

Handbook of Literary Terms

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Alexandrine—A line of poetry made up of six iambs.

Allegory—A story in which the characters, settings, and events stand for abstract or moral concepts.

Alliteration—The repetition of consonant sounds in words that are close to one another.
Example



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Allusion—A reference to a statement, person, place, event, or thing that is known from literature, history, religion, mythology, politics, sports, science, or popular culture.

Analogy—A comparison of two things to show that they are alike in certain respects.



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Anecdote—A brief and sometimes witty story that focuses on a single interesting incident or event, often in order to make a point or to teach a moral lesson.

Animism—A belief that spirits or souls are present in all living things.

Antagonist—The character or force that opposes or blocks the **protagonist**, or main character, in a narrative.



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Anticlimax—The occurrence of something trivial or comical at the point in a narrative when one expects something important or serious.

Antithesis—A contrast of ideas expressed in a grammatically balanced statement.

Aphorism—A concise, sometimes witty saying that expresses a principle, truth, or observation about life.



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Apostrophe—A figure of speech in which a speaker directly addresses an absent or dead person, an abstract quality, or something nonhuman as if it were present and capable of responding.

Archetype—A pattern that appears in literature across cultures and is repeated through the ages. An archetype can be a character, a plot, an image, or a setting.



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Aside—Private words that a character in a play speaks to the audience or to another character and that are not supposed to be overheard by others onstage.

Assonance—The repetition of similar vowel sounds followed by different consonant sounds in words that are close together.

Example



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Atmosphere—The mood or feeling in a literary work.

Augustan—Similar to the reign of Emperor Augustus (63 B.C.–A.D. 14) or having qualities or tastes that are associated with classical Rome.

Autobiography—A written account of the author's own life.



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Ballad—A song or songlike poem that tells a story.

[More about ballads](#)

[Folk and literary ballads](#)

Biography—An account of a person's life written by another person.

Blank Verse—Poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

[Example](#)



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Cadence—The natural rise and fall of the voice.

Caesura—A pause or break within a line of poetry, usually indicated by the natural rhythm of the language.

Canto—A subdivision in a long poem, corresponding to a chapter in a book.



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Capitalism—An economic philosophy that advocates the idea that the means of production and distribution should be owned and controlled by private individuals.

Carpe Diem—A Latin phrase that literally means “seize the day”—that is, “make the most of present opportunities.”



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Character—An individual in a story or play. The process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character is called **characterization**.

Direct and indirect characterization

Static vs. dynamic character

Flat vs. round character

Chivalry—The system of ideals and social codes governing the behavior of knights and gentlewomen in feudal times.



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Classicism—A movement in art, literature, and music that advocates imitating the principles manifested in the art and literature of ancient (“classical”) Greece and Rome.

Cliché—An expression that was fresh and apt when it was first coined but is now so overused that it has become hackneyed and stale.



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Climax—The point of greatest emotional intensity or suspense in a plot when the outcome of the conflict becomes known.

Comedy—In general, a story that ends happily.
[More about comedy](#)

Communism—A philosophy that advocates the creation of a classless and stateless society in which economic goods are distributed equally.



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Conceit—A fanciful and elaborate figure of speech that makes a surprising connection between two seemingly dissimilar things.

Conflict—A struggle or clash between opposing characters, forces, or emotions.

Internal and external conflict

Connotations—All the meanings, associations, or emotions that have become attached to a word.



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Consonance—The repetition of final consonant sounds after different vowel sounds.

Couplet—Two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme.

Courtly Love—A conventional medieval code of behavior that informed a knight of the proper way to treat his lady.



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Deism—The belief that God, after creating the universe, ceased to interfere with the laws of nature and society.

Denotation—The literal, dictionary definition of a word.

Denouement—The conclusion or resolution of a story.



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Deus ex Machina—Any artificial or contrived device used at the end of a plot to resolve or untangle the complications.

Dialect—A way of speaking that is characteristic of a particular region or group of people.
[More about dialect](#)

Dialogue—Conversation between two or more people.



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Diction—A writer's or speaker's choice of words.
[More about diction](#)

Didactic Literature—Literary works that are meant to instruct, give advice, or convey a philosophy or moral message.

