

I'm not a bot































Greek poetry but isn't seen as much these days—largely because it's difficult to do well. If s when a poet uses a word in one sentence to mean two different things, often meaning a literal one, and one meaning a figurative one. For example, "he lost his passport and his temper" or "I left my heart and my favorite scarf in Santa Fé" are two instances where the verb is used in both literal and figurative ways. How to use poetic devices Seeing the range of words-level tools available to you as a writer can be both exciting and a little overwhelming. As you can see, the twenty-six unassuming little letters of the English language carry within them a world of possibility—the poet just needs to know how to make them dance. There are two ways to begin working with poetic devices, both of them essential: the first is to read. Read classic poetry, modern poetry, free verse, blank verse, poetry written by men and women of all walks of life. Look at ways other artists have used these poetic devices effectively, and see which moments in their work resonate with you the most. Then ask yourself why and what you can do to bring that light into your own poetry. The second is to write. The poet and novelist Margaret Atwood famously said, "You become a writer by writing. There is no other way." Reading poetry and reading about poetry is an important part of understanding technique, but the only real way to get these poetic devices in your bones and blood is to begin. If you've started writing your own poetry already, go back and look at some of your earlier work. Can you spot any of the poetic devices from this list? Many of these literary devices work because they resonate with our innate human instincts for rhythm and storytelling. You probably already use some of them without realizing it. See where you can pick out these little seeds and bring them to life even more. As you progress, your awareness of technical literary devices in poetry such as assonance, epistrophe, metonymy, and poetic form will become as natural as a musician who no longer needs to look at the keys—they simply form a part of your poet's voice. Looking to spice up your writing? Poetic devices are the salt and pepper (and, if you get really into them, the saffron and caraway) of writing; when deployed effectively, they add flavor and texture to your work. But what is a poetic device? Do they only work in poetry? In this article, we'll cover what they are, when you can use them, and how to better understand their function in any literary form! What Is a Poetic Device? At its most basic, a poetic device is a deliberate use of words, phrases, sounds, and even shapes to convey meaning. That sounds so broad that it could basically encompass any form of written expression, but poetic devices are generally used to heighten the literal meaning of words by considering sound, form, and function. There are a lot of poetic devices, just as there are a lot of literary and rhetorical devices. Anything that impacts the way a poem or other written work looks or sounds is a type of poetic device, including devices that are also classified as literary or rhetorical devices. Consider your writing—whether it's an essay, poem, or non-fiction article—as a meal you're cooking. You use good ingredients and put a lot of care into the dish, so you know it's going to taste good. But there are ways to make it taste even better, little additions that can bring out the taste of each ingredient to make it even tastier—a pinch of salt, a touch of cumin. That's what poetic devices do. Like the metaphor I used in the last paragraph, poetic devices infuse literal meanings (what words actually say) with figurative meanings (implications, unexpected connotations, and so on). You might have gotten the point that poetic devices improve writing without me comparing them to spices, but that metaphor added flavor and enhanced the meaning that was already there. But metaphors are only one method of enhancing your writing. A poem about a horse may use a hoofbeat rhythm (otherwise known as an anapest or dactyl, depending on which syllable is stressed—da-da-DUH for the former and DUH-da-da for the latter) to really draw the reader in. The reader doesn't have to notice the hoofbeat rhythm for it to be effective, either; often, a rhythm helps readers remember what they've read without them necessarily realizing it. One important thing to remember is that literary devices, like spices, are great in moderation, but overpowering if overused. Nobody wants to eat a bowl of pepper, just like nobody wants to read something if its meaning is totally obscured by flowery language. You don't have to hold back entirely—many wonderful poets, essayists, and authors can use flowery language to great effect—but do make sure that your poetic devices are enhancing rather than overshadowing your point. Writers commonly use literary devices in poetry to help make their points memorable or their language more evocative. You've likely used poetic devices without thinking about it, but deliberate use can make your writing even stronger! A little skillful use of spices and poetic devices goes a long way. 20 Top Poetic Devices to Remember There are tons of poetic devices out there—it would be nearly impossible to list all of them. But to get you started, we've compiled some of the most common poetry terms, along with a few of the more interesting ones! Allegory An allegory is a story, poem, or other written work that can be interpreted to have a secondary meaning. Aesop's Fables are examples of allegories, as they are ostensibly about one thing (such as "The Ant and the Grasshopper") but actually have a secondary meaning. Fables are particularly literal examples of allegories, but there are many others, as well, such as George Orwell's Animal Farm or Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Fruit." Alliteration Alliteration is the repetition of a sound or letter at the beginning of multiple words in a series. "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary..." - Edgar Allen Poe, "The Raven" Poe uses alliteration with the "wh," sound at the beginning of multiple