Glossary of Literary and Rhetorical Terms

**Allegory**  A form of symbolism in which ideas or abstract qualities are represented as characters or events in a story, novel, or play. For example, in the medieval drama *Everyman*, Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods, the friends of the title character, will not accompany him on his end-of-life journey, and he must depend on Good Works, whom he has previously neglected.

**Alliteration**  Repetition of the same consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words:

Should the glee—glaze—
In Death's—stiff—stare—
—Emily Dickinson

**Allusion**  An indirect reference to some character or event in literature, history, or mythology that enriches the meaning of the passage. For example, the title of W. H. Auden's poem “The Unknown Citizen” is an ironic allusion to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

**Ambiguity**  Something that may be validly interpreted in more than one way; double meaning.

**Anapest**  See Meter.

**Antagonist**  The character (or a force such as war or poverty) in a drama, poem, or work of fiction whose actions oppose those of the protagonist (hero or heroine).

**Anticlimax**  A trivial event following immediately after significant events.

**Apostrophe**  A poetic figure of speech in which a personification is addressed:

You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean.
—Walt Whitman

**Archetype**  A recurring character type, plot, symbol, or theme of seemingly universal significance: the blind prophet figure, the journey to the underworld, the sea as source of life, the initiation theme.
Assonance The repetition of similar vowel sounds within syllables:

On desperate seas long wont to roam
 —Edgar Allan Poe

Atmosphere  See Mood.

Audience  In composition, the readers for whom a piece of writing is intended.

Ballad  A narrative poem in four-line stanzas, rhyming xaxa, often sung or recited as a folk tale. The x means that those two lines do not rhyme.

Blank Verse  Unrhymed iambic pentameter, the line that most closely resembles speech in English:

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
 —Robert Frost

Carpe Diem  Literally, seize the day, a phrase applicable to many lyric poems advocating lustful living:

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

Catharsis  In classical tragedy, the purging of pity and fear experienced by the audience at the end of the play; a “there but for the grace of the gods go I” sense of relief.

Chorus  In Greek drama, a group (often led by an individual) who comments on or interprets the action of the play.

Climax  The point toward which the action of a plot builds as the conflicts become increasingly intense or complex; the turning point.

Coherence  In good writing, the orderly, logical relationship among the many parts—the smooth moving forward of ideas through clearly related sentences.  
Also see Unity.

Comedy  A play, light in tone, designed to amuse and entertain, that usually ends happily, often with a marriage.

Comedy of Manners  A risqué play satirizing the conventions of courtship and marriage.

Complication  The rising action of a plot during which the conflicts build toward the climax.
The Editing Process

Conceit A highly imaginative, often startling, figure of speech drawing an analogy between two unlike things in an ingenious way:

In this sad state, God’s tender bowels run
Out streams of grace….

—Edward Taylor

Concrete That which can be touched, seen, or tasted; not abstract. Concrete illustrations make abstractions easier to understand.

Conflict The antagonism between opposing characters or forces that causes tension or suspense in the plot.

Connotation The associations that attach themselves to many words, deeply affecting their literal meanings (e.g., politician, statesman).

Consonance Close repetition of the same consonant sounds preceded by different vowel sounds (flesh/flash or breed/bread). At the end of lines of poetry, this pattern produces half-rhyme.


Controlling Image In a short story, novel, play, or poem, an image that recurs and carries such symbolic significance that it embodies the theme of the work, as the quilts do in Walker’s “Everyday Use,” and as the grass does in Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass.”

Convention An accepted improbability in a literary work, such as the dramatic aside, in which an actor turns from the stage and addresses the audience.

Couplet Two rhymed lines of poetry:

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

—William Shakespeare

Crisis See Climax.

Dactyl See Meter.

Denotation The literal dictionary meaning of a word.

Denouement Literally, the “untying”; the resolution of the conflicts following the climax (or crisis) of a plot.

Diction Words chosen in writing or speaking.

Double Entendre A double meaning, one of which usually carries sexual suggestions, as in the country-western song about a truck driver who calls his wife long distance to say he is bringing his “big ol’ engine” home to her.

Dramatic Irony See Irony.

Dramatic Monologue A poem consisting of a self-revealing speech delivered by one person to a silent listener; for instance, Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess.”
Dramatic Point of View  See Point of View.

Elegy  A poem commemorating someone’s death but usually encompassing a larger issue as well.

