

40+ Literary Devices

Can't tell your anastrophe from your elbow? This list will help you master the most common literary devices used today.



Allegory

A type of narrative that uses characters and plot to exemplify abstract ideas and themes. In an allegorical story, events and characters tend to represent more than they appear on the surface.

Alliteration

A series of words used in quick succession that all start with the same letters or sound. **Examples:** Love's Labour's Lost, Sense and Sensibility, The Haunting of Hill House.

Allusion

A passing or indirect descriptive reference to something. **Example:** calling the star pupil 'Einstein' is an allusion to the physicist Albert Einstein.

Anachronism

When something happens or is attributed to a different era than when it actually existed. It can be intentional if the author wants to comment on a theme like time or society.

Anaphora

The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a series of clauses or sentences. **Example:** Martin Luther King Jr's LK's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Anastrophe

A figure of speech in which the traditional sentence structure is reversed. **Example:** In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda says, "Ready, are you?" instead of "Are you ready?"

Anthropomorphism

When human traits or qualities are applied to non-human things — such as objects, animals, or weather. **Example:** Hobbes in *Calvin and Hobbes* and most of the characters from *The Jungle Book*.

Aphorism

A universally accepted truth stated in a concise manner. They often take the form of an adage or proverb. **Example:** "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Chiasmus

When two or more parallel clauses are inverted. **Example:** "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

Circumlocution

Expressing a simple idea in a long and wordy way. **Example:** "I placed a morsel of sourdough into my mouth, masticated it into mush and progressed it into my alimentary canal" instead of "I ate some bread".

Colloquialism

The use of casual and informal language in writing; this can also include slang. **Example:** a cowboy might say "howdy" where an Australian would say "g'day."

Euphemism

An indirect or "politer" way of describing something deemed inappropriate or awkward to address directly. **Example:** a lady might go to "powder her nose" when in fact she is headed to the lavatory.

Euphony

Words and phrases that create a pleasing sound when read aloud are said to be 'euphonic'. The term 'cellar door' is often cited as a prime example. The opposite of a cacophony.

Flashback

Where the narrative jumps into the past, revealing to the reader in real-time what has gone on before. **Example:** as the villain reveals his plan, the book flashes back to an earlier time.

Foreshadowing

Hinting at events yet to come, perhaps to create tension or suspense. **Example:** Fr. Laurence tells Romeo and Juliet, "These violent delights have violent ends," foreshadowing the tragedy.

Hyperbole

An exaggerated statement that emphasizes the significance of the statement's actual meaning. **Example:** to die of embarrassment.

Hypophora

Similar to a rhetorical question, a hypophora is where the person raises a question and immediately answers it themselves. **Example:** "Should I have a cookie? I think I will."

Imagery

An appeal to readers' senses through descriptive language. Crucial for any writer looking to show "show, don't tell."

Irony

A contrast between how things seem and how they really are. Varieties include **dramatic** (readers know what will happen before characters do), **situational** (the expected outcome is subverted), and **verbal** (when the meaning is the opposite of what was said).

Isocolon

Where two or more phrases or clauses have a similar structure, rhythm, and even length. **Examples:** "Veni, vidi, vici" and "Finders, keepers; losers, weepers".

Juxtaposition

Where there are two or more characters, themes, concepts, places whose contrasts highlight their profound differences. **Example:** A *Tale of Two Cities* juxtaposed the vast social inequality that sparked the French Revolution.

Litotes

Litotes (*lie-TOE-teez*) are phrases that express certain sentiments through their opposites, by saying that that reverse is not the case. **Example:** "you won't be sorry."

Malapropism

Where common phrases are misheard or misspoken, and often confused with other more common words. **Example:** "to dance a flamingo" instead of the Flamenco.

Metaphor

When it comes to literary devices, this one is a heavy hitter. Unlike juxtaposition, metaphors help us make sense of things by comparing the common characteristics of two disconnected things.

Motif

A recurring element that develops the theme of the narrative. This might be a symbol, concept, or image. **Example:** in *Lord of the Flies*, the fire motif represents technology and civilization.

Onomatopoeia

Amusingly, this difficult-to-pronounce word refers to words that sound like the thing they're referring to. **Examples:** whiz, buzz, snap, grunt, etc.

Oxymoron

Two contradictory words put together to describe something. While juxtaposition contrasts two story elements, oxymorons are about the actual words. **Examples:** bittersweet, random order.

Paradox

From the Greek word paradoxon, which means "beyond belief." It's a premise that would seem to be valid, but if you were to follow it down the rabbit hole, would appear to be self-contradictory or logically impossible.

Pathetic Fallacy

Where the emotions or thoughts of a character is ascribed to a non-human or inanimate object, often to mirror that character's state. **Example:** on our wedding day, the sun smiled down on us.

Personification

Using human traits to describe non-human things (such as animals, object, or natural phenomena). **Example:** the skies poured down angrily.

Point of View

The mode of narration in a story. There are various types of point of view (POV) an author can choose, and each one will have a huge impact on the reading experience.

Polysyndeton

Using several conjunctions (or connecting words) in succession for dramatic effect. **Example:** "I lost a grand on the roulette table **and** spilled my drink on the croupier **and** accidentally dropped my passport in the fountain for good measure."

Portmanteau

Smashing words together to create a new word that describes the combination (or a mix) of the two. **Example:** Smoke and fog becomes *smog*. Breakfast and lunch becomes *brunch*. Kanye and Kim becomes *Kimye*.

Repetition

Repetition can be used to drill home a point or to create a certain atmosphere. **Example:** horror writers often use repetition to make the reader feel trapped and scared, especially since repeating things is seen as a sign of mental instability.

Satire

Critiquing some absurd aspect of human nature or society — usually through exaggeration, ridicule, or irony.

Simile

While a metaphor draws resemblances between two things by saying that "Thing A is Thing B," a simile says that "Thing A is like Thing B." It might also use the words "such as" or "as."

Soliloquy

A character speaks their thoughts aloud, usually at length. They're not speaking for the benefit of other characters — the purpose of a soliloquy is for a character to reflect independently.

Spoonerism

Where the initial sounds of two consecutive words are swapped — sometimes to an absurd or comedic effect. **Example:** "Blushing crow" instead of "crushing blow".

Symbolism

To represent abstract concepts and ideas in their stories, authors turn to symbols and symbolism. Symbols typically derive from objects — for instance, a dove might represent peace, or raven might represent death.

Synecdoche

Using a part of something to refer to the whole. **Example:** calling workers "hired hands" or telling people to "check out the wheels," meaning your car.

Verse

A style of writing that follows the meter, structure or rhyme scheme of poetry. The opposite of writing in verse is to write in prose.

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