

Glossary of Literary Terms

[A]

active voice

The voice of a verb indicates the relation of the action of the verb to the subject of the clause or sentence. There are two voices, **active** and **passive**. The active voice is direct statement: "I wrote this essay." The passive voice inverts the normal pattern: "This essay was written by me." The passive voice is easily recognized: the finite verb contains some form of the verb "to be" followed by a past participle - "written." Grammar aside, in general, most writers prefer the active voice to the passive as the active voice is usually more direct and vigorous:

I shall always remember my first visit to Montreal.

This is much better than

My first visit to Montreal will always be remembered by me.

This latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise. If the writer tries to make it more concise by omitting "by me,"

My first visit to Montreal will always be remembered,

it becomes indefinite: is it the writer or some person undisclosed or the world at large that will always remember this visit? As passive constructions are frequently indirect and obscure, politicians and civil servants are fond of them: it enables one to make assertions which promise action without committing oneself to perform it, and makes possible the admission of error without anyone having to accept responsibility. For instance,

Passive: Be assured (by whom?) that action will be taken (by whom?).

Active: I assure you that I will act.

Passive: It is to be regretted (by whom?) that an error has been made (by whom?) in your account. The matter will be investigated (by whom?).

Active: I am sorry we made an error in your account. I will look into the matter and correct it immediately.

However, there are valid reasons for using the passive voice: for example, here are three good reasons for using the passive.

(1) when the agent, or the doer of the act, is indefinite or not known.

(2) when the agent is not as important as the act itself.

(3) when the writer wants to emphasize either the agent or the act by putting it at the beginning or end of the sentence.

For example,

It was reported that there were eight survivors.

Here the writer does not know who did the reporting. To avoid the passive by saying, "Someone reported that there were eight survivors," would be to strain the point by seeming to emphasize the mysterious "someone." And the fact that someone did the reporting is, in this instance, less important than the content of the report.

The accident *was witnessed* by more than fifty people.

Here the writer wishes to emphasize the large number of witnesses. It could be stated, "More than fifty people witnessed the accident," but the emphasis is clearly greater at the end of the sentence than at the beginning.

allegory

An allegory is a narrative that has a second meaning beneath the surface. Although the surface story may have its own interest, the author's major interest is in the ulterior meaning. Therefore, an allegory is a story with at least two meanings, a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning; the characters, actions, or settings represent abstract ideas or moral qualities. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, for instance, is a good example wherein the entire novel is essentially an extended metaphor for the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalin.

alliteration

The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants or consonant clusters, in a group of words. Usually the term is limited to the repetition of initial consonant sounds. See **consonance**.

To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark, dock,
In a pestilential prison, with a life-long lock,
Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp, shock,
From a cheap and chippy choppy on a big, black block!

allusion

A reference to a person, a place, an event, or a literary work that the writer expects the reader to recognize and respond to; an allusion may be drawn from history, mythology, the Bible, religion in general, geography, or literature. Allusions expand and develop ideas in a work of literature, adding layers of meaning.

ambiguity

With writing, ambiguity can refer to a carelessness that produces two or more meanings where a single one is intended. However, with literature it generally refers to a richness of poetic expression which elevates and complicates diction and phrasing. The various meanings may make up the intended meaning of the writer. The meanings may be contradictory and show a fundamental division in the author's mind and challenge the reader to invent interpretations based on these contradictions.

analogy

A comparison between things similar in a number of ways. An analogy is frequently used to explain the unfamiliar by the familiar, as when a camera is compared by analogy to the human eye; strategy in a current armed conflict by analogy to an older struggle already understood; the heart's structure by analogy to a pump's. As a rhetorical device, analogy is sometimes used to justify conclusions logic would not allow, for even in closely analogous situations the differences may be crucial. The numerous similarities common to analogy tend to differentiate it from simile and metaphor, which depend on a few points of similarity in things fundamentally dissimilar.

anecdotal evidence

An anecdote is a short narrative, sometimes introduced to give a point to a longer work (like an essay), sometimes presented for its own sake or for its interest in relation to the subject under discussion. Anecdotes are usually presented as true (although they frequently rest on hearsay) and are incorporated into essays often as supporting evidence. They can be emotionally compelling: for instance, a story of a lifetime smoker who now has no vocal chords and must breathe through a hole in his neck - this in an essay on smoking legislation.

antagonist

An antagonist is the major force or character that opposes the protagonist. The major force may be an aspect of the physical or social environment, or a destructive element, for instance, in the protagonist's own nature.

anti-climax

A sudden descent from the impressive to the trivial, especially at the end of an ascending series, for ludicrous or humorous effect.

antithesis

The juxtaposition of contrasting or opposite ideas, often in parallel structure.

