

## AP English Language & Composition Literary Terms

**Abstract**—Not related to the concrete properties of an object; pertaining to ideas, concepts, or qualities, as opposed to physical attributes.

**Aesthetic**—Pertaining to the value of art for its own sake or for form.

**Allegory**—Narrative form in which characters and actions have meanings outside themselves; characters are usually personifications of abstract qualities.

**Alliteration**—The repetition of initial consonant sounds or any vowel sounds within a formal grouping, such as a poetic line or stanza, or in close proximity in prose.

**Allusion**—A figure of speech which makes brief, even casual reference to a historical or literary figure, event, or object to create a resonance in the reader or to apply a symbolic meaning to the character or object of which the allusion consists. For example, in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the surname of the protagonist, George Milton, is an allusion to John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, since by the end of the novel, George has lost the dream of having a little ranch of his own to share with his friend Lennie.

**Ambiguity**—Use of language in which multiple meanings are possible. Ambiguity can be unintentional through insufficient focus on the part of the writer; in good writing, ambiguity is frequently intentional in the form of multiple connotative meanings, or situations in which either the connotative or the denotative meaning can be valid in a reading.

**Anachronism**—Use of historically inaccurate details in a text; for example, depicting a 19th-century character using a computer. Some authors employ anachronisms for humorous effect, and some genres, such as science fiction or fantasy, make extensive use of anachronism.

**Anadiplosis**—Repetition of the last word of one clause at the beginning of the next clause. For example, "The crime was common, common be the pain." (Alexander Pope)

**Analogy**—Comparison of two things that are alike in some respects. Metaphors and similes are both types of analogy.

**Antagonist**—Character or force in a literary work that opposes the main character, or protagonist.

**Antihero**—Protagonist of a literary work who does not embody the traditional qualities of a hero (e.g., honor, bravery, kindness, intelligence); for example, the protagonists created by Byron in *Don Juan* and Childe Harold, and the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

**Anaphora**—regular repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases or clauses. For example, "We shall fight in the trenches. We shall fight on the oceans. We shall fight in the sky."

**Aphorism**—A concise statement designed to make a point or illustrate a commonly held belief. The writings of Benjamin Franklin contain many aphorisms, such as "Early to bed and early to rise/Make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

**Apostrophe**—A figure of speech in which a person, thing, or abstract quality is addressed as if present;

for example, the invocation to the muses usually found in epic poetry.

Appeals to: authority, emotion, logic—Rhetorical arguments in which the speaker: either claims to be an expert or relies on information provided by experts (appeal to authority), attempts to affect the listener's personal feelings (appeal to emotion), or attempts to persuade the listener through use of deductive reasoning (appeal to logic).

Anecdote—A brief story or tale told by a character in a piece of literature.

Assonance—The repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, usually in successive or proximate words.

Asyndeton—The practice of omitting conjunctions between words, phrases, or clauses. In a list, it gives a more extemporaneous effect and suggests the list may be incomplete. For example, "He was brave, fearless, afraid of nothing."

Audience—The person(s) reached by a piece of writing.

Begging the question—To sidestep or evade the real problem.

Bildungsroman—A novel or story whose theme is the moral or psychological growth of the main character.

Canon (canonical)—The works of an author that have been accepted as authentic.

Catharsis—Purification or cleansing of the spirit through the emotions of pity and terror as a witness to a tragedy.

Chiasmus—Figure of speech by which the order of the terms in the first of parallel clauses is reversed in the second. "Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?"-- *T. S. Eliot*,

Colloquial colloquialism—Ordinary language; the vernacular. For example, depending on where in the United States you live, a sandwich is called a sub, a grinder, or a hero.

Connotation—What is implied by a word. For example, the words sweet, gay, and awesome have connotations that are quite different from their actual definitions.

Consonance—The repetition of two or more consonants with a change in the intervening vowels, such as pitter-patter, splish-splash, and click-clack.

Contradiction—A direct opposition between things compared; inconsistency.

Deductive—The reasoning process by which a conclusion is drawn from set of premises and contains no more facts than these premises.

Delayed sentence—A sentence that withholds its main idea until the end. For example: Just as he bent to tie his shoe, a car hit him.

Denotation—The dictionary definition of a word; the direct and specific meaning.

Deus ex machina—As in Greek theater, use of an artificial device or contrived solution to solve a difficult

situation, usually introduced suddenly and unexpectedly.

Devices—A particular word pattern or combination of words used in a literary work to evoke a desired effect or arouse a desired reaction in the reader.

Diction—An author's choice of words to convey a tone or effect.

Didactic—Intended for teaching or to teach a moral lesson.

Doppelganger—Ghostly counterpart of a living person or an alter ego.

Elegy—Poem or prose lamenting the death of a particular person. Perhaps the most famous elegy is Thomas Grey's poem, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

Epigraph—Quote set at the beginning of a literary work or at its divisions to set the tone or suggest a theme.

Epiphany—A sudden or intuitive insight or perception into the reality or essential meaning of something usually brought on by a simple or common occurrence or experience.

Epistolary—A piece of literature contained in or carried on by letters.

Epitaph—A piece of writing in praise of a deceased person.

