

Literary Terms & General ELA Vocabulary

Allegory - the representation of abstract ideas or principles by characters, figures, or events in narrative, dramatic, or pictorial form.

Alliteration – the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Used to draw attention to certain words or ideas, to imitate sounds, and create musical effects. ie. “*Marilyn Monroe makes muffins on Mondays.*”

Allusion – a reference to something in literature, history, mythology, religious texts, etc., considered common knowledge.

Ambiguity - when an author leaves out details/information or is unclear about an event so the reader will use his/her imagination to fill in the blanks.

Analogy – a point by point comparison between two dissimilar things for the purpose of clarifying the less familiar of the two things.

Anaphora - repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines in a poem.

Anecdote - a short story or joke told at the beginning of a speech to gain the audience’s attention.

Antagonist - is the character that is directly opposed to the protagonist (a rival, opponent, enemy). The antagonist can be another character in the work, the forces of nature, fate, chance, or any combination of these things.

Anti-Climatic -- when the ending of the plot in poetry or prose is unfulfilling or lackluster.

Anti-hero -- is the protagonist who is the opposite of what we would expect a hero to be.

Apostrophe -- the device, usually in poetry, of calling out to an imaginary, dead, or absent person, or to a place, thing, or personified abstraction either to begin a poem or to make a dramatic break in thought somewhere within the poem.

Assonance - the repetition of the same vowel sound in a phrase or line of poetry. ie. “*How now brown cow.*” or “*mad as a hatter*”

Ballad -- a narrative poem that was originally meant to be sung. Ballads are generally about ordinary people who have unusual adventures, with a single tragic incident as the central focus. They contain dialogue and repetition, and imply more than they actually tell.

Blank Verse - name for unrhymed iambic pentameter. An iamb is a metrical foot in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. In iambic pentameter there are five iambs per line making ten syllables.

Cacophony -- harsh, clashing, or dissonant sounds, often produced by combinations of words that require a clipped, explosive delivery, or words that contain a number of plosive consonants such as b, d, g, k, p, and t; the opposite of EUPHONY.

Character – person or an animal that take part in the action of a literary work.

Major character – the most important character(s) in the story.

Minor character – one who takes part in the action, but is not the focus of attention.

Flat character – one-sided, often stereotypical.

Round character – fully developed and exhibits many traits (good and bad).

Dynamic character – one who changes or grows during the course of the work.

Static character – one who does not change.

Foil -- A character that by contrast underscores or enhances the distinctive characteristics of another.

Characterization – act of creating and developing a character.

Direct characterization – a writer states the character's traits or characteristics.

Indirect characterization – reader draw conclusions about the character's traits.

Colloquial Language -- informal, conversational language. Colloquialisms are phrases or sayings that are indicative of a specific region. Do not confuse this with slang - colloquialism is considered standard language, but slang is not.

Conceit -- an elaborate figure of speech comparing two very dissimilar things.

Conflict – struggle between opposing forces.

External – character struggles between outside forces, such as another person, force of nature, society.

Internal – character struggles within the mind of self, to make a decision, take action, or overcome a feeling.

Conflict Types -- the five basic types of conflicts are:

Person vs. Nature -- is where man struggles with weather, wind, water or other natural elements.

Person vs. Person -- is where humans struggle against other humans or human forms

Person vs. Self -- is where a human struggles against two or more elements within himself.

Person vs. Society -- is where man struggles against society's institutions (such as IRS, legal systems, prejudice, peer pressure etc.)

Person vs. Supernatural -- is where a human struggles with some opposing force outside of the ordinary (mythical gods, such as ghosts, "magical forces," etc.)

Connotation – set of ideas associated with a word, in addition to its explicit meaning. It can be personal, based on individual experiences.

Consonance -- the repetition of consonant sounds in a phrase or line of poetry. The consonant sound may be at the beginning, middle, or end of the word.

Convention -- an understanding between a reader and a writer about certain details of a story that does not need to be explained.

Couplet - two rhyming lines in poetry.

Denotation – the dictionary meaning of a word, independent of other associations that the word may have.

Example: lake – denotation is “an inland body of water.” Connotations might be “Vacation spot” and “place where fishing is good.”