To err is human, to forgive divine.

Though studious, he was popular; though argumentative, he was modest; though inflexible, he was candid; and though metaphysical, yet orthodox.

apostrophe

A figure of speech in which an absent or a dead person, an abstract quality, or something non-human is addressed directly. Example: "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean - roll!" Here, the persona is speaking to the ocean as if it were capable of hearing.

archaic language

Language that is old-fashioned or obsolete. Archaic language is deliberately used to suggest something written in the past.

aside

In theatre, a speech directed to the audience but, by dramatic convention, apparently unheard by the other characters in the play, who continue in their roles without the knowledge thus given the spectators. Shakespeare frequently uses asides.

Macbeth: [aside] If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir. (I. iii. 143-144)

assonance

The close repetition of similar vowel sounds, usually in stressed syllables.

Thou foster child of silence and slow time.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.

atmosphere

The atmosphere or mood is the prevailing feeling created by the story. It is created by descriptive diction, imagery, and dialogue. The opening of the short story, "Journey Home," for instance, describes "gloomy shacks half-hidden in the labyrinth of dark green trees" and the environment as "dismal." These opening descriptions help to set up an atmosphere that is dark, ominous, and apprehensive.

audience

Simply stated, an audience is the person or people gathered to hear, see, or read a work. A writer must be sensitive to who the intended audience is, as this critically affects stylistic choices, tone, diction, and so on.

autobiography

The description of a life, or a portion of one, written by the person who has lived it, in contrast to a biography, which presents a life as written by another person. Ordinarily, an autobiography is intended for public readership, as opposed to the private account of a life found in a diary, journal, or letters.

[C]

cacophony

"Bad sounding." The opposite of euphony, the term signifies discordant, jarring, unharmonious language. Here is an example from Tennyson's *Morte D'Arthur*:

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves
And barren chasms, and all to left and right
The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels -
And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,
And the long glories of the winter moon.

The alliteration and assonance of the first five lines are self-evidently rough; the last two lines, containing the same devices, are mellifluously smooth and euphonious.

caricature

In literature (as in art) a portrait which ridicules a person by exaggerating and distorting his most prominent features and characteristics. Shakespeare and Dickens are especially rich in caricature.

case study

A detailed analysis of an individual or group, especially as an exemplary model of medical, psychological, or social phenomena. A case study could be a strategy, for instance, in an argument or persuasion.

catastrophe

The final disaster of a tragedy, usually including a resolution back to order. A tragic dénouement of a play or story.

cause and effect

A common strategy in argumentative essays, it is the explaining of the "why" of something. Arguments based on causal relationships work in two directions. One can argue from an effect back to a cause, or one can start with a cause and argue that it will produce a particular effect. The nature of cause and effect can get quite complicated and is studied in university logic classes.

character

The term refers to both a fictional person in a story, and the moral, dispositional, and behavioral qualities of that fictional person. Readers can classify characters in a number of ways:

Flat character - a limited, usually minor character with only one or two apparent qualities. A character who is not developed.

Round character - a realistic character with several dimensions. A more complex, fully-developed person.

Static character - one who does not change in the course of a story, like the warlock in "Journey Home."

Dynamic (or Developing) character - one who undergoes a significant, lasting change, usually in his or her outlook on life. In a short story, he or she is often the protagonist.

Stereotyped (or Stock) character - a predictable, one-dimensional character who is recognizable to the reader as "of a type," for example, the jock, the brain, the yuppie, the absent-minded professor, and so on.

Character foil - a character whose behavior, attitudes, and/or opinions contrast with those of the protagonist.

characterization

It is the creation, or description, of a character in a work of fiction. In a biography, autobiography, or historical novel, however, it could be the delineation of a real person - like Henry VIII. In a novel, short story, poem, or play, characterization creates a lasting identity for an imagined person - sometimes, paradoxically, making the fictional character more "real" than people who have lived. The character of a fictional creation - Hamlet, Mercutio, Lady Macbeth, the Wife of Bath - is fixed forever in the words of the creator (although it is open to differing interpretations by readers or directors and actors). Interestingly, a character from history is subject to potentially radical revisions with each new work of literature. Characterization is influenced by many factors:

(1) simple description or summary of a person's distinguishing features and traits - by the author or other characters

(2) a character's name

(3) the narrative perspective, whether first person or omniscient

(4) the actual actions of the character (what he/she says and thinks)

(5) and the ethos, the world or setting the person is a part of, is associated with (for instance, a bleak prairie landscape can partially characterize the person who inhabits it).

