



# Literary Terms

## Introduction

This resource is intended as a glossary for common and not-so-common literary terms. It is by no means exhaustive and mainly covers those terms which apply to fiction writing (rather than poetry or discursive writing). The definitions and examples presented here intend to clarify the general concept of the term rather than delving into every single specific of what the term entails. It should also be noted that the terminology around literary devices is often overlapping with multiple terms for a single device or multiple meanings for a single term.

## Abecedarian

A poem or piece of prose which makes use of an alphabetised list with one item for each letter of the alphabet; alternatively, a poem or piece of prose where each line / sentence starts with a successive letter.

## Acyrologia

The substitution of a word by one of a similar (but inappropriate) meaning or of a similar sound often with a comedic effect. For example, “my perishable enemy” instead of “my mortal enemy”, or “Mrs White has a genome in her garden” instead of “Mrs White had a gnome in her garden.”

## Adage

A proverb or short saying.

## Adnominatio

Assigning the literal or homophonic meaning to a proper noun. For example, “Mrs Hall was not, in fact, the most accommodating of women.”

## Allegory

A sustained metaphor which might thread itself through an entire poem or story. The symbolic expression of truth.

### **Alliteration**

Repeating the initial letter or sound in nearby words. For example, “The cantankerous cat carves his claws across the carpet.”

### **Anadiplosis**

Using the last word of a phrase or sentence as the beginning of the next. For example, “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” (Yoda, The Phantom Menace)

### **Analogy**

A comparison between two things. Both similes and metaphors are types of analogy.

### **Anaphora**

Repeating the same word or phrase at the start of successive sentences. Can equally refer to the same word or phrase at the start of successive paragraphs or other regular repetitions of a word or phrase. For example, “The sun was a sliver of marmalade. The sun was bright. The sun was a nettle and a knife.”

### **Anastrophe**

Unusual word order to create emphasis. For example, a verb might come before a noun as in “Says the man to the mongoose”; an adjective might follow its noun as in “She put on her coat, yellow and bright”; the verb’s object might precede the subject-verb as in “Parents, everybody has them.”

### **Anesis**

A sentence attached to the end of a passage of text which diminishes what has come before. For example, “He is a lion of a man. He is big and strong and fierce. If anyone could defeat Goliath, it would be him. But unfortunately, he is washing his hair.”

### **Antanaclasis**

The repetition of a word or phrase but with a changed meaning, often for comedic effect. For example, “We must all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.” (attributed to Benjamin Franklin)

### **Anthypophora**

Asking a question or expressing doubt before immediately answering that question or doubt. For example, “But won’t we get into trouble if we go down there? Not if we are careful, I suppose. Yes, not if we are careful.”

**Anticlimax**

An abrupt non-event at the end of a period of mounting tension within a story.

**Antimetabole**

The repetition of a phrase with the word order reversed. For example, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." (John F. Kennedy)

**Antithesis**

A device that juxtaposes exact opposites, usually in the formula "X is Y, and not X is not Y." For example, "The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves." (Oscar Wilde)

**Antonym**

A word or phrase that means the exact opposite to another word or phrase.

**Apocope**

Shortening a word by a letter or syllable. For example, "It was very simp. All we had to do was count to ten."

**Appositive phrase**

A noun or noun phrase which immediately follows another noun or noun phrase and redefines or modifies it in some way. For example, "We looked up at the sky, its blue expanse, and smiled."

**Asyndeton**

Omitting the usual conjunctions between parts of a sentence. For example, "We were running, jumping, cheering."

**Auxesis**

The arrangement of words or phrases from smallest to largest, ending on a dramatic climax. For example, "O'erthrows thy joys, friends, fortune and thy state." (William Shakespeare, *Richard II*)

**Bathos**

The insertion of a humorous or lighter moment in an otherwise dramatic, tense or highly emotional passage of writing.

### **Braiding**

Weaving together two or more distinct threads which might be two character perspectives, two timeframes, or two tones or textures.

### **Cacozelia**

A poor imitation of the speech of others, often to appear more learned than you actually are.

### **Catachresis**

Using a word in a context which differs from its usual one. For example, “The voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses.” (E.E. Cummings)

### **Chiasmus**

A form of grammatical repetition where the repeated phrase inverts the elements from the first. For example, “Boys are expected to wear blue; pink is expected for girls.”

### **Circumlocution**

Talking around an often unknown (or unremembered) word or phrase.

### **Congeries**

A literal jumble of often disconnected words or phrases that build up to create an emotional swell. For example, “Apart from better sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and a freshwater system and baths and public order, what have the Romans done for us?” (*Monty Python’s Life of Brian*)

### **Consonance**

An inverted form of alliteration whereby it is the final letters of words rather than the starting letters which create the repetition. For example, “The band stood on the road by the food truck.”

### **Correctio**

Immediately amending or clarifying a word or phrase. For example, “It had been two years since Mary had left—or no, it had almost been three.”

### **Daffynition**

Reinterpretation of a word (often based on the sounds within it) for comedic effect. For example, “Maximum: the largest size of mother.”

