

Glossary of Literary and Critical Terminology

Term	Meaning	Example
Alliteration	A group of words which begin with the same letter	Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers
Anecdote	A brief (personal) story to illustrate a point	
Anti-climax	A final item in a list or story which seems out of place. The effect of using anti-climax could be to create humour	
Argument	The meaning or main point the writer wants to get across	
Assonance	A group of words which contain the same vowel	The roar soared over to the shore
Characterisation	The building up of a convincing character through dialogue, action, reaction to other characters	
Colloquial language	Informal writing	Calling a potato a 'spud'
Connotation	The association that a word brings to our mind rather than the literal meaning (see denotation)	'Gold' has connotations of success, riches
Context	The surrounding sentence or paragraph in which a word appears	
Denotation	The dictionary definition of a word or term	'Gold' a precious metal ...
Dialogue	Conversation between characters	
Effect	The impression you get from a piece of writing	
Ellipsis	The use of three dots ... to represent interruption, hesitation or indecision. At the end of a sentence they can be used to suggest an unfinished list or to create tension, suspense, a cliff hanger ...	I saw the boulder falling from the sky ...
Emotive language	Words or phrases which arouse an emotional response	The poor defenceless animals
Enjambement	In poetry this is where the idea in one line runs down into the next line or from one verse into another. This breaking can draw attention to	

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	words at the beginning and end of the line.	
Figurative language	Where the meaning isn't the same as the literal meaning	It was raining cats and dogs
Foreshadow	A minor event early in a text can foreshadow a major event which can come later.	In <i>Of Mice and Men</i> Lennie kills a mouse, then a puppy, then Curly's wife.
Genre	The type or category of literature	Poem, play, novel ...
Hyperbole	Exaggeration	I've been told a million times to improve my writing
Imagery/images	Descriptive words which create a picture in your head	The boy's bedroom looked like a bombed-out pigsty
Inference	A second level of meaning which is implied by the words but not stated	
Irony	That which is not what is intended happens – the opposite of what you mean or say	
Jargon	Specialised language belonging to a group or profession	Computer scientists may use jargon like 'byte', 'hard drive' etc.
Literal/literally	When a word or phrase means what it says.	'My teacher went through the roof' is metaphorical unless he is literally shot through it!
Litotes	The opposite of hyperbole which is when something is overstated. This is understatement.	'John is not the sharpest knife in the drawer' This may understate how foolish John is!
Metaphor	One thing is compared to another without using 'like' or 'as'	He's a wizard at maths
Onomatopoeia	Words which copy the sound they describe	Sizzle, crash ...
Oxymoron	The placing side by side of two opposites or contradictions in order to create impact.	A deafening silence ... A bitter sweet romance ...
First person narrative	The story is told from the point of view of one character	I
Third person narrative	The story is told by a narrator	He, she

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Oxymoron	Two opposites are placed side by side to create a new meaning	Bitter sweet
Parallel structure	The writer creates a pattern of words or phrases in such a way that the whole has greater impact than its parts	'It is by logic we prove but by intuition we discover.' (Da Vinci)
Paradox	A statement which seems to contradict itself – an element of mystery	You always hurt the ones you love
Parenthesis	Parenthesis can be found between two dashes, two commas or brackets. Additional supportive information is inserted which if removed would leave a sentence which makes sense.	There are many (some easier than others) terms to learn in English.
Personification	Objects are given human characteristics	The engine coughed into life
Propaganda	Writing or broadcasting designed to persuade people to a point of view	
Prose	Writing which is not in verse	Novels, short stories
Repetition	Repeated words or phrases to create an emphasis. Sometimes the repetition builds up to a climax.	A good student needs ... a good student hopes ... but above all a good student ...
Rhetorical question	A question which does not expect a direct answer probably because the questioner already knows the answer.	Who wants to see children suffer?
Rhyme	Using pairs of words, usually at the end of lines, with the same sound	
Rhythm	The pulse felt within a line of poetry through alternating stressed and unstressed syllables.	
Sarcasm	Uttering the opposite of what is meant – unlike irony there is usually a 'mean edge' to the remark	My good friend the Traffic Warden ...
Simile	Two things are compared using 'like' or 'as'	His hands were as cold as ice
Stanza	A unit within a poem, a verse.	

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Style	The way a writer writes creating effects through the use of imagery, anecdotes, word choice ...	
Symbol/symbolism	A word which can stand for something else	A flower can be a symbol of love
Synonym	An alternative word for the same thing	Happy, cheerful
Theme	The central idea of a text	
Tone	The way in which something is said, tone is created through word choice, emotive language, persuasive language ...	
Word choice	The word or expression a writer chooses in order to communicate or to create an effect.	'Outraged' suggests he was shocked or very angry by what had happened