**Common Literary Terms**

**Literary devices** are specific language techniques which writers use to create text that is clear, interesting, and memorable. Below is a list of literary devices you should be thinking about when analyzing pieces of literature.

**Allegory-** A story in which characters represent abstract qualities or ideas.

*Example*: In the fable, “The Grasshopper and the Ant,” the grasshopper represents flightiness, while the ant represents industriousness.

**Allusion-** an indirect reference to something outside the literary work. It could be a reference to a myth, a historical event/figure, another literary work, a person, cultural icon, etc.

*Example*:You're a regular Einstein. (allusion to a historical figure)

**Antagonist-** a character who is the adversary of the protagonist.

*Example*:In “Little Red Riding Hood,” the Big Bad Wolf is the antagonist because he is in conflict with Little Red Riding Hood.

**Assonance-** repetition of a vowel sound within or among words, usually within one line of poetry.

*Example*: “I must conf**ess** that in my qu**es**t I felt depr**ess**ed and r**es**tl**ess**.”  
 *With Love*, by Thin Lizzy

**Characterization-** the way an author presents the characters. **Direct characterization** is when the author tells you what a character is like. **Indirect characterization** is when the author allows you to draw your own conclusions about a character by showing you what a character is like.

*Example*: An author who shows a character who helps out at a nursing home and volunteers at a preschool is showing that the character is caring and kind.

**Figurative Language-** language that is not literal, in that it does not mean exactly what it says. Metaphors and similes are both types of figurative language, as are many of the other terms included in the list.

*Example*: “He’s a string bean” means that the man is very thin, but it does not actually mean the man is a vegetable.

**Foreshadowing-** a hint to the reader, which may or may not be obvious during a first reading, about the general direction of the plot.

*Example*: A rainstorm in a story often foreshadows difficult times for characters later in the story.

**Hyperbole-** extreme exaggeration used to make a point.

*Example*: “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”

**Imagery-** the use of descriptive language to appeal to one of the reader’s senses, such as, sound, touch, smell, taste, or sight.

*Example*:“The fudge melted in his mouth, swirling around his tongue with a rich, buttery flavor.”

**Irony-** the expression of a certain idea by saying or showing just the opposite. **Dramatic irony** occurs when the audience or reader knows more than the character who is speaking, and thus the words mean something different to the audience or reader than to the character. **Situational irony** occurs when the opposite of what is expected takes place. **Verbal irony** occurs when someone says one thing but means the opposite.

* *Example*: **Dramatic irony**: In *Toy Story*, the human characters are not aware that the toys speak and move, while the audience/viewers know the toys can move and speak.

**Situational irony**: *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin tells the tale of a wife who learned her husband was dead. She felt a sense of freedom, thinking about her new life out from under his thumb. Suddenly, the husband returns (he never was dead) and she dies of shock.

**Verbal irony**: In the episode of *Friends* where the friends go to London for Ross and Emily's wedding, Chandler says, "I'm so glad we're having this rehearsal dinner. You know, I so rarely get to practice my meals before I eat them."

**Metaphor-** a comparison made without using the words “like” or “as.” *Example*:When Hamlet says, “I will speak daggers to her,” he is comparing his hurtful words to daggers.

**Onomatopoeia-** the use of words that sound like what they mean.

*Example*: “snap”; “pop”; “pow”

**Organization-** the general structure of a piece of writing. Organization can include how the writing is physically divided into paragraphs or stanzas, as well as the structure of the plot or the order in which ideas are developed.

*Example*: One text may progress from a general to a specific treatment of one topic. Another text may focus on one character’s view of an event and then another character’s view of the same event.

**Oxymoron-** a phrase made up of two seemingly opposite words.

*Examples*: “sincere lie”; “deafening silence”; “jumbo shrimp”

**Paradox-** two or more words or ideas that contradict one another. *Example*:The opening lines of Charles Dicken’s *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”

**Personification-** giving human characteristics or abilities to nonhuman things.

*Example*:“The morning sunlight danced across the pillow.”

**Plot-** what events happen in a story.

*Example*:Plots can be very complex, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the plot is the course of events leading to the two young lovers’ deaths.

**Point of view-** how the narrator relates the events described in a piece of writing. A first-person point of view is one in which the narrator is a character and refers to himself or herself as “I.” A **first-person** narrative might begin with an opening line such as, “I knew it would be a difficult day as soon as I awoke.” The **second-person** narrative is much less common and might begin with “You knew it would be difficult day as soon as you awoke.” A **third-person** narrative refers to all the characters as “he” or “she.” An example would be, “She knew it would be a difficult day as soon as she awoke.” An **omniscient third-person** knows all the thoughts, actions, and feelings of all characters. The omniscient narrator also refers to all the characters as “he” or “she,” moving from character to character to show how each one contributes to the plot.

**Protagonist-** the main character in a piece of writing, the character who is the focus of the plot and who changes in some way.

*Example*:In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist is Holden Caulfield.

**Repetition-** saying the same thing more than once or using the same sound or sentence structure repeatedly.

**Simile-** a comparison made using the words “like” or “as.”

*Example*: “She is as quick as a rabbit.

**Stanza-** a section of poetry separate from the section that comes before and after.

**Symbolism-** the use of an object to represent an abstract idea.

*Examples*:Hearts often symbolize love; the color white often symbolizes innocence.

**Theme-** a general idea expressed by a literary work. There can be more than one theme in a work.

*Example*: The theme of “The Tortoise and the Hare” is that slow, steady effort triumphs over natural but undeveloped talent.

**Tone-** he feeling an author conveys to the reader. Tone contributes to the overall mood of a work.

*Example*: Tone can be formal, serious, passionate, lighthearted, witty, sarcastic, or any other general expression of feeling.