

# Guide to Literary Terms

---

This section defines a number of terms commonly used in analyzing literature. Terms are arranged alphabetically. Examples are given when appropriate (K. Buchanan, CAL).

## **Allusion**

A reference to a historical figure, a literary figure, or an event.

**Example:** An author makes references to Homer, Odysseus, and the Trojan War.

## **Analogy**

A comparison drawn between two basically different things that have some points in common. Compare with metaphor.

**Example:** Consider the worm that becomes a butterfly

## **Characterization**

The technique a writer uses to create and reveal the personalities of the characters in the work; may include physical appearance, situations, character's thoughts, and character's reactions.

## **Characters**

Persons, animals, or natural forces represented as persons. If the character stays the same throughout the work, the character is static. If the character changes in personality or attitude, the character is dynamic.

## **Climax**

The moment of the highest emotional intensity in a plot, when the outcome of the conflict is finally made clear to the readers.

## **Conflict**

Struggle between two opposing forces: (a) between two or more characters, (b) between characters and society, (c) between characters and nature, or (d) within a character's own mind.

## **Flashback**

A scene in story that interrupts the present action to tell of events that happened at an earlier time.

## **Figurative Language**

The use of words outside their literal or usual meanings. Figurative language is used to add beauty, increase vitality and impact, suggest associations and comparisons, and develop conciseness.

**Example:** "The lion's roar rolled like thunder."

## **Foreshadowing**

Technique of giving the reader, listener, or viewer hints of what is to come in the work.

## **Imagery**

The use of concrete details that appeal to the five senses.

**Example:** "Cold, wet leaves floating on moss-colored water. And the croaking of frogs - cracked bell-notes in the twilight."

## **Irony**

A contrast between what is said and what is actually meant is verbal irony. Irony of situation occurs when things turn out contrary to what is expected. Dramatic irony occurs when the reader is aware of something about which the character involved knows nothing.

## **Metaphor**

Comparison between two things that are basically dissimilar, with the intent of giving added meaning to one of them. Compare to analogy.

**Example:** "Rudolph Reed was oaken. His wife was oaken too."

## **Paradox**

A statement that reveals a kind of truth, although it seems at first to be self-contradictory and untrue.

## **Personification**

A figure of speech in which something nonhuman is given human characteristics or feelings.

**Example:** "The rocks sang with the joy of a well-trained choir."

**Plot**

The sequence of related events that make up a story. It is important to remember that a plot shows the reader a relationship among events. Plots may be very simple or complex and consist of a major plot plus one or more subplots. The main plot is the plot to which all other plots are related. A subplot is a plot in a story that is secondary to the main plot.

**Rising Action**

The series of events in a drama that lead up to a turning point, where the central character's fate is sealed.

**Setting**

The time and place in which the events of a literary work take place. A literary work may have more than one setting.

**Style**

A writer's characteristic way of writing: choice of words, sentence structure, and use of imagery and figurative language.

**Symbol**

Something in a literary work that maintains its own meaning while at the same time standing for something broader than itself.

**Theme**

The main idea expressed in a literary work. The central insight that the work gives us about human life.

**Tone**

The attitude the writer takes toward the subject or the reader of a work of literature.

**Turning Point**

That crucial moment in a story where the fate of the hero or heroine is sealed, when the events of the plot must begin to move toward a happy or an unhappy ending.