chorus

In Greek drama, the group of singers and dancers that appears at intervals within a play to comment on the action or the antagonists, or sing the praises of the gods. Generally, the chorus expresses the judgment of objective bystanders, compassionate and intelligent, representative of the best morality of the community, but not directly involved in the passions of the protagonist and other major characters. In later times, like the Elizabethan Age, a chorus is reduced to a single figure, as in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, or *Romeo and Juliet*.

chronological order

(*chrono*- Greek for time) It is simply arranging events in the order in which the events occurred. The plots of many stories are told in chronological order.

cliché

An overused expression, once clever or metaphorical, but now trite and timeworn; a large number of idioms have become clichés through excessive use. The following sentence contains eight common ones: "When the grocer, who was as fit as a fiddle, had taken stock of the situation, he saw the writing on the wall, but decided to turn over a new leaf and put his house in order by taking a long shot at eliminating his rival in the street - who was also an old hand at making the best of a bad job." The term derives from the French word for a stereotype plate, used for printing, and suggests unimaginative repetition. See **colloquial language**, **dead metaphor**.

climatic order

Ideas arranged in the order of least to most important, a strategy common in composing an argument.

climax

A plot term, it is the point of greatest intensity, interest, or suspense in a narrative. The climax usually marks a story's turning point.

coincidence

A happenstance, unplanned, accidental. Though frequent in life, coincidence in literature may seem a straining against probability. Comedy may exploit coincidence for humor, for instance. However, coincidence can become objectionable (from an artistic point of view) in proportion to its improbability, its importance to the story. A kind of plot manipulation.

colloquial language

This is everyday speech and writing. It is plain, relaxed, idiomatic, and may contain slang or cliché. "They've had it," "It's a cinch," and "That was sweet" are colloquial. Colloquial language is not used in formal speech or writing.

colloquialism

An informal expression characteristic of speech and acceptable in informal writing.

comedy

(Greek: *komos* "revel, merrymaking") A literary work that ends happily with a healthy, amicable armistice between the protagonist and society. Comedy is distinct from tragedy, which is generally concerned with a protagonist who meets an unhappy or disastrous end. Also, the comic protagonist may be a person of ordinary character and ability, and need not achieve the heroic stature of the protagonist in a tragedy. Comedies are often concerned, at least in part, with exposing human folly, and frequently depict the overthrow of rigid social fashions and customs. Wit, humor, and a sense of festivity are found in many comedies.

comic relief

A comic element inserted into a tragic or somber work, especially a play, to relieve its tension, widen its scope, or heighten by contrast the tragic emotion.

compare and contrast

To compare two or more things is to examine their likeness, their **similarities**. Contrast (Latin for "standing against") is a consideration of images, ideas, or other literary elements standing in opposition to one another, or considered for their differences.

These two strategies are often paired as a device for explanation or clarification. For instance, a compare and contrast essay of two stories or two poems may be an illuminating exercise, for the similarities may highlight important differences, or vice versa, thus leading to a better understanding of the literature. Furthermore, literature selected could be similar in plot but different in theme, similar in subject but different literary value, and so on. In writing such an essay, it would be best to choose elements that are significant and worthy of examination.

comparison

Latin for "with an equal." It is a consideration of separate things in the light of their similarities. Similarity is the basic principle behind inductive argument and analogy.

conflict

The term refers to the struggle between opposing characters or forces, usually the protagonist and something else. For preliminary discussion, conflict can be classified roughly as

individual versus individual
individual versus environment
individual versus himself/herself.

Another approach to a discussion of conflict is to classify the conflict as physical, moral, emotional, intellectual, philosophical, spiritual, and so on. **External conflict** refers to conflict that arise from outside of the character (individual versus individual, individual versus environment), and **internal conflict** refers to conflict arising from within a character. Compare a wrestling match versus a chess match; in what way are they external conflict? Internal?

connotation

All of the emotions and associations that a word or phrase may arouse. Denotation is the literal or "dictionary" meaning of a word or phrase. For instance, "springtime" literally means the season between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice, but the connotations of the words makes most people think of such things as youth, rebirth, and romance.

consonance

The repetition of similar consonant sounds in the middle or at the end of words. Note the repetition of the "l" sound in the following:

And all the air a solemn stillness holds.

contrast

The juxtaposition of disparate or opposed images, ideas, or both, to heighten or clarify a scene, theme, or episode. Contrast is frequently paired with comparison as a device for explanation and clarification. See **compare and contrast**.

couplet

Two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme. Shakespeare frequently closes a scene with a couplet. Here is an example from *Macbeth*:

Hear it not Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell.