### **Diacope**

Repetition of a word with another word in between to evoke strong emotions. For example, “A Horse! A Horse! My Kingdom for a Horse!” (William Shakespeare, *Richard III*)

### **Diasymus**

Responding to an argument in a dismissive manner. For example, “Suggesting there is any doubt about the manmade nature of the climate catastrophe is like believing an albatross is responsible for the rising and setting of the sun.”

### **Diazeugma**

Using a single subject to govern multiple verbs. Also referred to as “multiple yoking.” For example, “he bites his lip, and starts; stops on a sudden, looks upon the ground, then, lays his finger on his temple; straight, springs out into fast gait; then, stops again, strikes his breast hard.” (William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*)

### **Digraph**

Two letters that represent one sound. For example, the “ea” in “sea” or the “th” in “this.”

### **Diphthong**

Double vowel sound where the sound begins with one vowel and moves towards another. For example, the “oi” in “coin” or the “ay” or “play.”

### **Dramatic Irony**

A type of irony where a reader knows more than the characters on scene. It is sometimes called “tragic irony” since it is most often found in works of tragedy.

### **Eggcorn**

A new word or phrase that comes about due to a mishearing of the original word or phrase. For example, “damp squid” instead of “damp squib.”

### **Ekphrasis**

The literary evocation of a piece of art or the process of creating art. More generally, the use of image / description to bring a scene to life.

### **Enantiosis**

The juxtaposition of opposites to create a striking effect. For example, “Foresight is a gift from the gods, but also a curse.”

### **Enjambment**

In poetry, the running over of one line into the next without a grammatical pause. The same term can be used to describe (for example) the continuous flow between paragraphs or between title and first paragraph in a piece of prose.

### **Epanalepsis**

Repetition of the same word or phrase at both the beginning and the end of a sentence, with at least one intervening clause. For example, "The king is dead; long live the king!"

### **Epanorthosis**

Immediate clarification and strengthening of a thought to infuse it with greater emotional clout. For example, "I'm annoyed. No, I'm incandescent!"

### **Epistrophe**

This is the counterpoint to anaphora. It involves the final word or phrase being the same in consecutive sentences. For example, "I was running. Joe was running. The water in the river was running. Beneath us and all around us, the world was running."

### **Epitasis**

Used to describe the part of a story where the action ramps up. Also used to describe an additional sentence which does nothing more than emphasize everything that has come before. For example, "We were there for a whole week. Seven long days."

### **Epizeuxis**

The repetition of a word or phrase in immediate succession. For example, "drip, drip, dripping" or "questions and questions and questions and questions."

### **Euphony**

The creation of a pleasing sound.

### **Extended metaphor**

A metaphor which continues over several phrases, sentences or paragraphs, or even across an entire story.

### **Filtering**

Use of verbs such as 'see', 'hear', 'smell', 'taste', 'feel', 'think', 'wonder', 'realise' and 'decide' to create psychic distance, thus preventing full immersion in a character's inner thoughts and feelings.

### **Flashback**

A scene which is set prior to the main story.

### **Hendiadys**

Expressing an idea through two nouns connected by an “and” rather than the more conventional adjective-noun pairing. For example, “She made her way through the bustle and the crowd” instead of “She made her way through the bustling crowd.”

### **Hermit crab story**

A story which makes use of a borrowed form. For example, a story in the form of a list or recipe; other forms might include instructions, an online form, a report, crossword clues etc.

### **Homograph**

Two words with the same spelling but with different meanings (and possibly different pronunciations). For example, “bass” (fish) and “bass” (stringed instrument).

### **Homophone**

Two words with the same pronunciation but with different spellings. For example, “see” and “sea” or “here” and “hear.”

### **Hypallage**

Intentionally switching the order in which words (usually adjectives) correspond with one another. For example, “Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time” (Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*). Also, called a “transferred epithet.”

### **Hyperbaton**

Another term for “anastrophe.”

### **Hyperbole**

Intentional exaggeration.

### **Hypotaxis**

The use of multiple clauses to create extremely long sentences.

### **Idiolect**

The way a particular person speaks; their tone of voice, their grammatical peculiarities, and their semantic choices.

### **In Media Res**

Literally meaning “in the middle of things”, this term refers to a scene or story starting with the characters already in the middle of something or an event already having begun.

### **Isocolon**

A kind of parallelism whereby a list or series of phrases is constructed, each having a similar construction, rhythmic pattern and length. For example, “I came, I saw, I conquered.”

### **Kenning**

A compound expression (usually of two nouns) that creates a metaphorical description of the thing being described. For example, “bookworm”, “arm candy” etc.

### **Litotes**

A form of understatement where the negative is used rather than the positive. For example, “not unhappy” instead of “ecstatic”, “not a masterpiece” instead of “completely without merit.”

### **Merism**

A technique in which a (normally accepted) whole is split into its composite parts. For example, “forty days and forty nights” rather than just “forty days.”

### **Mesodiplosis**

The repetition of a word or phrase in the middle of successive sentences. For example, “I am a sinner, not a saint. The world is a tangling of complexity, not a simple canvas laid out flat. Life is a succession of difficult choices, not an easy branchless path.”

