

Literary Devices

A literary device is a general term that refers to the techniques and strategies used to enhance writing, especially in literature. It includes *literary elements*, which cover an entire written work, such as setting, theme, and tone, as well as *literary techniques*, which apply to individual words and sentences. Recognizing literary devices while reading improves overall comprehension and helps with understanding both the subtle details and the greater meaning of a story. This handout will provide definitions and examples of common literary devices.

Literary Elements

Allegory: A story that appears to be about one thing but actually represents a larger theme such as an historical event or a political ideology.

Example: George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is an allegory for the 1917 Russian Revolution. In this novel, the animals take on human characteristics as they struggle for freedom and equality but eventually fall under a dictatorship, in a manner similar to what happened to the Russians under Joseph Stalin.

Characterization: The act of creating characters in a story. In literature, there are two types of characterization: direct characterization and indirect characterization.

Example (Direct): In Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Dahl directly describes the character of Grandpa Joe as being old and frail by saying that he is "ninety-six and a half" and "delicate and weak" (2021).

Example (Indirect): In Dahl's same novel, he uses dialogue between Charlie and his grandparents to indirectly reveal the personality traits of the different characters.

Irony: A deliberate contradiction between what is expected and what actually happens. When used throughout a story, irony can create tension, sympathy, or humor. There are three main types of irony: situational, verbal, and dramatic.

Example (Situational): In *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry, a married couple with financial difficulties tries to find special gifts for each other. The wife cuts her long hair and sells it to get the money to buy a chain for her husband's precious watch. However, the husband sells his watch to buy beautiful combs for his wife's long hair. The situation is ironic because the result is unexpected by both characters.

Example (Verbal): In J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield states, "I have to have this operation. It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain" (1951). This is verbal irony because Holden says one thing but really means the opposite. Most people would agree that a tumor on the brain is a very serious issue, no matter the size.

Example (Dramatic): In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, tension is created because the reader knows that Juliet is in a sleeping state, but Romeo believes she is dead. This leads to a tragic misunderstanding where both characters end up taking their own lives.

Mood: The overall emotional attitude that the writer wants the reader to feel.

Example: In Bram Stoker's horror novel *Dracula*, the mood is that vampires are scary and evil. However, in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga, the mood is that vampires are romantic and magical.

Motif: A recurring element that holds a symbolic meaning.

Example: In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, hunting is a motif that is repeated throughout the series. First, it is the literal hunting of animals for food. Then it is seen when the characters are hunted by each other for survival. Finally, the motif of hunting is seen when Katniss, the protagonist, is hunted by the government for leading a rebellion.

Setting: The time and place in which a story happens. The setting can influence the events in the story and the attitude of the characters.

Example: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in Maycomb, Alabama, in the early 1930s. Because of this time and place, certain societal beliefs existed that might not exist in a more modern setting.

Theme: The inferred message or position on a topic that the story wants to convey. It is no coincidence that the word "theme" sounds similar to "thesis". The theme is like the thesis of the entire story. One of the most common topics of a story is love, but in one story's particular case, the theme may be learning to love oneself.

Example: In the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, the topic could be good versus evil, but the theme is that good will triumph over evil in the end.

Tone: An author's attitude towards a certain subject in a story, often reflected in the personality or voice of a character. If the author wants to sound serious, the words will be more formal or technical, without much flourish. If the author wants to sound passionate, the words will be more descriptive and exaggerated instead of basic or neutral.

Example: In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator says:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. (...) I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture--a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees--very gradually--I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (1843)

The author's tone mixes anxiety and paranoia. He also uses short sentences and exclamation points to emphasize the manic thought process of the narrator.

Unreliable Narrator: A narrator who speaks from a first-person point of view and whom the reader cannot trust due to the narrator's inability to know about everything. This narrator either intentionally deceives the reader or unintentionally misunderstands the situation because of their own problems.

Example: In the above-mentioned novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield is the first-person point of view narrator. Because of his personal trauma, he views the world

with anger and tells his story with a negative attitude. This prevents the reader from truly understanding the other characters in the story, since those characters are presented through Holden's pessimistic perspective.

Literary Techniques

Allusion: A reference to other well-known people, places, or events that exist outside the story. It is assumed that the reader understands the reference without the need for explanation.

Example: "Herculean strength" alludes to the mythological Hercules, who had amazing strength. Since most people are familiar with this Greek mythological figure, the writer does not need to explain who Hercules was.

Analogy: A comparison used to show a similarity in a way that might not be easy to see.

Example: *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, by Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (1923)

In this poem, spring flowers, autumn leaves, the Garden of Eden, and the sunrise are all analogies for the precious things in life, which all must change and cannot last forever. (Eden in the poem is also an allusion to the biblical Garden of Eden.)