[D]

denotation

The literary or "dictionary" meaning of a word. For example, a denotation, or dictionary definition, of the word "star" (as in movie star) is "an eminent actor or actress," but the **connotations** that of an actor or actress who is adored by fans and who leads a fascinating and glamorous life.

dénouement

Pronounced "day-NEW-mahn," it is a French term for the "unknotting" or resolution of the plot. It follows the climax and constitutes all or part of the falling action of the story.

deus ex machina

It means "god out of the machine," and it refers to the resolution of a plot by use of a highly improbable chance or coincidence (so named from the practice of some Greek dramatists having a god descend from heaven at the last possible minute - in the theatre by means of a rope or stage machine - to rescue the protagonist from an impossible situation. This can be a fault in the literature as the plot is manipulated too much and lacks verisimilitude. The term should be italicized, *deus ex machina*, or deus ex machina.

dialect

A variety of language belonging to a particular time, place, or social group, as, for example, an eighteenth-century cockney dialect, a New England dialect, or Robert Burns' Scottish dialect. A language other than one's own is for the most part unintelligible without study or translation; a dialect other than one's own can generally be understood, although pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax seem strange.

dialogue

Conversation between two or more persons, as represented in prose fiction, drama, or essays, as opposed to **monologue**, the speech of one person. Good dialogue characterizes each speaker by idiom and attitude as it advances the dramatic conflict.

diary

A daily record of events and observations, especially personal ones. Examples include the diaries of Samuel Pepys, providing a portrait of everyday life in seventeenth-century England, and the diary of Anne Frank, recording events prior to her death in a concentration camp in World War II.

diction

A writer's choice of words, particularly for clarity, effectiveness, and precision. A writer's diction can be formal or informal, abstract or concrete, simple or ornate. In choosing "the right word," writers must think of their subject and their audience. Words that may be appropriate in informal dialogue would not always be appropriate in a piece of formal writing.

didactic

When the primary aim of a work of literature is to expound some moral, political, or other teaching, it is referred to as didactic. It is a derogatory term if the "teaching" aspect of the literature is intrusive, the writer on a platform or pulpit.

dilemma

A situation requiring a choice between two equally balanced alternatives. These alternatives are equally unfavorable. A common plot device to advance conflict and stir suspense.

direct presentation

See **characterization**. The author tells the readers straight out, by exposition or analysis, what a character is like, or the author may have another character do likewise.

dissonance A harsh or disagreeable combination of sounds; discord; cacophony. A good example of this is Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est":

Gas! Gas! Quick boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;

The combination of consonance and assonance in these two lines creates dissonance and the effect of confusion and anxious haste during a WWI gas attack.

drama A form of fiction, distinguished from poetry and from prose fictions like the short story and novel by being acted in front of an audience. More than other fictions, drama is collaborative, communal, and immediate.

dramatic form A drama may be a tragedy, comedy, farce, pantomime, and so on. A typical form, or structure, focuses on a simple narrative outline of a protagonist, or hero, in conflict with an antagonist, or opposing character. One dramatic structure is Freytag's pyramid, a diagrammatic way of presenting the action in five units:

exposition - the unfolding of events necessary to understand later plot development

rising action - the complication of events after the exciting force has initiated the conflict between protagonist and antagonist

climax - the high point of the pyramid, the major crisis that brings about the turn in the fortunes of the protagonist

falling action - the events leading away from the climax, as the protagonist attempts to escape his or her fate

catastrophe - the final disaster, involving also, usually, a resolution, or restoration of order to the disturbed world of the play.

In this way of understanding dramatic structure, the five essential movements of the action are reflected in the five-act structure of a tragedy, but it must be remembered that the scheme is only generally applicable, for not all tragedies have five acts and those with five do not always follow the pattern precisely as outlined. In comedy, farce, and other forms, including nondramatic ones such as the novel, the same pattern can be observed, provided proper allowances are made.

dramatic monologue A kind of narrative poem in which one character speaks to one listener or more whose replies are not given in the poem. The occasion is usually a crucial one in the speaker's life, and the dramatic monologue reveals the speaker's personality as well as the incident that is the subject of the poem.