Empathy  Literally, “feeling in”; the emotional identification that a reader or an audience feels with a character.

English Sonnet  See Sonnet.

Epigram  A short, witty saying that often conveys a bit of wisdom:

Heaven for climate; hell for society.
—Mark Twain

Epigraph  A quotation at the beginning of a poem, novel, play, or essay that suggests the theme of the work.

Epilogue  The concluding section of a literary work, usually a play, in which loose threads are tied together or a moral is drawn.

Epiphany  A moment of insight in which something simple and commonplace is seen in a new way and, as James Joyce said, “its soul, its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.”

Episode  In a narrative, a unified sequence of events; in Greek drama, the action between choruses.

Exposition  That part of a plot devoted to supplying background information, explaining events that happened before the current action.

Fable  A story, usually using symbolic characters and settings, designed to teach a lesson.

Falling Action  In classical dramatic structure, the part of a play after the climax, in which the consequences of the conflict are revealed. Also see Denouement.

Figurative Language  Words that carry suggestive or symbolic meaning beyond the literal level.

First-Person Point of View  See Point of View.

Flashback  Part of a narrative that interrupts the chronological flow by relating events from the past.

Flat Character  In contrast to a well-developed round character, a flat one is stereotyped or shallow, not seeming as complex as real people; flat characters are often created deliberately to give them a symbolic role, like Faith in “Young Goodman Brown.”

Foil  A character, usually a minor one, who emphasizes the qualities of another one through implied contrast between the two.

Foot  A unit of poetic rhythm. See Meter.

Foreshadowing  Early clues about what will happen later in a narrative or play.
Formal Writing  The highest level of usage, in which no slang, contractions, or fragments are used.

Free Verse  Poetry that does not have regular rhythm, rhyme, or standard form.

Freewriting  Writing without regard to coherence or correctness, intended to relax the writer and produce ideas for further writing.

Genre  A classification of literature: drama, novel, short story, poem.

Hero/Heroine  The character intended to engage most fully the audience’s or reader’s sympathies and admiration. Also see Protagonist.

Hubris  Unmitigated pride, often the cause of the hero’s downfall in Greek tragedy.

Hyperbole  A purposeful exaggeration.

Iamb  See Meter.

Image/Imagery  Passages or words that stir feelings or memories through an appeal to the senses.

Informal Writing  The familiar, everyday level of usage, which includes contractions and perhaps slang but precludes nonstandard grammar and punctuation.

Internal Rhyme  The occurrence of similar sounds within the lines of a poem rather than just at the ends of lines:

Too bright for our infirm delight
—Emily Dickinson

Invention  The process of generating subjects, topics, details, and plans for writing.

Irony  Lack of agreement between expectation and reality.

Verbal irony involves a major discrepancy between the words spoken or written and the intended meaning. For example, Stephen Crane writes, “War is kind,” but he means—and the poem shows—that war is hell.

Situational irony can stem quite literally from irony of situation. For example, in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” the fact that the inhabitants of a small town get together on a beautiful summer day not for a picnic but to stone one of their neighbors to death is heavily ironic. Situational irony can also involve the contrast between the hopes, aspirations, or fears of a character and the outcome of that person’s actions or eventual fate. For example, in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” the intellectual Hulga Joy is taken in by the uneducated Bible salesman she plans to seduce.

Dramatic irony involves the difference between what a character knows or believes and what the better-informed reader or audience knows to be true. For example, in Susan Glaspell’s Trifles the audience knows that the evidence to establish motive for the murder is right under the noses of the law enforcement officials, but the men overlook it because they consider the suspect’s “women’s work” not worthy of their notice.
Italian Sonnet  See Sonnet.

Jargon  The specialized words and expressions belonging to certain professions, sports, hobbies, or social groups. Sometimes any tangled and incomprehensible prose is called jargon.

Juxtaposition  The simultaneous presentation of two conflicting images or ideas, designed to make a point of the contrast: for example, an elaborate and well-kept church surrounded by squalorous slums.

Limited Point of View  See Point of View.

Lyric  A poem that primarily expresses emotion.

Metaphor  A figure of speech that makes an imaginative comparison between two literally unlike things:

Sylvia’s face was a pale star.

Metaphysical Poetry  A style of poetry (usually associated with seventeenth-century poet John Donne) that boasts intellectual, complex, and even strained images (called conceits), which frequently link the personal and familiar to the cosmic and mysterious. Also see Conceit.

