

AP Language and Composition

“Glossary of Literary and Rhetorical Terms”

This document is available in PDF format by going to Mr. Hardebeck’s page on the Timberline website. Most definitions and examples herein were written by Mr. Hardebeck, while some were gleaned from a vast range of print and Internet resources. Apologies for not always citing, as some original sources have been lost.

First, some FAQs:

Q: Why are these sometimes called “terms” and sometimes called “devices” or “strategies”?

A: *When it’s just sitting there in your glossary, it’s a “term.” But when it’s “alive,” and being used in a piece of writing then it’s a “device” or “strategy.”*

Q: What’s the difference between a “literary” device and a “rhetorical” device?

A: *A term used for a “literary” purpose means that it’s typically in literature: a work of fiction, or a poem. Furthermore, it’s probably being used for an aesthetic purpose – that means to make the writing more beautiful, or artistic, or maybe to help convey a message. On the other hand, a term being used for a “rhetorical” purpose means it’s probably in a piece of nonfiction writing, and that the term is being used to advance an argument, or convince the reader to believe something.*

Q: OK, but could someone use a literary device in nonfiction, or a rhetorical device in literature?

A: *Yes, it’s possible. For example, a speech writer might use alliteration, which is typically a poetic device, to make the argument in his speech sound nicer.*

Q: So, the same term can sometimes be literary, and other times be rhetorical?

A: *Sure, sometimes. Certain terms are better at crossing over like that. But some terms are ALWAYS one or the other. “Concession-rebuttal” is always a rhetorical strategy, and “internal rhyme” is always a literary device.*

Q: Could a device ever be used for a literary purpose AND a rhetorical purpose at the same time?

A: *Hmmm. Maybe. That would make a good essay topic.*

Q: Why are some terms in this glossary marked “RS”?

A: *On the AP English Language Exam, students will repeatedly be asked to identify the rhetorical strategies that an author is using to help make his/her point. Students should also learn to make use of rhetorical strategies in their own essay writing. The terms marked “RS” are some of the most common rhetorical strategies.*

The terms:

Active Voice - The subject of the sentence performs the action. This is a more direct and preferred style of writing in most cases. “Anthony drove while Toni searched for the house.” The opposite is **passive voice** – when the subject of the sentence receives the action. “Anthony was driving while Toni was searching for the house. Passive voice is often overused, resulting in lifeless writing. When possible, try to use active voice.

RS **Allusion** - An indirect reference to something (usually a literary text, although it can be other things commonly known, such as plays, songs, historical events) with which the reader is supposed to be familiar.

Alter-ego – A character that is used by the author to speak the author’s own thoughts; when an author speaks directly to the audience through a character. In Shakespeare’s last play, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare talks to his audience about his own upcoming retirement, through the main character in the play, Prospero. Do not confuse with **persona**.

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

Archetype – A commonly-used storyline, character type, or plot device. Archetypal stories and characters are seen again and again in literature; they are thought to accurately reflect real-life human actions/traits. Examples of archetypal stories include the “rags to riches” story and the story of “forbidden love.”

Classicism – Art or literature characterized by a realistic view of people and the world; sticks to traditional themes and structures (see **romanticism**).

RS **Comic relief** – when a humorous scene is inserted into a serious story, in order to lighten the mood somewhat. The “gatekeeper scene” in *Macbeth* is an example of comic relief.

RS **Diction** - Word choice, particularly as an element of style. Different types of words have significant effects on meaning. An essay written in academic diction would be much less colorful, but perhaps more precise than street slang. You should be able to describe an author’s diction. You SHOULD NOT write in your thesis, “The author uses diction...”. This is essentially saying, “The author uses words to write.” (Duh.) Instead, describe the *type* of diction (for example, formal or informal, ornate or plain).

RS **Colloquial** - Ordinary or familiar type of conversation. A “**colloquialism**” is a common or familiar type of saying, similar to an **adage** or an **aphorism**.

RS **Connotation** - Rather than the dictionary definition (denotation), the associations suggested by a word. Implied meaning rather than literal meaning. (For example, “policeman,” “cop,” and “The Man” all denote the same literal meaning of police officer, but each has a different connotation.)

