

What are Literary Devices?

Introduction

Commonly, the term *Literary Devices* refers to the typical structures used by writers in their works to convey his or her message(s) in a simple manner to his or her readers. When employed properly, the different literary devices help readers to appreciate, interpret and analyze a literary work.

Literary elements are not there to add decoration or fanciness to a text—they are there to create meaning and to convey that meaning to a reader.

To have a better understanding of *Literary Devices*, it is useful to look at their definition and examples:

Common Literary Techniques

1. **Imagery:** It is the use of figurative language to create visual representations of actions, objects and ideas in our mind in such a way that they appeal to our physical senses. For example:

- *The room was dark and gloomy.* -The words “dark” and “gloomy” are visual images.
- *The river was roaring in the mountains.* – The word “roaring” appeals to our sense of hearing.

2. **Simile and Metaphor:** Both compare two distinct objects and draws similarity between them. The difference is that Simile uses “as” or “like” and Metaphor does not. For example:

- *“My love is like a red red rose” (Simile)*
- *He is an old fox very cunning. (Metaphor)*

3. **Hyperbole:** It is deliberate exaggeration of actions and ideas for the sake of emphasis. For example:

- *Your bag weighs a ton!*
- *I have got a million issues to look after!*

4. **Personification:** It gives a thing, an idea or an animal human qualities. For example:

- *The flowers are dancing beside the lake.*
- *Have you see my new car? She is a real beauty!*

5. **Alliteration:** It refers to the same consonant sounds in words coming together. For example:

- Better butter always makes the batter better.
- She sells seashells at seahore.
- Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

6. **Allegory:** It is a literary technique in which an abstract idea is given a form of characters, actions or events. For example:

- “Animal Farm”, written by George Orwell, is an example allegory using the actions of animals on a farm to represent the overthrow of the last of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II and the Communist Revolution of Russia before WW II. In addition, the actions of the animals on the farm are used to expose the greed and corruption of the Revolution.

7. **Irony:** It is use of the words in such a way in which the intended meaning is completely opposite to their literal meaning. For example:

- The bread is soft as a stone.
- So nice of you to break my new PSP!
- Thank you very much for not doing the homework I gave you!

There are three types of Irony:

Dramatic irony – This occurs when the reader or audience understands more about the events of a story than a character.

Situational irony – This occurs when what actually happens is the opposite of what is expected or appropriate.

Verbal irony – A character says one thing but really means the opposite.

Example: Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" has all three types of irony.

8. **Foreshadowing:** Foreshadowing often appears at the beginning of a story, or a chapter, and helps the reader develop expectations about the coming events in a story. There are various ways to create foreshadowing.

A writer may use character dialogues to hint at what may occur in the future. In addition, any event or action in the story may throw a hint to the readers about future events or actions. Even a title of a work or a chapter title can act as a clue that suggests what is going to happen. Foreshadowing in fiction creates an atmosphere of suspense in a story, so that the readers are interested to know more.

9. **Symbolism.** The use of an object or action to mean something more than its literal meaning. For example, in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, one of the principle characters, Caddy, falls and stains her white dress when she's a child. The stained dress symbolizes (and foreshadows) her later loss of purity. A character can also be equated with an object throughout a work, another form of symbolism. In Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, an aunt is repeatedly seen carrying an empty bag, which symbolizes her childlessness.

9. **Euphemism:** The term euphemism refers to polite, indirect expressions that replace words and phrases considered harsh and impolite, or which suggest something unpleasant. Euphemism is an idiomatic expression, which loses its literal meanings and refers to something else, in order to hide its unpleasantness. For example, "kick the bucket" is a euphemism that describes the death of a person. In addition, many organizations use the term "downsizing" for the distressing act of "firing" its employees.

- We do not hire mentally challenged (stupid) people.
- He is a special child (disabled or learning challenged)
- "For the time being," he explains, "it had been found necessary to make a readjustment of rations." Substituting the word "reduction" for "readjustment" was an attempt to suppress the complaints of other animals about hunger. It works because reduction means "cutting" the food supply, while readjustment implies changing the current amount of food.

10. **Allusion:**

- "Don't act like a Romeo in front of her." – "Romeo" is a reference to Shakespeare's Romeo, a passionate lover of Juliet, in "Romeo and Juliet".

- The rise in poverty will unlock the Pandora’s box of crimes. – This is an allusion to one of Greek Mythology’s origin myth, “Pandora’s box”.
- “This place is like a Garden of Eden.” – This is a biblical allusion to the “garden of God” in the Book of Genesis.
- “Hey! Guess who the new Newton of our school is?” – “Newton”, means a genius student, alludes to a famous scientist Isaac Newton.

Function of Literary Devices

In general, the literary devices are a collection of universal artistic structures that are so typical of all works of literature frequently employed by the writers to give meanings and a logical framework to their works through language. When such works are read by readers, they ultimately recognize and appreciate them. Because of their universality, they also allow the readers to compare a work of one writer to that of the other to determine its worth. They not only beautify the piece of literature but also give deeper meanings to it, testing the very understanding of the readers along with providing them enjoyment of reading. Besides, they help motivating readers’ imagination to visualize the characters and scenes more clearly.

Poets and prose writers use this technique to bring out emotions and help their readers form images in their minds. Thus, figurative language is a useful way of conveying an idea that readers cannot understand otherwise, due to its complex and abstract nature. In addition, it helps in analyzing a literary text.

How to Analyze a short story or novel?