[E]

editorial

A newspaper or magazine commentary on an issue of public concern. Frequently unsigned, an editorial carries the weight of the editor or staff, and is generally identified as a matter of opinion by its placement or style. "Editorializing" is a term used frequently to describe the presentation of opinions in a similar authoritative manner in, for example, a news story, essay, or work of fiction.

elegy

A lyric poem, usually formal in language and structure, and solemn or melancholy in tone. Often it is a poem of mourning, usually over the death of an individual; it may also be a lament over the passing of life and beauty or a meditation over the nature of death.

emotional appeal

This is a strategy of persuasion that stirs an audience's emotions in the hope of moving people to action. Emotion can effectively be roused if the writer understands his or her audience. The writer can then tap into such things as humor, anger, sadness, the sense of the just versus the unjust, patriotism, vested interests, and so on.

epic

A long narrative poem telling about the deeds of a great hero and reflecting the values of the society from which it originated. Many epics were drawn from an oral tradition and were transmitted by song and recitation before they were written down. The most famous epics of Western civilization are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Others include the *Divine Comedy* by the Italian poet Dante. The two most famous English epics are the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

epigram

A short, witty, pointed statement often in the form of a poem. Alexander Pope is famous for epigrams:

'Tis education forms the common mind,
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

Oscar Wilde wrote many epigrams in prose: "Man is a rational animal who always loses his temper when he is called upon to act in accordance with the dictates of reason."

epiphany

Epiphany refers to a moment of significant realization and insight experienced by the protagonist, often at the end of the story. James Joyce built each story in his *Dubliners* around what he called an epiphany.

epitaph

An inscription on a gravestone or monument memorializing a person, or persons, buried there. It can also be a short poem written in memory of someone who has died. Many epitaphs are actually epigrams, as this example by John Gay, "My Own Epitaph":

Life is a jest, and all things show it.
I thought so once; but now I know it.

Jonathan Swift wrote his own: "*Ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit*," which translates "Where savage indignation can no longer tear his heart."

escape fiction

This refers to stories written primarily to entertain, thus helping the reader to escape the daily concerns and problems of reality. Escape fiction usually has lively plots and stereotyped or flat characters. It generally requires little intellectual engagement from the reader. Thrillers or "page-turners" are essentially escape.

essay

A literary composition on a single subject; usually short, in prose, and nonexhaustive. The word derives from French "essai," meaning "an attempt," first used in the modern sense by Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essais* (1580-1588) are classics of the genre. There are many types of essays, some including the argumentative essay, descriptive essay, expository essay, narrative essay, formal or informal essay, personal essay, persuasive essay, and so on. Here are some distinctions:

argumentative essay - an argumentative essay attempts to lead the reader to share the writer's belief, especially through the use of logic, using such devices as inductive or deductive reasoning, facts, statistics, and so on.

descriptive essay - The descriptive essay is often classified as one of the major types of prose, the others being **argument, exposition, and narration**, which, however, all use description. A descriptive essay would be noteworthy for its rendition in words, especially of observations of the human or natural environment, its use of imagery and sense impressions (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste). The objective is to provide the readers with a picture of what it is like to be there. This could encapsulate such things as a beautiful scene to the precise and concrete description needed by a police officer, medical doctor, or scientist.

expository essay - it is explanatory writing. Most essays require some element of exposition, and such strategies as cause and effect, compare and contrast, definition, and logic - just to name a few - all contribute in the necessary explaining of something.

formal essay - an essay dealing seriously with a subject, characterized by careful organization and formal diction and sentence structure. Many essays on literature are formal, keeping the focus on the literature discussed rather than the writer's personal response.

informal essay - it is usually brief and is written as if the writer is talking informally to the reader about some topic, using a conversational style and a personal or humorous tone. In an informal essay, the writer might digress from the topic at hand, or express some amusing, startling, or absurd opinions. Thus, an informal essay reveals as much about the personality of its author as it does about its subject.

narrative essay - an essay in the shape of a narrative, or story. The purpose in telling a story may be to illustrate a point, persuade, entertain, reinforce a thesis, and so on.

personal essay - usually in the first person point of view, an informal essay on a personal subject; it can be light and humorous, familiar and intimate in tone, subjective, and so on. Again, Montaigne's *Essais* remains a model collection. The personal essay can be synonymous with the **informal essay**.

persuasive essay - some make a distinction between argument and persuasion. Argument is the term applied to the logical approach to convincing a person while persuasion is the term applied to the emotional approach, convincing a person by way of the heart. Stirring an audience's emotions might involve arousing their anger over an issue, or presenting a situation that may arouse sadness. Most good writing is a blend of all of these approaches: to persuade a young audience of the dangers of smoking, a writer may vividly describe a smoker's lungs, narrate a sad story of a smoker dying of lung cancer, and logically present statistics on the likelihood of dying young.

euphemism

(Greek "fair speech") The substitution of a mild and pleasant expression for a harsh and blunt one, such as "to pass away" or "go to the great beyond" for to die. Euphemism has become the bane of much writing in the modern era, especially in the jargon of bureaucrats, politicians, and the military. Those who use euphemism are generally aware that they are manipulating language. Some examples: "streamline a field operation" for firing someone from a job; "correctional facility" for a jail; "pre-emptive counterattack" for when your side starts a war; and "deliberate, unprovoked act of aggression" for when the other side starts a war.

euphony

Melodious sound, the opposite of cacophony. A major feature of verse, but also a consideration in prose, euphony results from smooth-flowing meter or sentence rhythm as well as attractive sounds with emphasis on vowels and on liquid consonants and semi-vowels (l, m, n, r, w, y) as opposed to the harsher sounds of stops (b, d, g, k, p, t) and fricatives (f, s, v, z). Tennyson's famous "Lotus-Eaters" is notable for its euphony; here is an example,

The Lotos blooms below the barren peak:
The Lotos blows by every winding creak:
All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone
Thro' every hollow cave and alley lone,
Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotos-dust is blown.