### **Metalepsis**

Referring to something through something else which is not directly connected. For example, “There are only three sleeps until my birthday” (rather than “three days”) or “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” (Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*)



### **Metaphor**

A type of an analogy where something is described as literally being something else (rather than just comparing the two things). For example, “no man is an island” (John Donne) or “Hope is the thing with feathers.” (Emily Dickinson)

### **Metonymy**

Referring to something or someone through something associated with it rather than directly naming the thing or person. For example, referring to the monarchy as “the crown” or referring to the president of the USA as “the White House.”

### **Neologism**

A recently invented word or expression.

### **Onomatopoeia**

Words which imitate a particular sound. For example, “buzz”, “neigh”, “meow” etc.

### **Oxymoron**

A contradictory statement; a contradiction in terms. For example, “old news”, “sweet sorrow” or “awfully good.”

### **Paradox**

A statement which is seemingly contradictory but also contains a grain of truth.

### **Parallelism**

Repeating the same grammatical structure in consecutive phrases or sentences. For example, “The boy is painting seashells. The girl is doing star jumps.”

### **Parataxis**

A style of writing which uses a succession of short, simple phrases or sentences without connecting conjunctions or phrases.

### **Pathos**

Writing which is designed to evoke strong emotion.

**Periodic sentence**

A complex sentence in which the main clause appears right at the end. The opening to the sentence often makes use of anaphora. For example, "Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there." (Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*)

**Personification**

Referring to an inanimate object or abstract concept as though it were human.

**Pleonasm**

The use of superfluous words perhaps for emphasis. For example, "To see with one's eyes."

**Polyptoton**

Repeating a root word in a variety of different ways. For example, "I asked the caller his reason for calling. He said it was a social call. When I asked him his name, he said he was called Peter."

**Polysyndeton**

The use of multiple conjunctions to link phrases together. For example, "He wasn't there and then he was and I saw that he was wearing green trousers and a polka-dot shirt and the whole combination was ghastly but I didn't really care."

**Portmanteau**

A word which is made up of two other words squashed together. For example, "brunch" (the start of "breakfast" + the end of "lunch"), "biopic" (the start of "biography" + the start of "picture"), "guesstimate" (the whole of "guess" + the end of "estimate"), "gastropub" (the start of "gastronomy" + the whole of "pub"), "chortle" (the beginning of "chuckle", the end of "snort" and the end of "chuckle").

**Prolepsis**

Speaking about the future as though it has already happened. For example, "I am a dead man."

**Psychic distance**

The distance (in terms of perspective) between a reader and a story. This can be zoomed-out to show the wider context or zoomed-in to delve into character thought.

**Pysma**

Asking multiple questions in succession.

### **Rhetorical question**

A question which a speaker already knows the answer to; a question for which no response is expected or required.

### **Rhyme**

Two words with the same ending sound. For example, “boat” and “float” or “chair” and “pear.”

### **Simile**

A comparison between two things generally using “like” or “as.” For example, “as strong as a lion.”

### **Spoonerism**

A technique where the starting sounds in a two-word phrase are switched around so that “funny bone” becomes “bunny phone” etc. There are also “kniferisms” where the vowel sound in the middle of a word is switched around, so “hypodermic needle” becomes “hypodeemic nerdle”; and “forkisms” where the ending of two words is switched around as we see in the “Duch and Dukess of Cambridge.”

### **Syllepsis**

The use of a word which governs two (or more) phrases where a shift in understanding of the word’s meaning is necessary. For example, “You held your breath and the door for me.” (Alanis Morissette, *Head Over Feet*)

### **Symploce**

The use of both anaphora and epistrophe at the same time so that all sentences start with a repeating phrase and end with a repeating phrase.

### **Synaesthesia**

Describing one sense in terms of another. For example, “a buzz of lemon” (using sound to describe taste) or “a gravelly voice” (using touch to describe sound).

### **Syncope**

Cutting sounds or letters from the middle of a word. For example, “o’er” instead of “over.”

### **Synecdoche**

Similar to “metonymy”, using an element of something to represent the whole. For example, “my new wheels” to represent “my new car.”

### **Synonym**

A word or phrase that means the same (or similar) to another word or phrase.

### **Tautology**

The needless repetition of a word or idea. For example, “close proximity.”

### **Transferred epithet**

Intentionally switching the order in which words (usually adjectives) correspond with one another. For example, “Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time” (Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*). Also, called a “hypallage.”

### **Tricolon**

A list of three elements where all the elements are of parallel length. For example, “We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.” (Abraham Lincoln)

### **Verbal irony**

Saying one thing but meaning the opposite in order to express humour or frustration.

### **Zeugma**

The use of a single verb to govern multiple object-phrases. For example, “On their flippant way through Italy, the French carelessly picked up Genoa, Naples and syphilis.” (Voltaire)



# ENDNOTE

## Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. He has been placed or listed in various writing competitions including Bath, Flash 500, the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, Reflex and Leicester Writes. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

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