</b> high <b>birth</b> to <b>me</b> ,	e
Richer than <b>wealth</b> , prouder than <b>garments' cost</b> ,	f
Of <b>more</b> delight than <b>hawks</b> and <b>horses be</b> ;	e
And, <b>having thee</b> , of <b>all men's pride</b> I <b>boast</b> .	f
Wretched in <b>this alone</b> , that <b>thou</b> mayst <b>take</b>	g
All <b>this</b> away and <b>me</b> most <b>wretched make</b> .	g

**stanza:** A grouping of poetic lines; a deliberate arrangement of lines of poetry.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
and never stops—at all.  
(Dickinson, " 'Hope' is the thing with feathers")

**stock character:** A stereotypical character; a type. The audience expects the character to have certain characteristics. Similar to conventional character and flat character.

The wicked stepmother, the dizzy blonde, and the absent-minded professor are all stock characters.

**stream of consciousness:** A form of writing which replicates the way the human mind works. Ideas are presented in random order; thoughts are often unfinished. (Also see *interior monologue*.)

Morrison's *Beloved*; Joyce's *Ulysses*; Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

**structure:** The particular way in which parts of a written work are combined.

The structure of a sonnet is 14 lines. The structure of a drama is a certain number of acts and scenes. Plot structures a novel, and poems are organized by stanzas. Other structural techniques include chronological, nonlinear, stream of consciousness, and flashback.

**style:** The way a writer uses language. Takes into account word choice, diction, figures of speech, and so on. The writer's "voice."

Hemingway's style is simple and straightforward. Fitzgerald's style is poetic and full of imagery. Virginia Woolf's style varies, but she is often abstract.

**symbol:** A concrete object, scene, or action which has deeper significance because it is associated with something else, often an important idea or theme in the work.

Many critics feel that Melville's white whale in *Moby-Dick* symbolizes good, while Ahab the whale hunter embodies evil.

**synecdoche:** A figure of speech where one part represents the entire object, or vice versa.

All *hands* on deck; lend me your *ears*.

**syntax:** The way in which words, phrases, and sentences are ordered and connected.

Many of Mark Twain's characters speak in dialect, so their syntax is ungrammatical.

"Jim, this is nice,' I says. 'I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot cornbread."  
(Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)

**theme:** The central idea of a literary work.

The theme of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* is that love can soften even the hardest hearts. *Candide*'s themes include Voltaire's humorous indictment of human gullibility, greed, and optimism. In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, one of the themes is the emptiness of the American dream.

**tone:** Refers to the author's attitude toward the subject, and often sets the mood of the piece.

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the depiction of the District Commissioner and other British government officials shows the author's disdain for the colonial power's rule.

**tongue in cheek:** Expressing a thought in a way that appears to be sincere, but is actually joking.

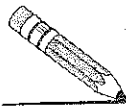
"How do you like this neon cowgirl outfit? I think I'll wear it to my job interview tomorrow."

**tragic flaw:** Traditionally, a defect in a hero or heroine that leads to his or her downfall.

Oedipus' pride; Othello's jealousy; Hamlet's indecisiveness

**transition/segue:** The means to get from one portion of a poem or story to another; for instance, to another setting, to another character's viewpoint, to a later or earlier time period. It is a way of smoothly connecting different parts of a work. Authors often use transitional sentences or phrases to achieve this.

Transition phrases include "the next day," "thereafter," and other phrases that mark the passage of time. Section breaks also help segue the reader to a different place or time in the work.



## You Try It

On a separate sheet of paper, write your own examples for the literary terms you've just reviewed. The first one is done for you.

### ad misericordium

*My little brother was sick last night and I had to take him to the hospital. Then my dog had to go to the vet. By this time it was midnight. I typed my paper and then my printer broke down and the disk is stuck in the computer. Please give me extra time to finish my paper.*

## Lesson 1: Answers

### Literary Elements: Activity 1

1. onomatopoeia
2. rhetorical question
3. hyperbole
4. simile
5. paradox
6. iambic pentameter
7. alliteration
8. apostrophe
9. personification
10. synecdoche
11. metaphor
12. allusion