Denotation - The literal, explicit meaning of a word, without its connotations.

Jargon – The diction used by a group which practices a similar profession or activity. Lawyers speak using particular jargon, as do soccer players.

RS **Vernacular** - 1. Language or dialect of a particular country. 2. Language or dialect of a regional clan or group. 3. Plain everyday speech

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

Adage – A folk saying with a lesson. “*A rolling stone gathers no moss.*”
Similar to **aphorism** and **colloquialism**.

Allegory - A story, fictional or non-fictional, in which characters, things, and events represent qualities or concepts. The interaction of these characters, things, and events is meant to reveal an abstraction or a truth. *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, is an allegory.

Aphorism - A terse statement which expresses a general truth or moral principle. An aphorism can be a memorable summation of the author's point. Ben Franklin wrote many of these in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, such as “*God helps them that help themselves,*” and “*A watched pot never boils.*”

Ellipsis - The deliberate omission of a word or phrase from prose done for effect by the author. "*The whole day, rain, torrents of rain.*" The term ellipsis is related to **ellipsis**, which is the three periods used to show omitted text in a quotation.

Euphemism - A more agreeable or less offensive substitute for generally unpleasant words or concepts. Sometimes they are used for political correctness. "*Physically challenged,*" in place of "*crippled.*" Sometimes a euphemism is used to exaggerate correctness to add humor. "*Vertically challenged*" in place of "*short.*"

RS **Figurative Language** - "Figurative Language" is the opposite of "Literal Language." Literal language is writing that makes complete sense when you take it at face value. "Figurative Language" is the opposite: writing that is *not* meant to be taken literally.

Analogy - An analogy is a figurative comparison of one situation to a similar situation: "*Just like roses can grow out of concrete, so you can find friends among your enemies.*" A more traditional form of analogy is to compare one pair of variables to a parallel set of variables. In this type of analogy the writer argues that the relationship between the first pair of variables is the same as the relationship between the second pair of variables. "*America is to the world as the hippo is to the jungle.*" Similes and metaphors are sometimes also analogies.

Hyperbole: Exaggeration. "*My mother will kill me if I am late.*"

Idiom: A common, often used expression that doesn't make sense if you take it literally. "*I got chewed out by my coach.*"

Metaphor: Making an *implied* and *figurative* comparison, not using "like," "as," or other such words. "*My feet are popsicles.*" An **extended metaphor** is when the metaphor is continued later in the written work. If I continued to call my feet "my popsicles" in later paragraphs, that would be an extended metaphor. A particularly elaborate extended metaphor is called using **conceit**.

Metonymy – Replacing an actual word or idea, with a related word or concept. "*Relations between London and Washington have been strained,*" does not literally mean relations between the two cities, but between the leaders of The United States and England. Metonymy is often used with body parts: "*I could not understand his tongue,*" means his language or his speech.

Synecdoche – A kind of metonymy when a whole is represented by naming one of its parts, or vice versa. "*The cattle rancher owned 500 head.*" "*Check out my new wheels.*"

Simile: Using words such as "like" or "as" to make a *direct* and *figurative* comparison between two very different things. "*My feet are so cold they feel like popsicles.*"

Synesthesia – a description involving a "crossing of the senses." *Examples:* "*A purplish scent filled the room.*" "*I was deafened by his brightly-colored clothing.*"

Personification: Giving human-like qualities to something that is not human. "*The tired old truck groaned as it inched up the hill.*"

Foreshadowing – When an author gives hints about what will occur later in a story.

Genre - The major category into which a literary work fits. The basic divisions of literature are prose, poetry, and drama. However, genres can be subdivided as well (poetry can be classified into lyric, dramatic, narrative, etc.). The AP Language exam deals primarily with the following genres: autobiography, biography, diaries, criticism, essays, and journalistic, political, scientific, and nature writing.

Gothic – Writing characterized by gloom, mystery, fear and/or death. Also refers to an architectural style of the middle ages, often seen in cathedrals of this period.