Colloquialism: Casual or informal slang speech used to create more realistic dialogue or a specific image of a character. It often includes changes in word spelling to communicate different pronunciation patterns.

Example: In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*, the character Jay Gatsby often refers to the narrator, who is his neighbor, as “old sport” when talking with him (1925).

In this context, the phrase “old sport” is used colloquially to mean “friend.” It is a term of endearment, which is a phrase used to show affection or love. The use of “old sport” shows platonic love and affection between two friends. This style of speaking is meant to portray Gatsby as a man who wants to be perceived as a legitimately wealthy, lighthearted person and an intimate friend, when he is actually none of those things.

Euphemism: A nicer word or phrase that indirectly represents a more serious or unpleasant topic. It is used to appear kind and proper.

Example: “Passed away” is a euphemism for “died” because it sounds gentler and more peaceful.

Exposition: The introduction of key background information, such as information on setting or characters, in a story.

Example: In the above-mentioned novel, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald gives a great deal of exposition on the guests who attend Gatsby’s parties. Instead of allowing the reader to learn about these guests through their actions or dialogue, the author describes the attitude of the party guests as seen through the narrator’s eyes.

Foreshadowing: A technique used to provide a clue to future events without telling the reader or audience what will happen.

Example: In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, the character of the scarecrow wants to have a brain. However, he is the one who has the cleverest ideas of how to fight off the Wicked Witch of the West. This foreshadows that he already has a brain and does not need the wizard’s gift to be smart.

Imagery: Descriptive language used to draw a picture and create a specific feeling in the reader’s mind.

Example: In E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, the barn where Charlotte the spider and Wilbur the pig live is described in the following excerpt: "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" (1952).

This imagery creates a picture of a calm and happy place for the animals who lived there and the people who entered the barn.

Hyperbole: An intentional exaggeration that is used to increase the effect of something.

Example: In Shakespeare's above-mentioned *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo greatly exaggerates Juliet's brightness because he is so infatuated with her:

The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars.
As daylight doth a lamp. Her eye in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night. (2.2.19-22)

It is an exaggeration to claim that Juliet's cheek is brighter than the stars or that its brightness would make birds believe that it was not dark at night.

Metaphor: A comparison of two different things represented in a way that is not literally accurate. A metaphor states that one thing is another thing.

Example: In William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, he says, "All the world's a stage."

The world is not literally a stage, but it represents the idea that life is a show, and the world is a place to perform or to watch events happen before one's eyes.

Paradox: A combination of two ideas that appear contradictory, or opposite, but still make sense.

Example: “What a pity that youth must be wasted on the young.” – George Bernard Shaw, playwright

This contrasts “youth” with “young”, which are two related terms. This example implies that young people do not appreciate the value of their youth. This idea makes sense to people who are not young anymore.

Example: “I can resist anything but temptation.” – Oscar Wilde, poet and playwright

This contrasts the words “resist” and “temptation”, which are two words that usually go together. Resisting temptation means not taking action on every desire we feel. Wilde uses paradox to say that he can resist everything, but he cannot resist temptation. In reality, this means he cannot resist anything at all.

Personification: A metaphor that assigns human characteristics to non-human objects, abstract things, or animals.

Example: In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens personifies the bell of the church tower in this excerpt: “The ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping slyly down at Scrooge out of a Gothic window in the wall, became invisible, and struck the hours and quarters in the clouds, with tremulous vibrations afterwards as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head up there” (1843).

Bells do not have eyes, so they cannot “peep,” nor do they have teeth that can chatter or heads that can freeze. Dickens describes the bell this way to emphasize the looming nature of the bell and the coldness of the air.

Satire: The use of humorous exaggeration to criticize the faults of society or human nature.

Example: In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the author focuses on the worst aspects of English Victorian society and how they treated children. Carroll creates characters who behave in an unpredictable and unconventional manner and expect Alice to understand their adult world even though she is a child and their adult world has nonsensical rules.

Simile: A type of metaphor that compares two unlike things, using the words “like” or “as” to make the connection.

Example: “I was so scared, and my heart was beating like a drum.”

This simile compares the heartbeat to the sound of a drum to emphasize how loud and strong the heartbeat felt because of fear.

Symbolism: When elements of the story represent a more profound meaning. Looking back to the earlier example of *The Hunger Games*, if hunting is the repeated motif, the symbolism refers to what hunting represents.

Example: When Katniss is hunting for food, that symbolizes survival. When she then becomes the hunted during the games and the rebellion, that symbolizes the inhumanity of the government.

Additional Resources

Literary Devices: Definitions and Examples of Literary Terms

<https://literarydevices.net/>

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