Deus ex machina -- term that refers to a character or force that appears at the end of a story or play to help resolve conflict. Word means “god from a machine.” In ancient Greek drama, gods were lowered onto the stage by a mechanism to extricate characters from a seemingly hopeless situation. The phrase has come to mean any turn of events that solve the characters’ problems through an unexpected and unlikely intervention.

Dialect – form of a language spoken by people in a particular region or group.

Dialogue – spoken conversation between characters.

Diction -- word choice or the use of words in speech or writing.

Elegy -- a lyric poem that mourns the dead; an entire poem about the loss that one feels after someone or something has died.

Enjambment -- the continuation of reading one line of a poem to the next with no pause, a run-on line.

Epic -- a long poem, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the history of a nation.

Epigram -- any witty, pointed saying. Originally an epigram meant an inscription, or epitaph usually in verse, on a tomb. Later it came to mean a short poem that compressed meaning and expression in the manner of an inscription.

Epilogue -- a short poem or speech spoken directly to the audience following the conclusion of a play, or in a novel the epilogue is a short explanation at the end of the book which indicates what happens after the plot ends.

Epistle -- a poem or other literary work in the form of a letter or series of letters.

Epitaph -- the inscription on a tombstone or monument in memory of the person or people buried there. Epitaph also refers to a brief literary piece that sums up the life of a dead person.

Essay – short nonfiction work about a particular subject. Usually have a single focus, with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion.

Euphemism -- the act of substituting a harsh, blunt, or offensive comment for a more politically accepted or positive one. (short=vertically challenged)

Euphony -- a succession of words which are pleasing to the ear. These words may be alliterative, utilize consonance, or assonance and are often used in poetry but also seen in prose; the opposite of cacophony

Extended Metaphor -- refers to a comparison between two unlike things that continues throughout a series of sentences in a paragraph, or lines in a poem. It is often comprised of more than one sentence, and sometimes consists of a full paragraph.

Feminine Ending -- term that refers to an unstressed extra syllable at the end of a line of iambic pentameter.

Fiction – prose writing that tells about imaginary characters and events

Figurative Language – writing or speech that is not to be taken literally

Hyperbole -- A figure of speech in which exaggeration is used for emphasis or comic/dramatic effect.

Metaphor – something is described as though it were something else, points out similarity between two unlike things

Simile – a comparison of two unlike things, using “like” or “as”

Personification - a nonhuman subject is given human characteristics

Flashback – an interruption in the major action of a story, play or nonfiction work to show an episode that happened at an earlier time and place. A flashback can shed light on the characters and events of the present by providing background information.

Foreshadow – clues in the text about incidents that will occur later in the plot, foreshadowing creates anticipation in the novel or story.

Foot -- the metrical length of a line is determined by the number of feet it contains. The most common feet have two to three syllables, with at least one stressed syllable.

Monometer: One foot

Dimeter: Two feet

Trimeter: Three feet

Tetrameter: Four feet

Pentameter: Five feet

Hexameter: Six feet

Heptameter: Seven feet

Types of feet in verse:

Iamb -- an iambic foot has two syllables. The first is unstressed and the second is stressed. The iambic foot is most common in English poetry.

Trochee -- a trochaic foot has two syllables. The first is stressed and the second is unstressed.

Dactyl -- a dactylic foot has three syllables beginning with a stressed syllable; the other two unstressed.

Anapest -- an anapestic foot has three syllables. The first two are unstressed with the third stressed.

Free Verse -- type of verse that contains a variety of line lengths, is unrhymed, and lacks traditional meter.

Genre – a division or type of literature

Poetry – lyric poetry, concrete poetry, dramatic poetry, narrative poetry, epic poetry

Prose – fiction (novels and short stories) and nonfiction (biography, autobiography, letters, essays, and reports)

Drama – serious drama and tragedy, comic drama, melodrama, and farce

Autobiography – story of the writer's own life, told by the writer. They are a form of nonfiction and are generally written in first person.

Biography – life story of a person told by another person. They are a form of nonfiction, but effective biographies share qualities of a good narrative.

Epic -- An extended narrative poem in elevated or dignified language, celebrating the feats of a legendary or traditional hero.

Folktale/Folklore – story composed orally and passed from person to person by word of mouth.

Fable – a brief story or poem, usually with animal characters, that teaches a lesson or moral.

Fantasy – highly imaginative writing that contain elements not found in real life.