Imagery - Word or words that create a picture in the reader's mind. Usually this involves the five senses. Authors often use imagery in conjunction with metaphors, similes, or figures of speech.

Invective – A long, emotionally violent, attack using strong, abusive language.

RS **Irony** - When the opposite of what you expect to happen does.

Verbal irony - When you say something and mean the opposite/something different. For example, if your gym teacher wants you to run a mile in eight minutes or faster, but calls it a "walk in the park" it would be verbal irony. If your voice tone is bitter, it's called **sarcasm**.

Dramatic irony - When the audience of a drama, play, movie, etc. knows something that the character doesn't and would be surprised to find out. For example, in many horror movies, we (the audience) know who the killer is, which the victim-to-be has no idea who is doing the slaying. Sometimes the character trusts the killer completely when (ironically) he/she shouldn't.

Situational irony - Found in the plot (or story line) of a book, story, or movie. Sometimes it makes you laugh because it's funny how things turn out. (For example, Johnny spent two hours planning on sneaking into the movie theater and missed the movie. When he finally did manage to sneak inside he found out that kids were admitted free that day).

RS **Juxtaposition** - Placing things side by side for the purposes of comparison. Authors often use juxtaposition of ideas or examples in order to make a point. (For example, an author may juxtapose the average day of a typical American with that of someone in the third world in order to make a point of social commentary).

Mood - The atmosphere created by the literature and accomplished through word choice (diction). Syntax is often a creator of mood since word order, sentence length and strength and complexity also affect pacing and therefore mood. Setting, tone, and events can all affect the mood.

Motif – a recurring idea in a piece of literature. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the idea that “you never really understand another person until you consider things from his or her point of view” is a motif, because the idea is brought up several times over the course of the novel.

Oxymoron – When apparently contradictory terms are grouped together and suggest a paradox – “wise fool,” “eloquent silence,” “jumbo shrimp.”

RS **Pacing** – The speed or tempo of an author’s writing. Writers can use a variety of devices (syntax, polysyndeton, anaphora, meter) to change the pacing of their words. An author’s pacing can be fast, sluggish, stabbing, vibrato, staccato, measured, etc.

Paradox - A seemingly contradictory situation which is actually true. “*You can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without getting a job.*”

RS **Parallelism** – (Also known as parallel structure or balanced sentences.) Sentence construction which places equal grammatical constructions near each other, or repeats identical grammatical patterns. Parallelism is used to add emphasis, organization, or sometimes pacing to writing. “*Cinderella swept the floor, dusted the mantle, and beat the rugs.*”

Anaphora - Repetition of a word, phrase, or clause at the beginning of two or more sentences or clauses in a row. This is a deliberate form of repetition and helps make the writer's point more coherent. “*I came, I saw, I conquered.*”

Chiasmus – When the same words are used twice in succession, but the second time, the order of the words is reversed. “*Fair is foul and foul is fair.*” “*When the going gets tough, the tough get going.*” Also called **antimetabole**.

Antithesis - Two opposite or contrasting words, phrases, or clauses, or even ideas, with parallel structure. *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"*

Syllepsis - When a single word governs or modifies two or more other words, and the meaning of the first word must change for each of the other words it governs or modifies. *"The butler killed the lights, and then the mistress."* *"I quickly dressed myself and the salad."*

Parenthetical Idea – When a tangential idea is inserted into a sentence, usually with parentheses, although commas or dashes could also be used to separate the peripheral idea from the rest of the sentence. *"John Steinbeck (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature) wrote The Grapes of Wrath in 1939."*

Parody - An exaggerated imitation of a serious work for humorous purposes. It borrows words or phrases from an original, and pokes fun at it. This is also a form of **allusion**, since it is referencing a previous text, event, etc. The Simpsons often parody Shakespeare plays. Saturday Night Live also parodies famous persons and events. Do not confuse with **satire** or **sarcasm**.

Parts of Speech– The main categories to which words are assigned based on their functions.

