

LITERARY TERMS CHEAT SHEET

Act – One of the main divisions of a play or opera

Allegory – Figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another

Alliteration – When the beginnings or middles of words sound alike – when either consonant or vowel sounds are repeated

Allusion – A reference to something else, either direct or indirect

Ambiguity – When something is unclear or indefinite

Anagram – A word or phrase formed by transposing the letters of another word; a game whereby anagrams are created

Anaphora – The purposeful repetition of a word or phrase for the sake of style. For example, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up...I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia...”

Anastrophe – Inversion of the usual syntactical order of words

Antagonist – Any force in a literary or dramatic work that strives to undermine the protagonist, or hero

Aphorism – A pithy saying embodying a universal truth. For example, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Archetype – A universal pattern or mold upon which people and characters are based; a prototype of character

Aside – The breaking of the fourth wall and speaking directly to the audience; a temporary breaking of form

Assonance – Alliteration involving vowels

Asyndeton – The omission of conjunctions for stylistic effect: “...Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

Bildungsroman – Type of novel concerned with the edification of a young protagonist

Caesura – A pause or break in poetry, sometimes marked with a line

Canon – The entire body of work of a particular author, genre, field, nation, etc...

Canzone – A poem in which each word that appears at the end of a line in the first stanza appears again at the end of one of the lines of each of the following stanzas. Also a variety of lyric poetry that resembles the madrigal

Catharsis – Emotional purging, reliving the build-up of emotional tension

Chiasmus – A reversal of the syntax in two otherwise parallel phrases: “He went to the country, to the town went she.”

Chorus – A lyric poem or ode that is sung by a group: the refrain of a song; a group of characters that comment on the action

Cinquain – A stanza of five lines. Also a short poem consisting of five, usually unrhymed lines, containing, respectively, two, four, six, eight, and two syllables.

Circumlocution – A roundabout or indirect way of speaking; the act of talking around something

Cliché – A phrase or motif that is overly familiar and trite. Also a platitude or saying

Colloquialism – Slang

Conflict – Disagreement, challenge, struggle or battle

Connotation – A secondary meaning in addition to a word’s primary meaning – often connected to emotions and/or senses

Consonance – Alliteration involving consonants

Constructivism – Learning theory whereby students learn by doing as opposed to by receiving a didactic lecture. Also, an art movement whereby art exists not just for its own sake but for a higher social purpose

Couplet – A pair of lines in poetry that work together and which usually, but not always, rhyme

Criticism – The practice of analyzing, classifying, interpreting, or evaluating literary or other artistic works

Deconstructionism – The school of thought/theory that says that, among other things, meaning lies not in the actual text but in the individual’s interpretation of the text – that there is no role for certainty, identity or truth in literary criticism

Denotation – The literal and objective definition of a term, separate from a word’s connotations, which are the ancillary definitions or the baggage that comes along for the ride.

Denouement – The resolution of a story

Deus ex machina – When a god-like force comes to rescue the protagonist or to otherwise resolve things. It is an arbitrary contrivance used to save the day

Dialect – A socially distinct variety of language, usually substandard

Diction – The selection, placement and order of words in a literary text

Didactic – Heavy-handed and instructive; preachy

Doggerel – Comic, burlesque, loose, crass

Doppelgänger – Ghostly double that often haunts its Earthly counterpart

Dynamic – Of or pertaining to motion and force. Also, pertaining to the range of volume

Dystopia – a society characterized by misery and squalor – the opposite of a utopia

Electra complex – The psychoanalytic theory that a female's psycho-sexual development involves a sexual attachment to her father, which is analogous to the Oedipus complex, which involves a boy's sexual attachment to his mother

End-stopped line – Lines of poetry are end-stopped when they terminate with punctuation

Enjambment – Lines of poetry are considered enjambed when a single thought continues from one line to the next without punctuation

Epic – a long poem, centered upon a hero, in which a series of great achievements or events is narrated in elevated style

Epilogue – The concluding part of a novel or play that sometimes, but not always, deals with the future of the characters

Epistolary – A story written in the form of a series of letters. The *Griffin and Sabine* books are epistolaries

Epithet – A derogatory nickname

Epode – A lyric poem in which a long verse is followed by a shorter verse. Also, the third part of a triadic Greek ode following the strophe and the antistrophe

Euphemism – Using a pleasant or benign word to substitute for a more offensive one

Explication – The analysis and explanation of something, such as a literary work

Exposition – The set-up of a story. Also, any part of a play or movie where the action is described and not shown

Farce – A light dramatic work in which highly improbable plot situations, exaggerated characters, and often slapstick elements are used for humorous effect

Figurative language – Language that is not literally true but is essentially true. Metaphor is an example.