Here, the assonance of the "o" sound combined with consonance and rhyme create a kind of drowsy sonority.

expert testimony

This is a strategy often used in argumentative or persuasive essays. Expert testimony can incorporate such things as an authority in a field (such as a scientist), reliable statistics, or laws. If the writer does not possess the expertise in a given field, he or she can still present a convincing argument through the selective citation of expert testimony.

exposition

It is explaining an idea or developing a thought. It is an important approach to essay writing, of course. The term can also be applied to literature, as in drama, where an explanation of present or past events is necessary to understand the plot development.

[G]

genre

A term often applied loosely to the larger forms of literary convention, a kind of analogy to "species" in biology. The major classical genres were epic, tragedy, lyric, comedy, and satire, to which is now added novel and short story.

graphic text

A work told in pictures; it may be based on drawings, paintings, photographs, etchings, and so on. Reading the visual text of the work becomes as important as the written text. The most famous graphic novel is *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, an exploration of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust told in comic strip style.

[H]

hero or heroine

In classical mythology, a person of superhuman powers, sometimes a demigod, perhaps attaining immortality. Later, the term came to mean a brave leader or a person of great physical or moral strength, a sense it often still carries today. Used in reference to literature today, the term can simply mean the "leading character," carrying with it no sense of superiority to others; a less ambiguous term, a more neutral sense, is the term protagonist.

historical reference

Any reference to an actual event from the past. In a historical novel, for instance, actual events from the past are incorporated into a fictional narrative which reconstructs and imagines the time depicted.

humor or humour

In its most common use, it is something designed to induce laughter or amusement. It can refer to the ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is comical or funny. When pluralized, humors, the term refers to the cardinal humors of ancient medical theory: blood, phlegm, yellow bile (choler), black bile (melancholy). From ancient times until the nineteenth century, the humors were believed to be largely responsible for health and disposition. Hippocrates (c. 460-c. 370 B.C.) thought an imbalance produced illness. Galen (c. A.D. 130-200) suggested that character types are produced by dominance of fluids: **sanguine**, or kindly, cheerful, amorous; **phlegmatic**, or sluggish, unresponsive; **choleric**, or quick-tempered; **melancholic**, or brooding, dejected. In literature, especially in the Renaissance, characters were portrayed according to the humors that dominated them. See **wit**.

hyperbole

The use of exaggeration for emphasis or to make a point.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? (Macbeth II. ii. 78-79)

I have told you that a thousand times!

[1]

iambic pentameter

This is the most common verse line in English poetry. It is a poetic line consisting of five verse feet ("penta-" is from a Greek word meaning "five"), with each foot an iamb - that is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Each line would have ten syllables. See **blank verse** and **meter**.

idiom

An expression peculiar to a language, not literally translatable. In French, "Il n'y pa de quoi" translates literally as "It has nothing here of what," but as a polite response to "thanks," it means, idiomatically,

"Please don't mention it," "Not at all," "It was a pleasure," "Forget it." There are many in English: "It's raining cats and dogs" or "My nose is running."

image

See **imagery**.

imagery

Collectively, the images of a literary work. A single image is a concrete picture, either literally descriptive, as in "Red roses covered the white wall," or figurative, as in "She is a rose," each carrying a sensual and emotive connotation. Images are representative of things accessible to the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Thus, the water imagery of a work may be visual, suggesting a picture; auditory, representing the sounds of a running brook; tactile, if wetness or temperature is brought to mind; or even gustatory or olfactory, if the water is given a taste or smell.

indeterminate ending

A plot term for an ending in which no definitive conclusion is reached. The story does not simply stop, but the conclusion need not be in terms of a resolved conflict, a tidy finish. A story may be much more effective without a resolution as it may force the reader to ponder possibilities.

indirect presentation

See **characterization**. Authors present their characters either directly or indirectly. In indirect presentation, the authors show us the characters in action; we infer what they are like from what they think or say or do. This is an effective way of dramatizing a character as readers are more likely to believe a character is, say, greedy, if they see the character behaving in a selfish manner.