Gothic -- a genre of fiction characterized by mystery and supernatural horror, often set in a dark castle or other medieval setting.

Legend – widely told story about the past

Memoir -- an account of the personal experiences of an author.

Myth – a fictional tale that explains the actions of gods or heroes or the origins of elements of nature.

Satire -- A literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit; the goal is to change the behavior/issue. Authors known for satires are Jonathan Swift and George Orwell.

Science Fiction – combines elements of fiction and fantasy with scientific facts. Are generally set in the future.

Hero/Heroine – a character whose actions are inspiring or noble. They struggle to overcome the obstacle and problems that stand in their way.

Hubris -- used in Greek tragedies, refers to excessive pride that usually leads to a hero's downfall.

Hypophora -- also referred to as *anthyphora* or *antipophora*, is a figure of speech in which the speaker poses a question and then answers the question.

Idiom -- is the figurative use of words in a certain way that has meaning that should not be taken literally. "Stop pulling my leg!" means stop joking, NOT that someone is actually physically pulling your leg.

Imagery – the use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas; the descriptive use of detail to appeal to one or more of the reader's senses or to create a picture in the reader's mind.

Inference – a form of reasoning based on the information given and what you already know through your own experiences. To make an inference is to draw a logical conclusion or assumption from what is already known.

In medias res -- a story that begins in the middle of things.

Inversion -- in poetry is an intentional digression from ordinary word order which is used to maintain regular meters. For example, rather than saying “the rain came” a poem may say “came the rain”. Meters can be formed by the insertion or absence of a pause.

Irony – surprising, interesting, or amusing contradictions

Dramatic Irony: When the audience or reader knows something characters do not know

Situational Irony: It involves a discrepancy between what is expected to happen and what actually happens

Verbal Irony: When one thing is said, but something else, usually the opposite, is meant

Journal – a daily or periodic account of events and the writer’s thoughts and feelings about events

Literal -- a word for word interpretation for what is written or said.

Main Idea -- what a piece of writing is mostly about. Clues to finding the main idea can often be found in the title and topic sentences found in the work. The main idea is also closely related to the topic of the passage.

Meter -- the measured arrangement of words in poetry, as by accentual rhythm, syllabic quantity, or the number of syllables in a line.

Metonymy -- the use of a word or phrase to stand in for something else which it is often associated. ie. Lamb means Jesus.

Moral – a lesson taught by a literary work. Moral must be made by the reader based on other elements in the story.

Motif - is a term for a reoccurring theme or idea in a piece of literature. In *The Outsiders*, one recurring motif is the repeated reference to literary works in an attempt by the main character to make a connection with the reader about the characters within the story.

Motive – reason that explains or partially explains a character’s thoughts, feelings, actions, or speech

Mood -- is the overall feeling or atmosphere the writer creates in a work through the choice of setting, imagery, details, and descriptions

Narrative – a story that is either fiction or nonfiction

Narrative Hook - is any device at the opening of a work to capture the interest of the readers and make them continue reading (most often seen in nonfiction)

Narrator – a speaker or character that tells a story

Narrator’s perspective – the way he or she see things

Third person narrator – stands outside the action and speaks about it

First person narrator – one who tells a story and participates in the action

Nonfiction - prose writing that presents and explains ideas or that tells about real people, places, objects, and events

Novel – a long work of fiction writing

Novella -- A short novel usually under 100 pages.

Ode -- A lyric poem of some length, usually of a serious or meditative nature and having an elevated style and formal stanzaic structure. An ode celebrates something. John Keats is known for writing odes.

Onomatopoeia – the use of words that imitate sounds

Oxymoron -- is a combination of contradictory terms (silent scream, civil war, jumbo shrimp, freezer burn).

Parallelism -- the use of similar grammatical form gives items equal weight, as in Lincoln's line "of the people, by the people, for the people." Attention to parallelism generally makes both spoken and written expression more concise, clear and powerful.

Paraphrase -- is a restatement of an idea that keeps the same meaning but uses different words.

Paradox -- Statement which seems to contradict itself. i.e. His old face was youthful when he heard the news.

Parody -- A literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule. i.e. SNL or Weird Al Yankovich.

Persuasion – writing or speech that attempts to convince the reader or listener to adopt a particular opinion or course of action

Plot – the sequence of events in which each event results from a previous one and causes the next. Usually involves both characters and a central conflict.