Fixed form – A poem that may be categorized by the pattern of its lines, meter, rhythm, or stanzas. A sonnet is a fixed form of poetry because by definition it must have fourteen lines. Other fixed forms include limerick, sestina, and villanelle. However, poems written in a fixed form may not always fit into categories precisely, because writers sometimes vary traditional forms to create innovative effects

Flashback – When the setting of a story changes and goes back in time to provide information that is crucial to the present

Foil – A character in a work whose behavior and values contrast with those of another character in order to highlight the distinctive temperament of that character (usually the protagonist)

Foot – The metrical unit by which a line of poetry is measured. An iamb is a two-syllable foot whereby the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed: da_DUM. A trochee is a two-syllable foot of opposite dynamics: DA-dum

Foreshadowing – The dropping of a hint or clue early on in a story so as to help the audience predict what will happen later

Formalism – Strict adherence to traditional forms

Genre – Category

Hamartia – A tragic flaw or misstep that leads to a hero's tragic downfall. Hubris is a form of hamartia

Hero – The protagonist of a story that often embodies heroic qualities and that overcomes significant challenges

Horatian satire – In general, a gentler, more good-humored and sympathetic kind of satire, somewhat tolerant of human folly even while laughing at it. Named after the poet Horace, whose satire epitomized it, Horatian satire tends to ridicule human folly in general or by type rather than attack specific persons

Hubris – Excessive arrogance. Also, the act of putting oneself in the position of a god

Hyperbole – Gross exaggeration: “You never listen” or “You are always late”

Hypertext – New genre of poetry and fiction with loose form and involving the Internet and certain interactive components

Iamb – A two-syllable foot whereby the first syllable is short, or unstressed, and the second syllable is long, or stressed

Idiolect – An individual's own personal language or manner of speaking and writing – their personal linguistic choices

Imagery – The formation of mental images in a reader's mind based on figurative and sensory description in a text

Invective – Vehement denunciation, censure or reproach; venomous language; a harsh accusation – BOTH ADJ AND NOUN

Inflection – The rise and fall of the spoken word – the melody or pitch. Also, the re-arrangement of a word by adding affixes

Irony – Dramatic is when audience knows what characters don't; Verbal is sarcasm; Situational is surprising twist of events

Juxtaposition – The side-by-side placement of elements, usually for the sake of finding contrast

Malapropism – The act or habit of misusing words ridiculously. G. W. Bush's “Don't underestimate me.” Based on an 18th century character Mrs. Malaprop from Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Rivals*

Melodrama – Form of drama that ignores cause and effect and grossly exaggerates emotions and events

Metaphor – A figure of speech whereby something is said to be something else “His eyes are moons shining that shine down upon the dark night of my melancholic soul” or “School is prison.” Also a symbol

Metatheatre – When a play comments on itself; a play within a play when the microcosm comments on the macrocosm

Metonymy – A figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated, as in the use of *Washington* for *the United States government* or of *the sword* for *military power* or *Uncle Sam* for the *U.S. government*

Mood – As distinct from tone, which is the author's attitude, mood represents the vibe of the setting or the emotional state of the reader

Motif – A recurring image, symbol or theme in a literary, artistic or musical work

Mythology – Set of myths, or stories, such as those of the Greeks, that serves as a foundation for later stories and also for philosophical and religious beliefs and which contains archetypes (prototypes for characters, people and concepts)

Nemesis – An opponent or rival whom one cannot overcome

Octave – A poetic stanza of eight lines, usually forming one part of a sonnet

Oedipus complex – A Freudian term derived from Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King*. It describes a psychological complex that is predicated on a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for his mother's love and his desire to eliminate his father in order to take his father's place with his mother. The female equivalent of this complex is called the Electra complex

Onomatopoeia – The use of a word that resembles the sound it denotes: buzz, rattle, bang, and sizzle