words. The repetition here mimics the sound of the wind (something you might hear on a dreary night), and also sounds a little soothing—something that's interrupted in the next couple of lines by a different sound, just as Poe interrupts his soothing, round vowel sounds with repetition of the 'p' sound in "suddenly there came a tapping, / As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door...." Allusion An allusion is an indirect reference to something. "The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest." - Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird Lee isn't speaking of a literal crash—she's referencing the stock market crash of the late 1920s, which left many people without money. Scout, To Kill a Mockingbird's narrator, references the stock market crash in a way that's appropriate for her context, which readers can gather from the novel's setting. Using this allusion allows Lee to do some quick scene-setting. Not only does it establish the novel firmly within its setting, but it also shows that Scout herself is a clear part of that setting—she speaks to the audience in the way that a child of that era would speak, giving the story a greater sense of realism. Apostrophe An apostrophe is a poetic device where the writer addresses a person or thing that isn't present with an exclamation. "O stranger of the future!O inconceivable being!whatever the shape of your house,no matter how strange and colorless the clothes youmay wear,I bet nobody there likes a wet dog either.I bet everybody in your pubeven the children, pushes her away," Billy Collins, "To A Stranger Born In Some Distant County Hundreds Of Years From Now" Though we know from the title that Collins is addressing a stranger from the future, in the final stanza of the poem he addresses that stranger directly. Apostrophe was particularly common in older forms of poetry, going all the way back to Ancient Greece—many works of Greek literature begin with an invocation of the Muses, typically by saying something like, "Sing in me, O Muse." Because the narrator of Collins' poem is calling out to someone in the future, he mimics the language of the past and situates this poem in a larger context. Assonance Assonance is the repetition of vowel or diphthong sounds in one or more words found close together. " Hear the loud alarm bells— Brazen bells!What tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells! In the startled ear of night How they scream out their affright! Too much horrified to speak. They can only shriek, shriek, Out of tune..." - Edgar Allen Poe, "The Bells" When Poe talks about alarm bells, he uses sharp, high-pitch vowels to echo their sound: notice the repetition of long "e" and "i" sounds, both of which sound a bit like screams. Blank Verse Blank verse refers to poetry written without rhyme, especially if that poetry is written in iambic pentameter. "But, woe is me, you are so sick of late,So far from cheer and from your former state,That I distrust you. Yet, though I distrust,Discomfort you, my lord, it nothing must..." - William Shakespeare, "Hamlet" Many of Shakespeare's plays are written in blank verse, including much of "Hamlet." Here, the dialog is without rhymes, which makes it sound more realistic, but it still follows a strict meter—iambic pentameter. This lends it a sense of grandiosity beyond if Shakespeare had tried to mimic natural speech, and the deliberate space of stressed and unstressed syllables gives it a satisfying sense of rhythm. Consonance Consonance is the repetition of specific consonant sounds in close proximity. "Tyger Tyger, burning bright,In the forests of the night,What immortal hand or eye,Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" - William Blake, "The Tyger" Black repeatedly uses multiple sounds in the first stanza of this famous poem. One of the most prominent is "r," which shows up in every line of the first stanza, and almost every line of the poem as a whole. As Blake is writing about the tiger, he's musing on its fearsome nature and where it comes from, with the repeated "r" sound mimicking the tiger's growl like a small, subtle threat in the poem's background. Enjambment Enjambment is the continuation of a sentence beyond a line break, couplet, or stanza without an expected pause. "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore— And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over— like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?" - Langston Hughes, "Harlem" Hughes plays with multiple methods of ending lines in this poem, including enjambment. The first two lines of the second stanza and the second-to-last stanza are examples of enjambment, as the thought continues from one line to the next without any punctuation. Notice the way these lines feel in comparison to the others, especially the second example, isolated in its own stanza. The way it's written mimics the exhaustion of carrying a heavy load, as you can't pause for breath the way that you do with the lines ended with punctuation. Irony Irony has a few different meanings. The most common is the use of tone or exaggeration to convey a meaning opposite to what's being literally said. A second form of irony is situational irony, in which a situation or event contradicts expectations, usually in a humorous fashion. A third form is dramatic irony, where the audience of a play, movie, or other piece of art is aware of something that the characters are not. Basic irony, where what someone says doesn't match what they mean, might look something like this: "Yeah, I love dogs," she said dryly, holding the miniature poodle at arm's length as his fives sprang up along her arms. Situational irony would include things like a police station getting robbed or a marriage counselor getting a divorce—we would expect police to be able to resist getting robbed and a marriage counselor to be able to save their own marriage, so the fact that these unexpected things occur is darkly funny. One of the most famous examples of dramatic irony is in Romeo and Juliet. The audience knows that Juliet isn't dead when Romeo comes to find her in the tomb, but obviously can't stop Romeo from killing himself to be with