Exposition – begins the plot, introduces the setting, characters, and basic situation

Inciting Incident - is the event, moment, or decision that begins a story's main conflict or problem

Rising action – introduces the central conflict, events which lead up to the turning point, the climax

Climax – the turning point, the high point of interest or suspense

Falling action – events which lead to the end of the central conflict

Resolution - the moment the main character(s) solve(s) the main problem/conflict or someone solves it for him or her

Dénouement – (day-new-mon) - the ending. At this point, any remaining secrets, questions or mysteries which remain after the resolution are solved by the characters or explained by the author. Sometimes the author leaves us to think about the THEME or future possibilities for the characters.

Poetic Justice -- the rewarding of virtue and the punishment of vice in the resolution of a plot. The character, as they say, gets what he/she deserves.

Poetry – one of the three major types of genre. Most poems use highly concise, musical, and emotionally charged language; making use of figurative language, imagery, and special devices, such as rhyme.

Point of View (POV) – the perspective or vantage point, from which a story is told.

First person – told by the narrator in the story who uses the first person pronoun “I”

Third person – a narrator outside the story, uses third-person pronouns “he,” and “she,” no use of “I” telling the story

- *Omniscient* – the narrator knows and tells about what each character feels and thinks
- *Limited* – the narrator relates the inner thoughts and feelings of one characters; and everything is viewed from this character’s perspective

Prequel -- a literary, dramatic, or cinematic work whose narrative takes place before that of a preexisting work or a sequel

Prologue -- an introduction or preface, especially a poem recited to introduce a play

Prose – the ordinary form of written language – fiction and nonfiction

Protagonist – the main character in a literary work

Pun -- a play on words...humorous use of words that have different meanings. (ex. “A bicycle can’t stand on its own because it’s two tired.”)

Rhyme -- the repetition of sounds in words

Rhyme Scheme -- the act of assigning letters in the alphabet to demonstrate the rhyming lines in a poem

Rites of Passage -- an incident which creates tremendous growth signifying a transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Satire -- a literary technique in which foolish ideas or customs are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society.

Sensory Language – writing or speech that appeals to one or more of the senses; also known as imagery

Setting – the time and place of the action of a story

Short story – a brief work of fiction that presents a sequence of events, or plot. Plot usually deals with central conflict of main character (protagonist). These events usually communicate a message about life or human nature (theme).

- *Plot*
- *Characters*
- *Setting*
- *Theme*

Slang -- A kind of language occurring chiefly in casual and playful speech, made up typically of short-lived coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect. Do not confuse for colloquialism; slang is more informal than colloquialism. It is used only by certain groups – like teenagers or people of certain professions.

Soliloquy -- A dramatic or literary form of discourse in which a character talks to himself or herself or reveals his or her thoughts without addressing a listener. Typical in plays.

Sonnet -- A poem with fourteen lines. An Italian sonnet subdivides into two quatrains and two tercets; while an English sonnet subdivides into three quatrains and one couplet. A volta is a sudden change of thought which is common in sonnets.

Stream of Consciousness -- the technique of presenting the flow of thoughts, responses, and sensations of one or more characters is called stream of consciousness.

Style -- The combination of distinctive features of literary or artistic expression, execution, or performance characterizing a particular person, group, school, or era.

Surprise Ending – a conclusion that is unexpected. Often this is *foreshadowed*, or subtly hinted at, during the course of the work

Suspense – a feeling of anxious uncertainty about the outcome of events in the literary work

Syllogism -- a logical argument based on deductive reasoning.

Symbol -- something concrete, such as an object, person, place or happening, that stands for or represents something beyond itself. For example, a dove is a bird, but it may also be a symbol for peace

Synecdoche -- a figure of speech in which a part of something stands for the whole thing.

Syntax -- sentence structure.

Theme – the central message or lesson in a literary work. The theme is usually an idea about life or about people. Writers sometimes state the story's theme outright, but more often they simply tell the story and let the reader discover the theme. Therefore, theme is an idea revealed by the events of the story; plot is simply what happens in the story; it is not the theme.

Tragedy -- a drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances.

Tone -- the way in which a writer uses their choice of words or arrangement of ideas and events to convey the writer's attitude or feelings toward a subject.