

A Level Literature Key Vocabulary List

20 different literary devices and their meanings

Alliteration

Alliteration is the literary technique of using a sequence of words that begin with the same letter or sound for a poetic or whimsical effect.

Examples: Many of Stan Lee's iconic comic book characters have alliterative names: Peter Parker, Matthew Murdock, Reed Richards, and Bruce Banner.

Amplification

Amplification is the technique of embellishing a simple sentence with more details to increase its significance.

Example: "A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly. You can have a wonky nose and a crooked mouth and a double chin and stick-out teeth, but if you have good thoughts it will shine out of your face like sunbeams and you will always look lovely." —
Roald Dahl, *The Twits*

Analogy

An analogy compares one thing to something else to help explain a similarity that might not be easy to see.

Example: In *The Dragons of Eden*, Carl Sagan compares the universe's entire history with a single Earth year to better demonstrate the context of when major events occurred; i.e., the Earth formed on September 9, humans first appeared at 10:30 p.m. on December 31.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is when non-human things like animals or objects act human, exhibiting traits such as speech, thoughts, complex emotions, and sometimes even wearing clothes and standing upright.

Example: While most fairy tales feature animals that act like humans, the *Beauty and the Beast* films anthropomorphize household objects: talking clocks, singing teapots, and more.

Antithesis

Antithesis places two contrasting and polarized sentiments next to each other in order to accent both.

Example: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." —Neil Armstrong

Colloquialism

Colloquialism is using casual and informal speech, including slang, in formal writing to make dialogue seem more realistic and authentic. It often incorporates respelling words and adding apostrophes to communicate the pronunciation.

Example: "How you doin'?" asked *Friends* character Joey Tribbiani.

Circumlocution

Circumlocution is when the writer deliberately uses excessive words and overcomplicated sentence structures to intentionally convolute their meaning. In other words, it means to write lengthily and confusingly on purpose.

Example: In *Shrek the Third*, [Pinocchio uses circumlocution](#) to avoid giving an honest answer to the Prince's question.

[Euphemism](#)

A euphemism is a soft and inoffensive word or phrase that replaces a harsh, unpleasant, or hurtful one for the sake of sympathy or civility.

Example: Euphemisms like “passed away” and “downsizing” are quite common in everyday speech, but a good example in literature comes from *Harry Potter*, where the wizarding community refers to the villain Voldemort as “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” in fear of invoking him.

[Hyperbole](#)

Hyperbole is using exaggeration to add more power to what you're saying, often to an unrealistic or unlikely degree.

Example: “I had to wait in the station for ten days—an eternity.” —Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Imagery

Imagery refers to writing that invokes the reader's senses with descriptive [word choice](#) to create a more vivid and realistic recreation of the scene in their mind.

Example: “The barn was very large. It was very old. It smelled of hay and it smelled of manure. It smelled of the perspiration of tired horses and the wonderful sweet breath of patient cows. It often had a sort of peaceful smell as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world.” —E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web*

Metaphor

Similar to an analogy, a [metaphor](#) is a figure of speech that compares two different things to show their similarities by insisting that they’re the same.

Example:

“All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances,

And one man in his time plays many parts. . .”

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Mood

A story’s mood is the emotional response the author is targeting. A writer sets the mood not just with the plot and characters, but also with tone and the aspects they choose to describe.

Example: In the horror novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, the literary mood of vampires is scary and ominous, but in the comedic film *What We Do In Shadows*, the literary mood of vampires is friendly and light-hearted.

Motif

A motif is a recurring element in a story that holds some symbolic or conceptual meaning. It's closely related to [theme](#), but motifs are specific objects or events, while themes are abstract ideas.

Example: In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's obsession with washing her hands is a motif that symbolizes her guilt.

[Onomatopoeia](#)

[Fancy literary term](#) onomatopoeia refers to words that represent sounds, with pronunciations similar to those sounds.

Example: The word "buzz" as in "a buzzing bee" is actually pronounced like the noise a bee makes.

[Oxymoron](#)

An oxymoron combines two contradictory words to give them a deeper and more poetic meaning.

Example: "Parting is such sweet sorrow." —William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Paradox

Similar to an oxymoron, a paradox combines two contradictory ideas in a way that, although illogical, still seems to make sense.

Example: "I know only one thing, and that is I know nothing." —Socrates in Plato's *Apology*

[Personification](#)

Personification is when an author attributes human characteristics metaphorically to nonhuman things like the weather or inanimate objects. Personification is strictly figurative, whereas anthropomorphism posits that those things really do act like humans.

Example: “The heart wants what it wants—or else it does not care . . .” —Emily Dickinson

[Portmanteau](#)

Portmanteau is the literary device of joining two words together to form a new word with a hybrid meaning.

Example: Words like “blog” (web + log), “paratrooper” (parachute + trooper), “motel” (motor + hotel), and “telethon” (telephone + marathon) are all portmanteaus in common English.

[Simile](#)

Like metaphors, similes also compare two different things to point out their similarities.

However, [the difference between similes and metaphors](#) is that similes use the words “like” or “as” to soften the connection and explicitly show it’s just a comparison.

Example: “Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away, as if I’m nothing more than a woman of sand, left by a careless child too near the water.” —Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

[Tone](#)

Tone refers to the language and word choice an author uses with their subject matter, like a playful tone when describing children playing, or a hostile tone when describing the emergence of a villain. If you’re confused about [tone vs. mood](#), tone refers mostly to individual aspects and details, while mood refers to the emotional attitude of the entire piece of work.

Example: Told in the first person, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* uses the angsty and sardonic tone of its teenage protagonist to depict the character's mindset, including slang and curse words.