Nouns – Persons, places or things. **"Proper nouns"** are specific people or places and are capitalized, while **"common nouns"** are general and not capitalized.
goat, cars, president, happiness, building, city, fireman, Bill Clinton, Montana, Great Pyramid

Verbs – Words that express action or relationship.
fly, ran, kick, cooked, drove, says, eat, understands, declared, loves, turned

Adjectives – Words that describe nouns.
happy, many, bitter, lonely, yellow, smelly, fast, tall, brave

Adverbs – Words that describe verbs – how the action was done. Often end in -ly.
angrily, quickly, deliberately, carefully, gently, lovingly, thoughtfully

Pronouns – Words that replace or "stand in" for a noun.
he, she, it, they, them, you, we, our

Antecedent - The noun or noun phrase that the pronoun refers back to. The AP language exam occasionally asks for the antecedent of a given pronoun in a long, complex sentence or in a group of sentences. *"If I could command the wealth of all the world by lifting my finger, I would not pay such a price for it."* An AP question might read: "What is the antecedent for "it"?"

Persona - The fictional mask or narrator that tells a story. Do not confuse with **alter-ego**.

Poetic device – A device used in poetry to manipulate the sound of words, sentences or lines.

Alliteration

The repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of words.
"Sally sells sea shells by the sea shore"

Assonance

The repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds.
"From the molten-golden notes"

Consonance

The repetition of the same consonant sound at the end of words or within words.
"Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door"

Onomatopoeia

The use of a word which imitates or suggests the sound that the thing makes.
Snap, rustle, boom, murmur

Internal rhyme

When a line of poetry contains a rhyme within a single line.
"To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!"

Slant rhyme

When a poet creates a rhyme, but the two words do not rhyme exactly – they are merely similar.
"I sat upon a stone, / And found my life has gone."

End rhyme

When the last word of two different lines of poetry rhyme.
"Roses are red, violets are blue, / Sugar is sweet, and so are you."

Rhyme Scheme

The pattern of a poem's end rhymes. For example, the following lines have a rhyme scheme of *a b a b c d c d*:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	<i>a</i>
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.	<i>b</i>
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.	<i>a</i>
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.	<i>b</i>
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines	<i>c</i>
And often is his gold complexion dimmed	<i>d</i>
And every fair from fair sometime declines	<i>c</i>
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed	<i>d</i>

Stressed and unstressed syllables

In every word of more than one syllable, one of the syllables is stressed, or said with more force than the other syllable(s). In the name "Nathan," the first syllable is stressed. In the word "unhappiness," the second of the four syllables is stressed.

Meter

A regular pattern to the syllables in lines of poetry.

Free verse

Poetry that doesn't have much meter or rhyme.

Iambic pentameter

Poetry that is written in lines of 10 syllables, alternating stressed and unstressed syllables.
"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Sonnet

A 14 line poem written in iambic pentameter. Usually divided into three quatrains and a couplet.

RS **Polysyndeton** – When a writer creates a list of items which are all separated by conjunctions. Normally, a conjunction is used only before the last item in a list. *Examples of polysyndeton: "I walked the dog, and fed the cat, and milked the cows." "Or if a soul touch any unclean thing, whether it be a carcass of an unclean beast, or a carcass of unclean cattle, or the carcass of unclean creeping things...he also shall be unclean."* Polysyndeton is often used to slow down the pace of the writing and/or add an authoritative tone.

Pun – When a word that has two or more meanings is used in a humorous way. *"My dog has a fur coat and pants!" "I was stirred by his cooking lesson."*

RS **Rhetorical Question** - Question not asked for information but for effect. *"The angry parent asked the child, 'Are you finished interrupting me?'"* In this case, the parent does not expect a reply, but simply wants to draw the child's attention to the rudeness of interrupting.

Romanticism – Art or literature characterized by an idealistic, perhaps unrealistic view of people and the world, and an emphasis on nature. Does not rely on traditional themes and structures (see **classicism**).

Sarcasm – A tone word, meaning to be bitter and humorous at the same time. Sarcasm can be used in conjunction with irony or satire. The tone of a whole written piece can be sarcastic, OR you can have one small part that is sarcastic. Do not confuse with **satire** or **parody**.