Ethos—In dramatic literature, the moral element that determines a character's actions, rather than thought or emotion.

Euphemism—Substitution of a milder or less direct expression for one that is harsh or blunt. For example, using "passed away" for "dead."

Expletive—A single word or short phrase intended to emphasize surrounding words. Commonly, expletives are set off by commas. Examples: in fact, of course, after all, certainly.

Eulogy—A speech or writing in praise of a person or thing; an oration in honor of a deceased person.

Foil—A person or thing that makes another seem better by contrast.

Formal, informal—Language that is lofty, dignified, or impersonal; informal or colloquial. Colloquial language is similar to everyday speech.

Foreshadow—To hint at or present things to come in a story or play.

Genre—Term used to describe literary forms, such as tragedy, comedy, novel, or essay.

Hyperbole—An overstatement characterized by exaggerated language.

Imagery—Sensory details in a work; the use of figurative language to evoke a feeling, call to mind an idea, or describe an object. Imagery involves any or all of the five senses.

Inductive—Conclusion or type of reasoning whereby observation or information about a part of a class is applied to the class as a whole. Contrast with deductive.

**Invective**—The use of angry and insulting language in satirical writing.

**In medias res**—Refers to opening a story in the middle of the action, requiring filling in past details by exposition or flashback.

**Irony: verbal, dramatic, and situational**—A situation or statement characterized by significant difference between what is expected or understood and what actually happens or is meant. Irony is frequently humorous, and can be sarcastic when using words to imply the opposite of what they normally mean.

**Isocolon**—Parallel structure in which the parallel elements are similar not only in grammatical structure, but also in length. For example, "An envious heart makes a treacherous ear" (Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston).

**Juxtaposition**—Placing of two items side by side to create a certain effect, reveal an attitude, or accomplish some other purpose.

**Litote**—Form of understatement in which the negative of the contrary is used to achieve emphasis and intensity. For example, "She is not a bad cook." Or "No man ever followed his genius until it misled him."  
Thoreau

**Mood**—The feeling or ambience resulting from the tone of a piece as well as the writer/narrator's attitude and point of view. The effect is created through descriptions of feelings or objects that establish a particular feeling such as gloom, fear, or hope.

**Motif**—Recurrent device, formula, or situation that often serves as a signal for the appearance of a character or event.

**Nostalgia**—Desire to return in thought or fact to a former time.

**Onomatopoeia**—A word capturing or approximating the sound of what it describes, such as buzz or hiss.

**Oxymoron**—A figure of speech that combines two apparently contradictory elements, as in "jumbo shrimp" or "deafening silence."

**Paradox**—A statement that seems contradictory, but is actually true.

**Parallelism**—Recurrent syntactical similarity where several parts of a sentence or several sentences are expressed alike to show that the ideas in the parts or sentences equal in importance. It also adds balance, rhythm, and clarity to the sentence. For example, "I have always searched for, but never found the perfect painting for that wall."

**Parody**—A satirical imitation of a work of art for purpose of ridiculing its style or subject.

**Persona**—The voice or figure of the author who tells and structures the story and who may or may not share of the values of the actual author.

**Personification**—Treating an abstraction or nonhuman object as if it were a person by giving it human qualities.

**Perspective**—A character's view of the situation or events in the story.

Point of view—The view the reader gets of the action and characters in a story.

Propaganda—Information or rumor deliberately spread to help or harm a person, group, or institution.

Prose—The ordinary form of written language without metrical structure, as distinguished from poetry or verse.

Protagonist—The chief character in a work of literature.

Realism—The literary practice of attempting to describe life and nature without idealization and with attention to detail.

Rhetorical device—Particular use of word patterns and styles used to clarify, make associations, and focus the writing in a piece of literature. Some rhetorical devices are expletives, parallelism, metaphor, analogy, assonance, etc.

Sarcasm—A sharp caustic remark. A form of verbal irony in which apparent praise is actually bitterly or harshly critical. For example, a coach saying to a player who misses the ball, "Nice catch."

Satire—A literary style used to make fun of or ridicule an idea or human vice or weakness.

Syllogism—A form of deduction. An extremely subtle, sophisticated, or deceptive argument.

Syntax—The way words are put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is sentence structure and how it influences the way a reader perceives a piece of writing.

Theme—The central or dominant idea or concern of a work; the main idea or meaning.

Thesis—Focus statement of an essay; premise statement upon which the point of view or discussion in the essay is based. Antithesis—The juxtaposition of sharply contrasting ideas in balanced or parallel words or phrases.

Tone—The attitude a literary work takes towards its subject and theme. It reflects the narrator's attitude.

Transition words—Words and devices that bring unity and coherence to a piece of writing. Examples: *however, in addition, and on the other hand.*

Utopia—An imaginary place of ideal perfection. The opposite of a dystopia. —An imaginary place where people live dehumanized, often fearful lives.

Voice—The acknowledged or unacknowledged source of words of the story; the speaker, a "person" telling the story or poem.

Zeugma—Grammatically correct linkage of one subject with two or more verbs or a verb with two or more direct objects. The linking shows a relationship between ideas more clearly. For example: Bob excelled at sports; Jim at academics; Mark at eating.