Literary analysis looks critically at a work of fiction in order to understand how the parts contribute to the whole. When analyzing a novel or short story, you'll need to consider elements such as the context, setting, characters, plot, literary devices, and themes. Remember that a literary analysis isn't merely a summary or review, but rather an interpretation of the work and an argument about it based on the text. Depending on your assignment, you might argue about the work's meaning or why it causes certain reader reactions. This handout will help you analyze a short story or novel—use it to form a thesis, or argument, for your essay.

Summary

Begin by summarizing the basic plot: “*Matilda* by Roald Dahl is about a gifted little girl in small town America who learns to make things move with her mind and saves her teacher and school from the evil principal.” This will help ground you in the story. (When you write your paper, you probably won't include a summary because your readers will already be familiar with the work. But if they aren't, use a brief summary to orient them.)

Context

Research the author's background and other work. This can give insight into the author's perspective and bias, as well as tell the reader what he might be commenting on. For example, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is about a group of friends who embark on an epic journey and fight a great war. Knowing Tolkien fought in the Battle of Somme during World War I and that his closest friends were killed helps explain his sentiments about war.

Other questions about context can stem from the story itself. Consider the narrator's personality and their role in the story. In *The Outsiders*, the narrator is the character of Ponyboy Curtis and not the author, S.E. Hinton. Also consider who the narrator is addressing. At the end of *The Outsiders*, for example, you find out that the entire book was an essay for one of Ponyboy's teachers, which makes the story seem more honest and real.

Setting

When and where a story takes place can be profoundly significant. Consider where the author's story is placed and why the author made that decision. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, the setting is Italy, although Shakespeare was writing in England. He set his play elsewhere, in part, so he could make social commentary about England without incurring the wrath of English rulers.

Remember, many stories would be irretrievably altered if their setting were different and setting is, therefore, integral for interpreting the story's meaning. For instance, the setting for Faulkner's work—the American South after the Civil War—is essential to his overall message. Faulkner's characters are people who can't move on, and through them he suggests that the South similarly can't get past the Civil War and the wrongs of slavery.

Plot

Story lines usually follow patterns like those in the example below. Identifying essential plot points will help you to analyze, interpret, and explain the story.

Main Problem (Conflict): The plot hinges on some major problem, often a conflict between characters or an obstacle that must be overcome.

Ex. In Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda*, Matilda's parents neglect her and the Trunchbull is evil to everyone, including Miss Honey. The Trunchbull is Miss Honey's aunt and cheated her out of her inheritance.

Climax: The high point of the action, when the conflict or problem could either be resolved or cause a character's downfall.

Ex. Matilda uses her telekinetic powers to scare the Trunchbull into believing the ghost of Miss Honey's father is haunting her. The Trunchbull runs away, leaving Miss Honey her house and belongings.

Resolution: The conflict or problem is solved and normalcy or a new order is restored.

Ex. Matilda's family flees so her dad can escape prison, but Matilda gets to stay and live with Miss Honey.

Characters

Characters are the driving force behind stories, both major characters and minor ones, and authors use them to broadcast their most important messages. You won't be able to analyze every character, but pick out several important ones to consider.

First, describe the character for yourself; next, consider why the character was portrayed in that way. The following are some guiding questions:

What are the character's main personality traits? Why did the author give him these traits?

<pEx. In the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the character Dumbledore is wise, calm, courteous, protecting, encouraging, powerful, and ambitious. As the story progresses, his faults and imperfections appear. Rowling creates Dumbledore as a force to protect and guide Harry.</p

<pWhat is the character's role in the story? Is she the hero? The bad guy? A secondary character? Why did the author give her this role?

Ex. Dumbledore is the classic "teacher wizard" figure, in that he is all wise and has magical powers that others do not. People have an instinctive trust in this type of character; he voices many of Rowling's most important themes.

What are the character's morals or ethics? Why does the author give him those?

Ex. Dumbledore's morality is based on compassion, understanding, and respect for all. If the respected, powerful teacher says something, Rowling's readers, and Harry, will be more likely to believe it.

Why does the character do what she does? Why did the author make her act that way?

Ex. Readers find out that Dumbledore was not born wise and all knowing, but was ambitious and egotistical when he was young. His wisdom was gained through pain and tragedy. This illustrates Rowling's theme that a normal, flawed person, with courage and love, can save the world.

What is the character's relationship to other characters and why? Why did the author create the relationships?

Ex. To Cornelius Fudge, Dumbledore is a threat because of his power and influence. In being frightened and resentful of Dumbledore, Fudge shows himself to be a weak man who blames others for his mistakes—Rowling's comment on government.

Tying It Together

Once your analysis is complete, develop a thesis that makes an arguable claim about the text. It should connect one of the themes you've identified with specific proof from the text (i.e. setting, context, plot, characters, symbolism, allusions, etc.). Sometimes, you will also use the support of other analysts or literary experts.

Ex. Thesis In *The Once and Future King*, White shows that the ideal leader is not one of military strength, but one who balances government power and social independence. He achieves this through his satire of the

knighthood, his depiction of Merlin's philosophical experiments, and his portrayal of Arthur.

Remember that a thesis for a literary analysis should NOT merely:

- Summarize the plot ("*The Once and Future King* tells the story of the legendary King Arthur.")
- Announce a general theme ("*The Once and Future King* gives important ideas about leadership.")
- Offer a review of the book ("*The Once and Future King* is a literary classic that everyone should read.")