

Literary devices are tools and techniques that are used to add detail, emphasis, and variation to writing. Literary devices are used to engage readers and make writing more memorable. This handout covers common literary devices, but writers should always work with their audience and assignment in mind.

Alliteration

Repeating the initial sound in a series of words for emphasis.

Example: The sneaky snake slithered silently.

Allusion

An indirect or passing reference to a place, idea, or character with which the audience should be familiar.

Example: Sam is an Einstein. (Referring to the scientist Albert Einstein alludes to Sam's intelligence.)

Archetype

A symbol, character, or theme within a text that creates patterns and expectations for the reader.

Examples: Sun (symbol), hero and villain (characters), quest (theme)

Assonance

Repeating similar vowel sounds to create a pattern or add emphasis.

Example: Sweet tea, please.

Cacophony

A grouping of strong sounds (such as *k*, *p*, *b*, *g*, *t*, and *ch*) that create a harsh effect.

Example: The toad croaked, then splashed in the pond.

Caesura

A pause or break in a poetic line that is used for emphasis.

Example: "To be, or not to be—that is the question." (Caesura between *be* and *that*)

Characterization

Using descriptive details to add nuance and depth to a character.

Examples: She was distant and uninterested. (Direct characterization)
In response, he rolled his eyes and turned away. (Indirect characterization)

Connotation

Any association that readers connect to a word in addition to its literal meaning.

Example: Fox—carries connotations of cleverness and quickness.

Consonance

The repetition of a consonant or consonant sound in any part of a word within a sentence, creating a pattern.

Example: Zack cracked his back.

Denotation

The dictionary definition of a word.

Example: Fox—noun referring to a small, carnivorous mammal

Diction

A specific selection of vocabulary that is used to give off a certain tone and impression.

Example: “I would be happy to help.” (Formal)
“No worries!” (Informal)

Flashback

Interrupting a story with an event that occurred at an earlier time to cause the reader to reflect.

Example: When she heard to song, she had a flashback to dancing at the party.

Foil

A character who emphasizes the main character’s traits through their contrasting qualities.

Example: The tortoise, slow and steady, acts as a foil to the hare who is quick and impatient.

Foreshadowing

Hinting at an event in a story that will occur in the future to create suspense or curiosity.

Example: The book title, *Death on the Nile*, foreshadows the events that occur in the story.

Hyperbole

Using exaggeration or overstatement for emphasis or humor.

Example: She was **dying** of laughter.

Idiom

An expression that has a separate meaning from what it is literally saying to add intensity or humor.

Example: “It’s raining cats and dogs!” (The idiom suggests it is raining intensely.)

Imagery

Descriptive or figurative language used to evoke a vivid picture in the reader’s mind.

Example: The sun glittered on the calm ocean waves as they crashed against the shore.

Irony

When an action or event differs from what’s expected, often for a humorous or tense effect.

Verbal Irony

When a person says one thing but means the opposite.

Example: “Great!” he cried in frustration. “That’s just great!”

Situational Irony

When the results of an action are opposite of what is intended or expected.

Example: The community was quite surprised when the fire station burned down.

Dramatic Irony

When the reader has more knowledge about a situation than the character does.

Example: In the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the reader knows that the wolf is dressed as the girl’s grandmother, but Little Red Riding Hood does not.

Metaphor

A comparison between two actions, ideas, or things by saying one thing *is* something else.

Example: Life **is** a rollercoaster, full of ups and downs.

Oxymoron

The combination of opposite or contradictory terms that can add irony or deeper meaning to a phrase.

Example: Moving out of his childhood home was a **bittersweet** experience.

Personification

Giving human feelings, thoughts, or attributes to an object, idea, or animal to bring them to life.

Example: The moon smiled down on them.

Point of View

The perspective from which a story is told.

Examples: **I** run. (First person narration)

You run. (Second person narration)

She runs. (Third person narration)

Simile

A comparison between two actions, ideas, or things by saying one thing *is like* something else.

Example: Life **is like** a rollercoaster, full of ups and downs.

Symbol

A person, place, thing, or event that stands for something other than its literal meaning.

Example: Sunshine often symbolizes happiness.

Understatement

Intentionally falling short of describing the full extent of a subject, often for humor.

Example: It gets a **little uncomfortable** sitting in the sun on those 115-degree summer afternoons.