Meter  Recurring patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry. A metrical unit is called a foot. There are four basic patterns of stress: an iamb, or iambic foot, which consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (before, return); a trochee, or trochaic foot, which consists of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one (funny, double); an anapest, or anapletic foot, which consists of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one (contradict); and a dactyl, or dactylic foot, which consists of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones (merrily, syllable). One common variation is the spondee, or spondaic foot, which consists of two stressed syllables (moonshine, football).

Lines are classified according to the number of metrical feet they contain: monometer (one foot), dimeter (two feet), trimeter (three feet), tetrameter (four feet), pentameter (five feet), hexameter (six feet), and so on.

Metonymy  A figure of speech in which the name of one thing is substituted for that of something else closely associated with it—for example, the White House (meaning the president or the whole executive branch), or the pen is mightier than the sword (meaning written words are more powerful than military force).

Mood  The emotional content of a scene or setting, usually described in terms of feeling: somber, gloomy, joyful, expectant. Also see Tone.

Motif  A pattern of identical or similar images recurring throughout a passage or entire work.

Myth  A traditional story involving deities and heroes, usually expressing and inculcating the established values of a culture.

Narrative  A story line in prose or verse.
Narrator  The person who tells the story to the audience or reader. Also see Unreliable Narrator.

Objective Point of View  See Point of View.

Ode  A long, serious lyric focusing on a stated theme: “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

Omniscient Point of View  See Point of View.

Onomatopoeia  A word that sounds like what it names: whoosh, clang, babble.

Oxymoron  A single phrase that juxtaposes opposite terms:

the lonely crowd, a roaring silence.

Parable  A story designed to demonstrate a principle or lesson using symbolic characters, details, and plot lines.

Paradox  An apparently contradictory statement that, upon examination, makes sense:

In my end is my beginning.

—Motto of Mary, Queen of Scots

The motto is intelligible only in the context of Christian theology, which promises renewed life after death.

Paraphrase  In prose, a restatement in different words, usually briefer than the original version; in poetry, a statement of the literal meaning of the poem in everyday language.

Parody  An imitation of a piece of writing, copying some features such as diction, style, and form, but changing or exaggerating other features for humorous effect.

Pentameter  A line of poetry that contains five metrical feet. See Meter.

Persona  The person created by the writer to be the speaker of the poem or story. The persona is not usually identical to the writer—for example, a personally optimistic writer could create a cynical persona to narrate a story.

Personification  Giving human qualities to nonhuman things:

the passionate song of bullets and the banshee shrieks of shells

—Stephen Crane

Phallic Symbol  An image shaped like the male sex organ; suggests male potency or male dominance (towers, snakes, spurs, jet planes, sleek cars).

Plagiarism  Carelessly or deliberately presenting the words or ideas of another writer as your own; literary theft.

Plot  A series of causally related events or episodes that occur in a narrative or play. Also see Climax, Complication, Conflict, Denouement, Falling Action, Resolution, and Rising Action.

Point of View  The angle or perspective from which a story is reported and interpreted. There are four common points of view that authors use:
**First person**—someone, often the main character, tells the story as he or she experienced it (and uses the pronoun *I*).

**Omniscient**—the narrator knows everything about the characters and events and can move about in time and place and into the minds of all the characters.

**Limited**—the story is limited to the observations, thoughts, and feelings of a single character (not identified as *I*).

**Shifting**—a limited view which can shift to the perspective of more than one character.

**Objective or dramatic**—the actions and conversations are presented in detail as they occur, more or less objectively, without any comment from the author or a narrator.

**Unreliable**—narrated from the point of view of a character unable or perhaps unwilling to give a fully accurate account.

**Prewriting** The process that writers use to gather ideas, consider audience, determine purpose, develop a thesis and tentative structure (plan), and generally prepare for the actual writing stage.

**Primary Source** The literary work under consideration by the reader.

**Protagonist** The main character in drama or fiction, sometimes called the hero or heroine.

**Pun** A verbal joke based on the similarity of sound between words that have different meanings:

> They went and *told* the sexton and the sexton *toll*ed the bell.

—Thomas Hood

**Quatrain** A four-line stanza of poetry, which can have any number of rhyme schemes.

**Resolution** The conclusion of the conflict in a fictional or dramatic plot. Also see Denouement and Falling Action.

**Rhyme** Similar or identical sounds between words, usually the end sounds in lines of verse (*brain*/*strain*; *liquor*/*quicker*).

