

Commonly Used Terms and Challenging Vocabulary

Ad Hominem - in an argument, this is an attack on the person rather than on the opponent's ideas.

Allegory - a work that functions on a symbolic level

Alliteration - the repetition at close intervals of initial identical consonant sounds. Or, vowel sounds in successive words or syllables that repeat.

Allusion - an indirect reference to something (usually a literary text) with which the reader is expected to be familiar. Allusions are usually literary, historical, Biblical, or mythological.

Analogy - a comparison to a directly parallel case. When a writer uses an analogy, he or she argues that a claim reasonable for one case is reasonable for the analogous case.

Anecdote - a brief recounting of a relevant episode. Anecdotes are often inserted into fictional or nonfictional texts as a way of developing a point or injecting humor.

Antithesis - a balancing of two opposite or contrasting words, phrases, or clauses.

Colloquial – the use of slang in writing, often to create local color or to create an informal tone.

Connotation - rather than the dictionary definition, the associations associated by a word. Implied meaning rather than literal meaning or denotation.

Cumulative Sentence - sentence which begins with the main idea and then expands on that idea with a series of details or other particulars.

Deduction - a form of reasoning that begins with a generalization, then applies the generalization to a specific case or cases.

Dialect – the re-creation of regional spoken language.

Diction - word choice, particularly as an element of style. Different types and arrangements of words have significant effects on meaning. An essay written in academic diction, for example, would be much less colorful, but perhaps more precise, than street slang.

Didactic - a term used to describe fiction or nonfiction that teaches a specific lesson or moral or provides a model or correct behavior or thinking.

Ellipsis – indicated by a series of three periods, the ellipsis indicates that some material has been omitted from a given text.

Ethos - when a writer tries to persuade the audience to respect and believe him or her based on a presentation of image of self through the text. Reputation is sometimes a factor in ethical appeals, but in all cases the aim is to gain the audience's confidence.

Euphemism - the use of a word or phrase that is less direct, but is also considered less distasteful or less offensive than another. E.g. "He is at rest" instead of "He is dead." Also consider "technicolor yawn" for "vomiting."

Extended Metaphor – a sustained comparison developed throughout a piece of writing (also called a conceit).

Figurative Language - a word or words that are inaccurate literally, but describe by calling to mind sensations or responses that the thing described evokes. Figurative language may be in the form of metaphors or similes, both non-literal comparison. Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" is an example of non-literal figurative language (metaphor specifically).

Hyperbole - conscious exaggeration used to heighten effect. Not intended literally, hyperbole is often humorous. Example: "And fired the shot heard round the world."

Imagery - the use of images, especially in a pattern of related images, often figurative, to create a strong unified sensory impression.

Induction - a form of reasoning which works from a body of facts to the formulation of a generalization; frequently used in science and history.

Inference – a conclusion one can draw from the presented details.

Irony - when a reader is aware of a reality that differs from a character's perception of reality (dramatic irony)/ The literal meaning of a writer's words may be verbal irony. Generally speaking, a discrepancy between expectation and reality.

Litotes - opposite of hyperbole; litotes intensifies an idea understatement by stating through the opposite. E.g. saying "It wasn't my best day" instead of "It was my worst day."

Logic (Logos) - relies on the audience's logical faculties; logical appeal moves from evidence to conclusion.

Logical Fallacy – a mistake in reasoning.

Metonymy - designation of one thing with something closely associated with it. E.g. calling the head of a committee a CHAIR, the king the CROWN, a newspaper the PRESS, or old people the GRAY HAIRS.

Motif - a frequently recurrent character, incident, or concept in literature.

Pacing – based largely on syntax, the movement of a literary piece from one point to another.

Parable - a short story from which a lesson may be drawn.

Parody – a comic imitation of a work that ridicules the original. These can range from gentle humor to mockery.

Pathos - qualities of a fiction or nonfiction work that evoke sorrow or pity. Over-emotionalism can be the result of an excess of pathos.

Pedantic – writing that borders on lecturing. It is scholarly and academic and often overly difficult.

Periodic Sentence - sentence that places the main idea or central complete thought at the end of the sentence, after all introductory elements - e.g. "Across the stream, beyond the clearing, from behind a fallen tree, the lion emerged."

Reduction ad Absurdum – Latin for "to reduce to the absurd." Used for comedic effect, it is considered a rhetorical fallacy because it reduces an argument to an either/or choice.

Rhetoric - the art of effective communication, especially persuasive discourse. Rhetoric focuses on the interrelationship of invention, arrangement, and style in order to create felicitous and appropriate discourse.

Rhetorical Question - a question asked for rhetorical effect to emphasize a point; no answer is expected. "Are you crazy?"

Sarcasm - a type of verbal irony in which, under the guise of praise, a caustic and bitter expression of strong and personal disapproval is given. Sarcasm is personal, jeering, and intended to hurt.

Satire - a work that reveals a critical attitude toward some element of human behavior by portraying it in an extreme way. Satire doesn't simply abuse (as with invective) or get personal (as with sarcasm). Satire usually targets groups or large concepts rather than individuals; its purpose is customarily to inspire change.

Style - the choices in diction, tone, and syntax that a writer makes. In combination they create a work's manner of expression. Style is thought to be conscious and unconscious and may be altered to suit specific occasions. Style is often habitual and evolves over time.

Syllogism - a form of reasoning in which two statements or premises are made and a logical conclusion is drawn from them (a form of deductive reasoning).

Symbol - a thing, event, or person that represents or stands for some idea or event. Symbols also simultaneously retain their own literal meanings. A figure of speech in which a concrete object is used to stand for an abstract idea - e.g. the cross for Christianity.

Synecdoche - part of something is used to stand for the whole - e.g. "threads" for clothes; "wheels" for cars.

Syntax - in grammar, the arrangement of words as elements in a sentence to show their relationship.

Theme - a central idea of a work of fiction or nonfiction, revealed and developed in the course of a story or explored through argument.

Thesis – the main idea of a piece of writing. It presents the author's assertion or claim. The effectiveness of a piece is often based on how well the thesis is supported. (Typically used when discussing non-fiction; particularly student-generated writing.)

Tone - a writer's attitude toward his or her subject matter revealed through diction, figurative language, and organization of the sentence and global levels.

Voice – in the non-grammatical sense, it is the total "sound" or "feel" of a writer's style