informal language

A level of language that is usually less serious in tone and purpose than formal expression. It may have colloquialism, jargon, slang, contractions, a conversational tone, and so on.

interior monologue

A fictional presentation of unspoken thoughts as though delivered in monologue, typically characterized by **stream of consciousness** content and technique.

internal conflict

See **conflict**. It is the conflict arising from *within* a character's consciousness. It may arise from the character's moral conscience, a dilemma, a desire to conform, peer pressure, an opposition of ideas, fear, and so on.

internal rhyme

Rhyme within a line, rather than at the beginning (initial rhyme) and end (end rhyme). Here is an example from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "The Wedding Guest here beat his breast. . . ."

interpretive fiction

Unlike escape fiction, interpretive literature has meaningful, usually realistic plots, conflicts, settings, and characters. It may be serious or comedic, but it is written to broaden and deepen and sharpen our awareness of life. It illuminates the human condition and brings the readers closer to understanding ourselves and our world.

irony

Irony involves contrast between two elements. As a literary device, it can provide depth, impact, and suggest a complexity of experience. There are three primary forms of irony:

verbal irony

It is the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. If a person says, "What a beautiful day it is!" and it is pouring rain outside, the listeners would probably assume he is being verbally ironic. For a remark to be verbally ironic, the speaker and the listeners must all get the irony intended.

situational irony

This occurs when what finally takes place is different from what is expected or seems appropriate. This ironic contrast generates meaning and power.

dramatic irony

This occurs when what a character says or thinks contrasts with what the reader (and possibly other characters in the story) knows to be true. Unlike verbal irony, at least one character must be ignorant of the irony.

[N]

narration

One of the major modes of prose writing, it is the telling of a story. Other modes are argument, description, and exposition.

narrative

A story. An account of real or imagined events.

narrator

One who tells a story. The narrator determines the story's **point of view**; if the narrator is a participant in the story's action, the narrative is said to be in first person; a story told by a narrator not within the story is in third person.

[Q]

quatrain

A stanza of four lines, rhymed or unrhymed. With its many variations, it is the most common stanzaic form in English.

question and answer

Like the **rhetorical question**, this is a stylistic technique in a composition. Questions are an effective way of arousing interest or concern in a subject which can then be answered within the essay.

[R]

refrain

A word, phrase, line, or group of lines repeated regularly in a poem, usually at the end of each stanza. Refrains are often found in ballads and narrative poems to create a songlike rhythm, help build suspense, or emphasize a particular idea.

repetition

Basically, anything repeated. Extremely common in poetry and prose, it may consist of sounds, particular syllables and words, phrases, stanzas, metrical patterns, ideas, allusions, and shapes. Thus, refrain, assonance, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, parallelism all incorporate repetition.

research

To engage in looking for information, usually to support an essay. This involves reading and putting together source material to support a discussion. It is a way of bringing together expert opinion and organizing the information in a meaningful way, and not facing your audience alone. Research can be time-consuming, using such sources as the library, the Internet, personal interviews, and so on. An essay based on research requires documentation (a system of acknowledging your sources) usually cited at the end of the essay as a "Works Cited" page.

resolution

Synonymous with **dénouement**.

rhetorical question

A question not expecting an answer, or one to which the answer is more or less self-evident. It is used primarily for stylistic effect and is a common device in public speaking -- especially when the speaker is trying to rouse emotions. A famous example is from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (III. I. 60-69)

rhyme

The repetition of sounds in two or more words or phrases that appear close to each other in a poem. For example, river/shiver, song/long, leap/deep. If the rhyme occurs at the ends of lines, it is called **end rhyme**; here is an example from William Blake's "The Tiger,"

In what distant deeps or *skies*,
Burnt the fire of thine *eyes*?
On what wings dare he *aspire*?
What the hand, dare seize the *fire*?

If the rhyme occurs within line, it is called **internal rhyme**; here is an example from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "The Wedding *Guest* here beat his *breast*. . . ."

rhyme scheme

It is the pattern of rhymes in a stanza or poem. It is usually represented by small letters: for example, the rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza is *abcb*. In the previous entry, the quatrain from Blake's "The Tiger" would have a rhyme scheme of *aabb*.

rhythm

The arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables into a pattern. Rhythm is most apparent in poetry although it is a part of all good writing. See **meter**.

rising action

The rising action precedes the climax of a work. During this stage, background information is given, conflicts are introduced, and suspense is built up. Because it does so much, it is typically longer than the falling action.