**Rhythm** The recurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables in a regular pattern. Also see Meter.

**Rising Action** The complication and development of the conflict leading to the climax in a plot.

**Round Character** A literary character with sufficient complexity to be convincing, true to life.

**Sarcasm** A form of *verbal irony* that presents caustic and bitter disapproval in the guise of praise. Also see Irony.

**Satire** Literary expression that uses humor and wit to attack and expose human folly and weakness. Also see Parody.

**Secondary Source** Critical material from the library or the Internet (*articles, reviews, books, sections of books*).
Sentimentality  The attempt to produce an emotional response that exceeds the circumstances and to draw from the readers a stock response instead of a genuine emotional response.

Setting  The time and place in which a story, play, or novel occurs. Also see Mood.

Shakespearean Sonnet  See Sonnet.

Simile  A verbal comparison in which a similarity is expressed directly, using like or as:

houses leaning together like conspirators.
—James Joyce

Also see Metaphor.

Situational Irony  See Irony.

Soliloquy  A speech in which a dramatic character reveals what is going through his or her mind by talking aloud to herself or himself. Also see Dramatic Monologue.

Sonnet  A poem of fourteen ten-syllable lines, arranged in a pattern of rhyme schemes. The English or Shakespearean sonnet uses seven rhymes that divide the poem into three quatrains and a couplet: abab, cdcd, efe, gg. The Italian sonnet usually divides into an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines) by using only five rhymes: abba, abba, cdecde. (The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies widely from sonnet to sonnet.)

Speaker  The voice or person presenting a poem.

Spondee  See Meter.

Standard English  The language that is written and spoken by most educated persons of English-speaking countries.

Stereotype  An oversimplified, commonly held image or opinion about a person, a race, or an issue.

Stilted Language  Words and expressions that are too formal for the writing situation; unnatural, artificial language.

Structure  The general plan, framework, or form of a piece of writing.

Style  Individuality of expression, achieved in writing through the selection and arrangement of words and punctuation.

Subplot  Secondary plot in a novel or play, usually reinforcing the main theme but sometimes just providing interest, excitement, or comic relief.

Symbol  Something that suggests or stands for an idea, quality, or concept larger than itself: the lion is a symbol of courage; a voyage or journey can symbolize life; water suggests spirituality, dryness the lack thereof.

Synecdoche  A figure of speech in which some prominent feature is used to name the whole, or vice versa—for example, a sail in the harbor (meaning a ship), or call the law (meaning call the law enforcement officers).
Synesthesia  Figurative language in which two or more sense impressions are combined:

blue uncertain stumbling buzz

—Emily Dickinson

Syntax  Sentence structure; the relationship between words and among word groups in sentences.

Theme  The central or dominating idea advanced by a literary work, usually containing some insight into the human condition.

Thesis  The main point or position that a writer develops and supports in a composition.

Tone  The attitude a writer conveys toward his or her subject and audience. In poetry this attitude is sometimes called voice.

Tragedy  A serious drama that relates the events in the life of a protagonist, or tragic hero, whose error in judgment, dictated by a tragic flaw, results in the hero's downfall and culminates in catastrophe. In less classical terms, any serious drama, novel, or short story that ends with the death or defeat of the main character may be called tragic.

Trochee  See Meter.

Type Character  A literary character who embodies a number of traits that are common to a particular group or class of people (a rebellious daughter, a stern father, a jealous lover); all of the characters in Valdez's Los Vendidos are types.

Understatement  A form of ironic expression that intentionally minimizes the importance of an idea or fact.

Unity  The fitting together or harmony of all elements in a piece of writing. Also see Coherence.

Unreliable Narrator  A viewpoint character who presents a biased or erroneous report that may mislead or distort a reader's judgments about other characters and actions; sometimes the unreliable narrator may be self-deceived.

Usage  The accepted or customary way of using words in speaking and writing a language.

Verbal Irony  See Irony.

Verisimilitude  The appearance of truth or believability in a literary work.

Versification  The mechanics of poetic composition, including such elements as rhyme, rhythm, meter, and stanza form.

Yonic Symbol  An image shaped like the female breasts, uterus, or genitalia; suggests fecundity or female sexuality (caves, pots, rooms, apples, full-blown roses).