her. Unlike other forms of irony, dramatic irony often isn't funny—it heightens tension and increases audience investment, but doesn't necessarily have to make people laugh. Metaphor A metaphor is when a writer compares one thing to another. "An emotional rollercoaster" is a common example of a metaphor—so common, in fact, that it's become cliché. Experiencing multiple emotions in a short period of time can feel a lot like riding a roller coaster, as you have a series of extreme highs and lows. Meter Meter refers to the rhythm of a poem or other written work as it's expressed through the number and length of the feet in each line. "But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,Who is already sick and pale with grief..." - William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare famously wrote frequently in iambic pentameter, a specific type of meter containing five iambic feet. Iamb is a foot—a unit of rhythm—consisting of one unstressed and one stressed syllable. In the first line of this passage, you have five iamb, which produces a sort of heartbeat-esque rhythm. "But soft / what light / through yon- / -der win- / -dow breaks?" Meter like this gives readers expectations about how each line will go, which can be very useful if you want to subvert them, such as how Shakespeare does in Hamlet: "To be / or not / to be / that is / the ques- / -ion." Because we expect iambic pentameter, the rule-breaking here clues us in that something isn't right with Hamlet. Ode An ode is a short lyrical poem, often in praise of something. "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,Sylvan historian, who canst thus express A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape Of deities or mortals, or of both, In Tempe or the dales of Arcady? What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" covers all the required bases of the ode—it's short at just five stanzas, it's lyrical (the language is clearly elevated above regular speech), and it's written in praise of a scene on an imagined Grecian urn, which preserves the beauty of several scenes for eternity. Though Keats' ode here may be in earnest, the deliberate use of language far outside our normal method of speaking often makes the form ripe for satire. In this case, Keats is using this language to discuss beauty and truth, two rather lofty themes that work in tandem with the lofty language. Pun A pun is a play on words, using multiple meanings or similar sounds to make a joke. "Mine is a long and a sad tale!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing. "It is a long tale, certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail, "but why do you call it sad?" And she kept on puzzling about it while the Mouse was speaking..." - Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland Here, Alice clearly misunderstands what the mouse is saying—he says 'tale,' referring to his long and sad story, and she hears 'tail,' referring to his literal tail. The result is a misunderstanding between the two that ends with Alice looking rude and uncaring. Though it makes Alice look bad, it's quite entertaining for the reader. The world of Wonderland is full of strangeness, so it's not really a surprise that Alice wouldn't understand what's happening. However, in this case it's a legitimate misunderstanding, heightening the comedy as Alice's worldview is once again shaken. Repetition Repetition is fairly self-explanatory—it's the process of repeating certain words or phrases. "Do not go gentle into that good night,Old age should burn and rave at close of day;Rage, rage against the dying of the light.Though wise men at their end know dark is right,They had forked no lightning theyDo not go gentle into that good night.Good men, the last wave by, crying how brightTheir frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,Rage, rage against the dying of the light.Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,Do not go gentle into that good night." - Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" Throughout this poem, Thomas repeats the lines, "Do not go gentle into that good night," and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." The two lines don't appear together until the final couplet of the poem, cementing their importance in relation to one another. But before that, the repetition of each line clues you in to their importance. No matter what else is said, the repetition tells you that it all comes back to those two lines. Rhetorical Question A rhetorical question is a question asked to make a point rather than in expectation of an answer. "Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" - Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" Sojourner Truth's question to the Women's Convention of 1981 in Akron, Ohio isn't a question that needs an answer. Of course she's a woman—she, as well as everybody else in the audience, knew that perfectly well. However, Sojourner Truth was a black woman in the time of slavery. Many white women wouldn't have considered her to be part of the women's rights movement despite her gender. By asking the question, Sojourner Truth is raising the point that she is a woman, and therefore should be part of the conversation about women's rights. "Ain't I a woman?" isn't a question of gender, but a question of race—if it's a conference about women's rights, why weren't black women included? By asking a question about an undeniable truth, Sojourner Truth was in fact pointing out the hypocrisy of the conference. Rhyme A rhyme is a repetition of syllables at the end of words, often at the end of a line of poetry, but there are many unique kinds of rhymes. "It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea,That a maiden there lived whom you may know By the name of Annabel Lee;And this maiden she lived with no other thought Than to love and be loved by me." - Edgar Allen Poe, "Annabel Lee" Poe's poem starts off with a fairly typical ABAB rhyme scheme—the first line rhymes with the third, the second with the fourth. However, in line five, we get a jarring line that does not rhyme, which is carried through the rest of the poem. The rhyming sounds hearken back to classic songs