[T]

theme

The theme of a story is the **central idea**, usually implied rather than directly stated. It is the story's observation about life or human nature, the controlling insight. Theme should not be confused with a "moral" like "crime does not pay" or "you can't tell a book by its cover." Avoid asking, "What does this story teach?" Instead, ask, "What does this story reveal?" Some stories do not have a theme: for instance, a good thriller, a page-turner, a pure escape fiction. Discovering and stating theme is a difficult and delicate task, for we may have an idea of what the story is about and yet find it difficult to articulate. Avoid stating theme as a single word, like "love" or "racism." Articulating theme is an important step both in developing a greater understanding of what you are reading and in understanding humanity.

thesis

Perhaps the single most important component of a good essay is a clear thesis. The thesis of an essay is its main point, its central idea. It is the reason the writer is composing the paper. It is usually summed up into one sentence, the **thesis statement**, the message the writer wants to convey to the audience. Here are some examples:

Vancouver should switch to a Ward system in the next municipal election.

The media is the single biggest instigator of eating disorders in Canada.

Romeo and Juliet and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both examine the folly of love.

thesis statement

This is the sentence expressing an essay's main point, its main focus. A good thesis statement is specific, but not self-evident. It should avoid being too general, too vague, too obvious. A good thesis statement helps the reader, providing focus and unity. Good thesis statements are challenging to write well:

"English teachers are important." This is too general a statement and needs to be made more specific: "The English teacher is responsible for the two most important skills we possess as adults: reading and writing."

"Eating a balanced diet of fruit and vegetables is good for the health." This does not work well as a thesis statement as it is too obvious, self-evident. Not many would argue with this.

"Permissive parents are the cause of juvenile crime." This is too general, too open for refutation. An improved thesis statement might be, "Overly permissive parents are one cause of juvenile crime."

"In this essay, I am going to discuss violence in hockey." This is wordy, general, and vague. A revision might be, "Violence in hockey should be held as accountable as violence in society."

third person narrative

First person is the use of "I" or "we." Second person is "you." Third person is "he," "she," "it," and "they." Many narratives are told in first person, few in second person. Third person narrative is extremely common, of course. In general, a distinction is made depending on how "omniscient" the third person narrator is; the distinctions are the objective point of view, the limited omniscient point of view, and the omniscient point of view. See **point of view**.

tone

The attitude a writer takes toward his or her subject, characters, or audience. It could be serious, playful, ironic, formal, somber, friendly, detached, pompous, intimate, and so on.

tragedy

A literary work in which the protagonist meets an unhappy or disastrous end. Unlike comedy, tragedy depicts the actions of a central character who is usually dignified or heroic. Through a series of events, this main character, or tragic hero, is brought to a final downfall. The causes of a tragic hero's downfall vary. In traditional dramas, the cause can be fate, a flaw in character, or an error in judgment. In modern dramas, where the tragic hero is often an ordinary individual, the causes range from moral or psychological weakness to the evils of society. The tragic hero, though defeated, usually gains a measure of wisdom or self-awareness.

[U]**understatement**

The opposite of hyperbole. It is a minimizing of something (often ironic), a lessening of something, in order to emphasize it. In everyday speech, it can be a gentle irony of describing something spectacular or impressive as "not bad" or "OK." A well-known example comes from *Romeo and Juliet* when Mercutio, knowing himself mortally wounded, replies to Benvolio's belief that the wound cannot be that bad: "Ay, ay, *a scratch, a scratch* . . . 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but *'tis enough, 'twill serve.*"

universality

Universality is the quality of a story that gives it relevance beyond the narrow confines of its particular characters, subject, or setting. Stories which have universality reveal human nature or common truths of life experience; the story could apply to more people's experience.

[V]**verisimilitude**

Verisimilitude is a life-like quality possessed by a story as revealed through its plot, setting, conflict, and characterization. Taken together, a true-to-life impression is created for the reader.

voice

Voice is a manifestation of a writer's style. It is the persona of the writer - whether actual or contrived. It is probably the last acquirement of a proficient writer. It encompasses diction, the technicalities of writing, organization, ideas (content), fluency, tone, vigor, and creativity all in one big, holistic bundle! It encompasses all.

volta

The turn of thought occurring after the octave of an Italian sonnet. A Miltonic sonnet is characterized by the absence of this turn, as the thought continues uninterrupted from octave to sestet. The term may also be applied to other places where a turn of thought occurs, as sometimes after the first two quatrains of a Shakespearean sonnet.

[W]**wit**

Wit is intellectual acuity; humor, an amused indulgence of human deficiencies. Wit now denotes the acuity that produces laughter. It originally meant mere understanding, then quickness of understanding, then, beginning in the seventeenth century, quick perception coupled with creative fancy. In the eighteenth century, wit and nature were related -- nature provided the rules of the universe; wit allowed these rules to be interpreted and expressed.