Dissonance—A harsh, discordant combination of sounds. Dissonance is also called **cacophony**.



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Dramatic Monologue—A poem in which a character addresses one or more listeners who remain silent or whose replies are not revealed.

Dramatic Song—A poem found in a play that serves to establish mood, reveal character, or advance action.



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Elegy—A poem that mourns the death of a person or laments something lost.

End-Stopped Line—A line of poetry in which the meter and the meaning conclude with the end of the line.

Epic—A long narrative poem that relates the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular society.

[More about the epic](#)



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Epigram—A brief, clever, and usually memorable statement.

Example

Epiphany—In a literary work, a moment of sudden insight or revelation that a character experiences.

Epitaph—An inscription on a tombstone or a commemorative poem written about a person who has died.



Handbook of Literary Terms

Epithet—An adjective or other descriptive phrase that is regularly used to characterize a person, place, or thing.

Essay—A short piece of nonfiction prose that examines a single subject from a limited point of view.

Informal essay

Formal essay



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Exaggeration—Overstatement. Exaggeration or **hyperbole** is often used in literature to express strong emotion or to create a comic effect.



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Fable—A very brief story in prose or verse that teaches a **moral**, or a practical lesson about life.

Falling Action—The action that follows the **climax**, or point of greatest intensity or suspense, in a plot.

Farce—A type of comedy in which ridiculous and often stereotyped characters are involved in far-fetched, silly situations.



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Fascism—A nationalistic philosophy that advocates rule by a single charismatic dictator.

Feudalism—The economic, political, and social system of medieval Europe.

Figure of Speech—A word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another, dissimilar thing, and is not meant to be understood on a literal level. The most common figures of speech are the simile, the metaphor, and personification.



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Flashback—A scene in a movie, play, short story, novel, or narrative poem that interrupts the present action of the plot to “flash backward” and tell what happened at an earlier time.

Foil—A character who sets off another character by strong contrast.

Foreshadowing—The use of clues to hint at what is going to happen later in the plot.



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Frame Story—An introductory narrative within which one or more of the characters proceed to tell individual stories.

Free Verse—Poetry that has no regular meter or rhyme scheme.



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Gothic—A term used to describe literary works that contain primitive, medieval, wild, mysterious, or natural elements. The **Gothic novel** is chiefly characterized by gloomy settings and an atmosphere of terror and mystery.



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Haiku—A brief, unrhymed, three-line poem developed in Japan in the 1600s.

[More about haiku](#)

Humanism—An intellectual movement of the Renaissance that restored the study of the classics and focused on examining human life here and now.



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Hyperbole—A figure of speech that uses exaggeration to express strong emotion or create a comic effect.



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Iambic Pentameter—A line of poetry made up of five iambs. Iambic pentameter is by far the most common verse line in English poetry.

Example

Imagery—Language that appeals to the senses. Most images are visual—that is, they appeal to the sense of sight. But imagery can also appeal to the senses of hearing, touch, taste, or smell.



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Incremental Repetition—A device widely used in ballads whereby a line or lines are repeated with slight variations from stanza to stanza.

Industrial Revolution—The period of social and economic change following the replacement of hand tools by machines and power tools, which allowed manufacturers to increase their production and save money.



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In Medias Res—The technique of starting a story in the middle and then using a flashback to tell what happened earlier.

Irony—A contrast or discrepancy between expectation and reality—between what is said and what is really meant, between what is expected and what really happens, or between what appears to be true and what really is true. Types of irony include verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony.



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Kenning—In Anglo-Saxon poetry, a metaphorical phrase or compound word used to name a person, place, thing, or event indirectly.



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Laissez Faire—An economic policy based on the idea that economic forces should be allowed to operate freely and without government regulation.

Literary Epic—Literary epics are epics that have been composed by individual writers, often following earlier models.

Lyric Poetry—Poetry that focuses on expressing emotions or thoughts, rather than on telling a story.



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Magic Realism—A literary style that combines incredible events with realistic details and relates them all in a matter-of-fact tone.

Materialism—A belief that nothing exists except matter and that the operations of everything, including thought, will, and feeling, are caused by material agencies.



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Maxim—A brief, direct statement that expresses a basic rule of human conduct or a general truth about human behavior.