RS **Satire** – An article, story, film or performance that makes a serious point in a humorous manner. Good satire usually has three layers: 1) serious on the surface; 2) humorous when you discover that it is satire instead of reality; and 3) serious when you discern the underlying point of the author. Satire refers to the entire written work – you can't have one sentence of satire. Do not confuse with **sarcasm** or **parody**.

Sentence - A sentence is group of words (including subject and verb) that expresses a complete thought.

Appositive - A word or group of words placed beside a noun or noun substitute to supplement its meaning. *“Bob, the lumber yard worker, spoke with Judy, an accountant from the city.”*

Clause - A grammatical unit that contains both a subject and a verb. An **independent clause** expresses a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence. A **dependent, or subordinate clause** cannot stand alone as a sentence and must be accompanied by an independent clause. (Example: *“Other than baseball, football is my favorite sport.”* In this sentence, the independent clause is “football is my favorite sport” and the dependent clause is “Other than baseball.”

Sentence structures:

Balanced sentence – A sentence in which two parallel elements are set off against each other like equal weights on a scale. Both parts are parallel grammatically. *“If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”* Also called **parallelism**.

Compound sentence - Contains at least two independent clauses but no dependent clauses.

Complex sentence - Contains only one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

Cumulative sentence - When the writer begins with an independent clause, then adds subordinate elements. *“He doubted whether he could ever again appear before an audience, his confidence broken, his limbs shaking, his collar wet with perspiration.”* The opposite construction is called a **periodic sentence**.

Periodic sentence - When the main idea is not completed until the end of the sentence. The writer begins with subordinate elements and postpones the main clause. *“His confidence broken, his limbs shaking, his collar wet with perspiration, he doubted whether he could ever again appear before an audience.”* The opposite construction is called a **cumulative sentence**.

Simple sentence - Contains only one independent clause.

Sentence types:

Declarative sentence - States an idea. It does not give a command or request, nor does it ask a question. *“The ball is round.”*

Imperative sentence - Issues a command. *“Kick the ball.”*

Interrogative sentence - Sentences incorporating interrogative pronouns (what, which, who, whom, and whose). “*To whom did you kick the ball?*”

Style - The choices in diction, tone, and syntax that a writer makes. Style may be conscious or unconscious.

Symbol - Anything that represents or stands for something else. Usually a symbol is something concrete such as an object, actions, character...that represents something more abstract. Examples of symbols include the Whale in *Moby Dick*, the river and the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*, and the Raven in “The Raven.”

RS **Syntax/sentence variety** - Grammatical arrangement of words. This is perhaps one of the most difficult concepts to master. First, a reader should examine the length of sentences (short or long). How does sentence length and structure relate to tone and meaning. Are they simple, compound, compound-complex sentences? How do they relate to one another? Syntax is the grouping of words, while **diction** refers to the selection of individual words.

Theme - The central idea or message of a work. The theme may be directly stated in nonfiction works, although not necessarily. It is rarely stated directly in fiction.

Thesis - The sentence(s) that directly express the author's claim, or opinion, or purpose, or meaning, or proposition or stance. In student writing, the thesis (claim, proposition, argument, etc.) should be short and clear. (also see **argument**)

Tone - A writer's attitude toward his subject matter revealed through diction, figurative language and organization. To identify tone, consider how the piece would sound if read aloud (or how the author wanted it to sound aloud). Tone can be: playful, serious, businesslike, sarcastic, humorous, formal, somber, etc.

RS **Understatement** - The ironic minimizing of fact, understatement presents something as less significant than it is. The effect can frequently be humorous. “*Our defense played valiantly, and held the other team to merely eight touchdowns in the first quarter.*”

Litotes - a particular form of understatement, generated by denying the opposite of the statement which otherwise would be used. Depending on the tone and context of the usage, litotes either retains the effect of understatement (*Hitting that telephone pole certainly didn't do your car any good*) or becomes an intensifying expression (*The flavors of the mushrooms, herbs, and spices combine to make the dish not at all disagreeable*).

Want more? OK, if you really want to know what “antiprosopopoeia” or “tapinosis” means, the best website for literary/rhetorical terms is:

<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>