Ottava rima – A stanza of eight iambic lines, usually iambic pentameters. Each stanza consists of three alternate rhymes and one double rhyme, following the a-b-a-b-a-b-c-c pattern

Oxymoron – A condensed form of paradox in which two contradictory words are used together, as in "sweet sorrow" or "original copy"

Paradox – A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true. For example standing still is more tiring than walking; we must often wage war to experience peace; to love and support someone, you have to sometimes be tough and provide strict boundaries

Parody – A form of satire that involves mimicry

Pedantic – Being showy as a learner and/or overly persnickety as a teacher

Periphrasis – The use of extraneous or roundabout language; a synonym for circumlocution

Personification – When human qualities and actions are attributed to inanimate things or ideas

Picaresque - pertaining to or characteristic of a form of prose fiction, originally developed in Spain, in which the adventures of an engagingly roguish hero are described in a series of usually humorous or satiric episodes that often depict, in realistic detail, the everyday life of the common people: *picaresque novel*; *picaresque hero*

Plot – the plan, scheme, or main story of a literary or dramatic work, as a play, novel, or short story. In his text *Poetics*, Aristotle says that plot, or mythos, is a narrative's most crucial element.

Poetry – Literary work in metrical form that is evocative of images, the senses and elevated thought

Point of View – The perspective from which something is viewed and then discussed. A narrator usually writes from either the first or third person point of view, and, if third, then either the objective, limited omniscient or omniscient point of view

Portmanteau – A new word formed by joining two others and combining their meanings; "'smog' is a blend of 'smoke' and 'fog'"; "'motel' is a portmanteau word made by combining 'motor' and 'hotel'"; "'brunch' is a well-known portmanteau"

Précis – An objective (not subjective) and succinct abstract, synopsis or summary that is usually written in the past tense and that is absent any personal conclusions or assumptions about the author's intent or the reader's experience

Prologue – Introduction or preface to a literary or artistic work – a literary or artistic appetizer

Prose – The ordinary form of spoken or written language, without metrical structure, as distinguished from poetry or verse

Prosody – The study of versification, specifically, metrical structure

Protagonist – The hero of a dramatic narrative; the principal character in a literary work

Pun – A play on words whereby the sounds are the same but the meanings are different

Quatrain – A stanza or poem of four lines, usually with alternate rhymes

Refrain – A phrase, line, or group of lines repeated at intervals throughout a poem (or song) generally at the end of the stanza; a synonym for chorus, although some musical scholars argue that a refrain resolves while a chorus introduces

Rhetoric – The art and study of writing and speaking to communicate, and especially to persuade

Rhyme – When the endings of words sound alike

Rhythm – An ordered, recurrent alternation of strong and weak elements of sound and silence in speech and music

Romance – A medieval tale based on legend, chivalric love and adventure, or the supernatural **(2)**: a prose narrative treating imaginary characters involved in events remote in time or place and usually heroic, adventurous, or mysterious **(3)**: a love story especially in the form of a novel **b**: a class of such literature

Satire – A humorous mocking of something, often political, in order to affect change; a humorous depiction of human folly

Satyr – Mythological lecherous male character that is usually depicted as half man, half beast

Scansion – An analysis of (and often the marking of) a poem's versification, or metrical structure

Scene – A subdivision of an act. In modern plays, the units of action in which there are no changes in the setting or breaks in the continuity of time. In traditional plays, when there are no changes in setting or character line-up.

Scheme – An analytical structure (or statement) Also, a literary structure, for example, anaphora or parallelism

Semantics – The study of meaning; the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence as opposed to the structure of such

Sestet – A set of six lines of any verse, so long as they function as a unit – especially the last six lines of certain sonnets

Sestina – A poem of six six-line stanzas and a three-line envoy, often without rhyme, in which each stanza repeats the end words of the lines of the first stanza but in a different order – the envoy using the six words again – three in the middle and three at the end. Also called a sextain.