Memoir—A type of **autobiography**, or account of an author's own life, that usually focuses on a single time period or historical event.



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Metaphor—A figure of speech that makes a comparison between two seemingly unlike things without using a connective word such as *like*, *as*, *than*, or *resembles*.

- Directly stated metaphor
- Implied metaphor
- Extended metaphor
- Dead metaphor
- Mixed metaphor



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Metaphysical Poetry—A term applied to the poetry of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and other seventeenth-century poets who wrote in a difficult and abstract style.

Meter—A generally regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry.

Scansion



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Metonymy—A figure of speech in which something closely related to a thing or suggested by it is substituted for the thing itself.

Mock Epic—A comic narrative poem that parodies the epic by treating a trivial subject in a lofty, grand manner. The style of the mock epic, which includes dignified language, elaborate figures of speech, and supernatural intervention is called **mock heroic**.



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Modernism—A broad trend in literature and other arts, from approximately 1890 to 1940, that reflected the impact of works like Sigmund Freud's writings on psychology.

Monologue—A long, formal speech made by a character in a play.

Mood—The overall emotion created by a work of literature.



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Moral Tale—A tale that teaches a lesson about life.

Motif—In literature, a word, a character, an object, an image, a metaphor, or an idea that recurs in a work or in several works.

[More about motif](#)

Motivation—The reasons for or forces behind the action of a character.



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Myth—An anonymous traditional story, rooted in a particular society, that usually serves to explain the mysteries of nature and a society's beliefs and customs.



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Narrator—One who tells, or narrates, a story.
Types of narrators

Neoclassicism—The revival of classical standards and forms during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Novel—A long fictional prose narrative, usually of more than fifty thousand words.
More about the novel



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Octave—An eight-line stanza or poem or the first eight lines of an Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet.

Ode—A complex, generally long lyric poem on a serious subject.

Onomatopoeia—The use of a word whose sound imitates or suggests its meaning. The words *clap*, *squish*, *sizzle*, and *wheeze* are onomatopoetic.



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Ottava Rima—An eight-line stanza in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme *abababcc*.

Oxymoron—A figure of speech that combines apparently contradictory or incongruous ideas. “Bittersweet,” “cruel kindness,” and “eloquent silence” are oxymorons.



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Parable—A short, allegorical story that teaches a moral or religious lesson about life.

Paradox—An apparent contradiction that is actually true.

Parallelism—The repetition of words, phrases, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure or that restate a similar idea.

Example



Handbook of Literary Terms

Parody—The imitation of a work of literature, art, or music for amusement or instruction.

Pastoral—A type of literature that depicts country life in idyllic, idealized terms.

Personification—A kind of metaphor in which a nonhuman or nonliving thing or quality is talked about as if it were human or had life.

Example



Handbook of Literary Terms

Plot—The series of related events that make up a story or drama.

[Elements of plot](#)

[Plot diagram](#)

Point of View—The vantage point from which a writer tells a story.

[First-person point of view](#)

[Limited-third-person point of view](#)

[Omniscient point of view](#)



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Postmodernism—A trend in art and philosophy that reflects the late-twentieth-century distrust in the idea that there is a legitimate and true system of thought that can be used to understand the world and our place in it.

Protagonist—The main character in fiction, drama, or narrative poetry.



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Proverb—A short saying that expresses a common truth or experience, usually about human failings and the ways that people interact with one another.

Pun—A play on the multiple meanings of a word or on two words that sound alike but have different meanings.



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Quatrain—A four-line stanza or poem or a group of four lines unified by a rhyme scheme. The quatrain is the most common verse unit in English poetry.

Example



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Rationalism—A philosophy that advocates the idea that one should use reason rather than emotion when one is attempting to discover the truth.

Realism—In literature and art, the attempt to depict people and things as they really are, without idealization.

Refrain—A repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines.



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Reformation—The break from Catholicism and the authority of the pope that resulted in the establishment of the Protestant churches in the sixteenth century.

Renaissance—A French word meaning “rebirth,” used to designate the period in European history beginning in Italy in the fourteenth century and ending in the seventeenth century when scientific truths began to challenge long-accepted religious beliefs.



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Resolution—The final part of a story when all the problems or mysteries of the plot are unraveled.