and stories, but is undone by something that doesn't sound right, just as the classic love story of the narrator and Annabel Lee is undone by tragedy. Rhythm Rhythm refers to the pattern of long, short, stressed, and unstressed syllables in writing. "Double, double toil and trouble;Fire burn and caldron bubble.Fillet of a fenny snake,In the caldron boil and bake..." - William Shakespeare, Macbeth In this scene from Macbeth, the witches are positioned as being strange and unnatural, and the rhyme scheme Shakespeare uses is also unnatural. It lends the passage a sing-song quality that isn't present in other parts of the play, which is easy to get stuck in your head. This is important, because their prophecies also get stuck in Macbeth's head, leading him to commit his horrible crimes. Sonnet A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem with a strict rhyme scheme, often written in iambic pentameter. "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.I love thee to the depth and breadth and heightMy soul can reach, when feeling out of sight!How far the ends of being and ideal grace,I love thee to the level of every day'sMost quiet need, by sun and candle-light,I love thee freely, as men strive for right;I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.I love thee with the passion put to useIn my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.I love thee with a love I seemed to loseWith my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,I shall but love thee better after death." - Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "How Do I Love Thee" Sonnets were a standard poetry format for a long time—Shakespeare famously wrote sonnets, as did poets like Browning. As with blank verse, sonnets are often written in iambic pentameter, which gives the writing a sense of realism, as it's not quite as affected as other rhythms, but also makes it feel purposeful and different from natural speech. Because sonnets have a rhyme scheme, they feel removed again from realistic speech. But that works in form's favor—the rigid structure encourages unconventional word use (hence the memorability of "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.") and marks poems in this style as having a kind of heightened reality. Because blank and free verse arose later, writing sonnets in modern times gives poems a classic or even intentionally antiquated feeling, which can work in the poet's favor. You probably don't need to light a candle and burn out your magnifying glass to understand poetic devices, but nothing's stopping you! How to Identify and Analyze Poetic Devices It's nearly impossible to remember every poetic device, but teaching yourself to identify and analyze them is a great way to increase your vocabulary and writing ability. To learn more about them, you can: Read More Reading widely in a variety of literary forms—poetry, prose, essays, non-fiction, and so on—is one of the best ways to learn more poetic devices. You may not notice them all, but challenge yourself to find one example of a poetic device every time you read. Remember, there are lots of kinds of poetic devices; they don't always have to be things you'd only find in poetry. The more you read, the more exposed you are to different kinds of writing styles. If you read widely, you'll see more people using language creatively—when you see something interesting, make note of it and see if it's a poetic device you can use in your own writing! Use Them in Your Own Writing Identifying them is great, but to really understand poetic devices, try using them. Not every device is right for every situation, but playing a little with your language can reveal to you exactly how these devices work. Challenge yourself to use new devices to get a better appreciation for how they can elevate your writing. Question Poetic Devices When you come upon a poetic device in something you're reading, ask yourself what the author is doing with it. What purpose does alliteration serve in a specific context? Why did I choose to use that spices metaphor earlier in this article? Was it effective or confusing? The more you think about these devices, the more you'll get a feel for how they work and why writers use them. Understanding the different ways they can be used will help you discover how to use them better, so don't be afraid to start questioning how and why professionals do it! Key Tips for Literary Devices in Poetry Enhancing your writing with poetic devices is great, but there are a few things to keep in mind to be sure you're doing it right. First, don't overuse them. Poetic devices can be great for making your writing sound more interesting or to deliver information in a more impactful manner, but too much really stands out. Alliteration is great, but an alliterative sonnet that's an allusion to Greek literature can feel a little gimmicky. Even too much alliteration can quickly feel hackneyed if it's not done with a purpose. Ask yourself why you're using these devices and trim them if you can't think of a reason—restraint is as much a part of good writing as the skillful use of a poetic device. Don't forget that poetic devices are good for more than just poetry. A well-written essay can use a great metaphor. A sonnet can be written in plain English for a great effect. An article for your school newspaper might be improved with a little alliteration. Feel free to experiment with how and when these devices are used—adding in an unexpected poetic device is a great way to elevate your writing. What's Next? Poetic devices are just one of the many kinds of tools you can use to enhance your writing. Check out this list of rhetorical devices for even more things you can do to liven up your work! Want even more poetic devices? Check out this article on personification, which covers examples of this device in both poetry and literature! Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," is a great example of repetition, but there's a lot more to it than that! This article will give you some in-depth information on the meaning of Dylan Thomas' poem, including how to analyze it! Have any questions about this article or other topics? Ask below and we'll reply!