Setting – The time and locale of the scenes of a story

Simile – A figure of speech wherein two unlike things are compared, often involving words such as "like" or "as;" a simile is distinct from a metaphor in that it allows the two items being compared to remain as distinct entities, while a metaphor says that one thing IS another thing

Slant rhyme – A form of rhyme whereby either the vowels or the consonants of the stressed syllables are the same, as in: *mine* and *time* or *years* and *yours*. Also called half rhyme or oblique rhyme

Speaker – The voice used by an author to tell a story or speak a poem. The speaker is often a created identity, and should not automatically be equated with the author's self. The speaker of a poem is like the narrator of a novel

Spoonerism – An inadvertent slip of the tongue or a purposeful play on words whereby the speaker mixes up corresponding sounds, for example “well-boiled icicle” in place of “well-oiled bicycle”

Stanza – A division of a poem consisting of a series of lines arranged together in a usually recurring pattern of meter and rhyme

Static character – A character that remains unchanged throughout a story – he or she does not arc

Strophe – The first of a pair of stanzas of alternating form on which the structure of a given poem is based; the first movement of the chorus in classical Greek drama while turning from one side of the orchestra to the other; the part of a choral ode sung while this strophic movement is executed

Subplot – A plot subordinate to the main plot. Also called the “B” story when the main story is called the “A” story

Syllepsis – Like a zeugma, except that both pairings are grammatically and idiomatically correct: “He took the oath and his seat”

Symbolism – When a material thing represents an abstract idea, for example when a cage represents subjugation or slavery

Synecdoche – A figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole (as *hand* for *sailor*), the whole for a part (as *the law* for *police officer*), the specific for the general (as *cutthroat* for *assassin*), the general for the specific (as *thief* for *pickpocket*), or the material for the thing made from it (as *steel* for *sword*); **Think about how synecdoche differs from metonymy**

Synesthesia – The use of cross-sensory metaphors, such as “bitter wind;” the description of one sense using terms of another

Synopsis – A brief summary of the plot of a novel, motion picture, play or other literary or artistic work

Syntax – The order of words in a sentence; the use and order of a variety of sentence forms in a text; the rules and principles that govern how sentences are constructed in any given language

Terza rima – An interlocking three-line rhyme scheme: aba, bcb, cdc, ded, and so on. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" are written in terza rima.

Theme – In fiction: the central idea or message of a text; in non-fiction: the message and/or topic of a text; in rhetoric: the author's prevailing opinion or point. Also, a recurring motif

Thesis – In an essay: the author's prevailing opinion; in fiction, the central message of a text written in sentence form (may be synonymous with “theme”)

Tone – The author's attitude toward the audience, the subject matter or the world at large and which is evident in the text via diction, syntax and other literary elements and devices

Tragedy – A narrative whereby the hero takes a fall, either because of his or her own tragic flaw (hamartia) or because of external circumstances. Tragedies usually begin high and end low. See Aristotle's *Poetics* and other sources for more info

Tragic flaw – The hero's personal flaw that leads to his or her own downfall - while “hamartia” refers to either a flaw OR a misstep, a tragic flaw is strictly a flaw

Tragicomedy – A blend of tragedy and comedy. While a tragedy begins high and ends low, a tragicomedy usually ends high

Travesty – A grotesque and base satire of a serious work

Triplet – A set of three rhyming lines of the same length; a stanza of three lines. Also called a tercet

Trochee – A two-syllable foot whereby the first syllable is long, or stressed, and the second syllable is short, or unstressed (opposite of an iamb)

Trope – Any literary or rhetorical device, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, that consists in the use of words in other than their literal sense. Synonyms: Figure of speech

Unreliable narrator – A narrator who is shown to be lacking in credibility, i.e., crazy, intoxicated, mentally feeble or a child

Utopia – the name given to the notion of a perfect society – taken from the title of a book written in 1516 by Sir Thomas More

Verisimilitude – State of being verisimilar, which is life-like and true; realism

Vernacular – A non-standard dialect or manner of speech that is particular to a group or class

Verse – A generic term used to describe poetic lines composed in a measured rhythmical pattern, that are often, but not necessarily, rhymed; a synonym for both poetry and poem; the part of a song that comes after the intro but precedes the chorus

Versification – The study and application of the principles and uses of meter, rhyme, and stanza forms - sometimes also extending to sound effects (figures of sound) such as alliteration and onomatopoeia

Zeugma – The use of one verb in two *distinct* ways, for example, “If you don't approve. Let me know. I can take it. I might take it with a fistful of pills, but I can take it” In zeugma, unlike syllepsis, the single word does not coincide grammatically or idiomatically with one member of the pair. Syllepsis: He took the oath and his seat; Zeugma: Execute your laws and your citizens.