Rhyme—The repetition of accented vowel sounds and all sounds following them in words that are close together in a poem.

Example

Types of rhyme

Rhyme scheme



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Rhythm—The alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in language.

Meter

Romance—Historically, a medieval verse narrative chronicling the adventures of a brave knight or other hero who must undertake a quest and overcome great danger for love of a noble lady or high ideal.



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Romanticism—A literary, artistic, and philosophical movement that developed as a reaction against neoclassicism in the late eighteenth century and dominated the early nineteenth century.

Run-on Line—A line of poetry that does not contain a pause or conclusion at the end, but rather continues on to the next line. Such lines are said to exhibit **enjambment**.



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Sarcasm—A kind of particularly cutting irony, in which praise is used tauntingly to indicate its opposite in meaning.

Satire—A kind of writing that ridicules human weakness, vice, or folly in order to bring about social reform.

Scansion—Indicating the metrical pattern of a poem by marking stressed syllables with the symbol ' and unstressed syllables with ~.



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Scop—An Anglo-Saxon minstrel or poet.

Sestet—A six-line stanza or poem or the last six lines of an Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet.

Setting—The time and place of a story or play.

Short Story—A brief work of fiction.



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Simile—A figure of speech that makes a comparison between two seemingly unlike things by using a connective word such as *like*, *as*, *than*, or *resembles*.

Example

Epic simile

Social Darwinism—The notion that, in society, only the fittest will survive.



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Socialism—A political movement that advocates the idea that the ownership and operation of the means of production and distribution should be owned by the community rather than by private individuals.

Soliloquy—A long speech in which a character who is usually alone onstage expresses his or her private thoughts or feelings.



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Sonnet—A fourteen-line lyric poem, usually written in iambic pentameter, that has one of several rhyme schemes.

Italian sonnet

Shakespearean sonnet

Spenserian sonnet

Speaker—The imaginary voice, or persona, assumed by the author of a poem.



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Speech—A more or less formal address delivered to an audience or assembly or the written or printed copy of this address.

Spenserian Stanza—A nine-line stanza with the rhyme scheme *ababbcbcc*.

Sprung Rhythm—A term coined by Gerard Manley Hopkins (Collection 6) to designate his unconventional use of poetic meter.



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Stanza—A group of consecutive lines in a poem that form a single unit.

Stream of Consciousness—A writing style that tries to depict the random flow of thoughts, emotions, memories, and associations running through a character's mind.

Style—The manner in which writers or speakers say what they wish to say. Style is closely connected to **diction**, or word choice.



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Suspense—The uncertainty or anxiety we feel about what is going to happen next in a story.

Symbol—A person, a place, a thing, or an event that stands both for itself and for something beyond itself.

[More about symbols](#)



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Symbolism—A literary movement that began in France in the late nineteenth century and advocated the use of highly personal symbols to suggest ideas, emotions, and moods.

Synecdoche—A figure of speech in which a part represents the whole.



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Synesthesia—In literature, a term used for descriptions of one kind of sensation in terms of another. For example, color may be described as sound (a “loud” yellow) or sound as taste (how “sweet” the sound).



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Tanka—A traditional five-line form of Japanese poetry.

Tercet—A triplet, or stanza of three lines, in which each line ends with the same rhyme.

Terza Rima—An interlocking, three-line stanza form with the rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc ded* and so on.



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Theme—The central idea or insight about human experience revealed in a work of literature.

[More about theme](#)

Tone—The attitude a writer takes toward the reader, a subject, or a character.

Totalitarianism—A system of government that advocates the rule of an absolute dictator or a single political party.



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Tragedy—A play, novel, or other narrative depicting serious and important events, in which the main character comes to an unhappy end.
[More about tragedy](#)

Turn—The transition in a sonnet from the first part to the concluding stanza.



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Understatement—A figure of speech that consists of saying less than what is really meant or saying something with less force than is appropriate.



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Vernacular—The language spoken by the people who live in a particular region.

Villanelle—A nineteen-line poem divided into five tercets (three-line stanzas), each with the rhyme scheme *aba*, and a final quatrain (four-line stanza) with the rhyme scheme *abaa*.



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Wit—A quality of speech or writing that combines verbal cleverness with keen perception, especially of the incongruous.



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