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Common literary devices, such as metaphors and similes, are the building blocks of literature, and what make literature so enchanting. Language evolves through the literary devices in poetry and prose; the different types of figurative language make literature spark in different ways. Consider this your crash course in common literary devices. Whether you're studying for the AP Lit exam or looking to improve your creative writing, this article is crammed with literary devices, examples, and analysis. Let's start with the basics. What are literary devices? What are Literary Devices? Literary devices take writing beyond its literal meaning. They help guide the reader in how to read the piece. Literary devices are ways of taking writing beyond its straightforward, literal meaning. In that sense, they are techniques for helping guide the reader in how to read the piece. Central to all literary devices is a quality of connection: by establishing or examining relationships between things, literary devices encourage the reader to perceive and interpret the world in new ways. One common form of connection in literary devices is comparison. Metaphors and similes are the most obvious examples of comparison. A metaphor is a direct comparison of two things—"the tree is a giant," for example. A simile is an indirect comparison—"the tree is like a giant." In both instances, the tree is compared to—and thus connected with—something (a giant) beyond what it literally is (a tree). Other literary devices forge connections in different ways. For example, imagery, vivid description, connects writing richly to the worlds of the senses. Alliteration uses the sound of words itself to forge new literary connections ("alligators and apples"). By enabling new connections that go beyond straightforward details and meanings, literary devices give literature its power. What all these literary devices have in common is that they create new connections: rich layers of sound, sense, emotion, narrative, and ultimately meaning that surpass the literal details being recounted. They are what sets literature apart, and what makes it uniquely powerful. Read on for an in-depth look and analysis at 116 common literary devices. Literary Devices List: 14 Common Literary Devices In this article, we focus on literary devices that can be found in both poetry and prose. There are a lot of literary devices to cover, each of which require their own examples and analysis. As such, we will start by focusing on common literary devices for this article: literary devices that can be found in both poetry and prose. With each device, we've included examples in literature and exercises you can use in your own creative writing. Afterwards, we've listed other common literary devices you might see in poetry, prose, dialogue, and rhetoric. Let's get started! Metaphors, also known as direct comparisons, are one of the most common literary devices. A metaphor is a statement in which two objects, often unrelated, are compared to each other. Example of metaphor: This tree is the god of the forest. Obviously, the tree is not a god—it is, in fact, a tree. However, by stating that the tree is the god, the reader is given the image of something strong, large, and immovable. Additionally, using "god" to describe the tree, rather than a word like "giant" or "gargantuan," makes the tree feel like a spiritual center of the forest. Metaphors allow the writer to pack multiple descriptions and images into one short sentence. The metaphor has much more weight and value than a direct description. If the writer chose to describe the tree as "the large, spiritual center of the forest," the reader won't understand the full importance of the tree's size and scope. 2. Simile Similes, also known as indirect comparisons, are similar in construction to metaphors, but they imply a different meaning. Like metaphors, two unrelated objects are being compared to each other. Unlike a metaphor, the comparison relies on the words "like" or "as." Example of simile: This tree is like the god of the forest. OR: This tree acts as the god of the forest. What is the difference between a simile and a metaphor? The obvious difference between these two common literary devices is that a simile uses "like" or "as," whereas a metaphor never uses these comparison words. Additionally, in reference to the above examples, the insertion of "like" or "as" creates a degree of separation between both elements of the device. In a simile, the reader understands that, although the tree is certainly large, it isn't large enough to be a god; the tree's "godhood" is simply a description, not a relevant piece of information to the poem or story. Simply put, metaphors are better to use as a central device within the poem/story, encompassing the core of what you are trying to say. Similes are better as a supporting device. Does that mean metaphors are better than similes? Absolutely not. Consider Louise Gluck's poem "The Past." Gluck uses both a simile and a metaphor to describe the sound of the wind: it is like shadows moving, but is her mother's voice. Both devices are equally haunting, and ending the poem on the mother's voice tells us the central emotion of the poem. Learn more about the difference between similes and metaphors here: Simile vs. Metaphor vs. Analogy: Definitions and Examples Simile and Metaphor Writing Exercise: Tenors and Vehicles Most metaphors and similes have two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor refers to the subject being described, and the vehicle refers to the image that describes the tenor. So, in the metaphor "the tree is a god of the forest," the tenor is the tree and the vehicle is "god of the forest." To practice writing metaphors and similes, let's create some literary device lists. grab a sheet of paper and write down two lists. In the first list, write down "concept words"—words that cannot be physically touched. Love, hate, peace, war, happiness, and anger are all concepts because they can all be described but are not physical objects in themselves. In the second list, write down only concrete objects—trees, clouds, the moon, Jupiter, New York brownstones, uncut sapphires, etc. Your concepts are your tenors, and your concrete objects are your vehicles. Now, randomly draw a one between each tenor and each vehicle, then write an explanation for your metaphor/simile. You might write, say: "Peace, like an uncut sapphire, gleams with labor." Have fun, write interesting literary devices, and try to incorporate them into a future poem or story! 3. Analogy An analogy is an argumentative comparison: it compares two unalike things to advance an argument. Specifically, it argues that two things have equal weight, whether that weight be emotional, philosophical, or even literal. Because analogical literary devices operate on comparison, it can be considered a form of metaphor. For example: Making pasta is as easy as one, two, three. This analogy argues that making pasta and counting upwards are equally easy things. This format, "A is as B" or "A is to B", is a common analogy structure. Another common structure for analogy literary devices is "A is to B as C is to D." For example: Gordon Ramsay is to cooking as Meryl Streep is to acting. The above constructions work best in argumentative works. Lawyers and essayists will often use analogies. In other forms of creative writing, analogies aren't as formulaic, but can still prove to be powerful literary devices. In fact, you probably know this one: "That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" —Romeo & Juliet by William Shakespeare To put this into the modern language of an analogy, Shakespeare is saying "a rose with no name smells as a rose with a name does." The name "rose" does not affect whether or not the flower smells good. Analogy Writing Exercise Analogies are some of the most common literary devices, alongside similes and metaphors. Here's an exercise for writing one yourself. On a blank sheet of paper: write down the first four nouns that come to mind. Try to use concrete, visual nouns. Then, write down a verb. If you struggle to come up with any of these, any old word generator on the internet will help. The only requirement is that two of your four nouns should be able to perform the verb. A dog can swim, for example, but it can't fly an airplane. Your list might look like this: Verb: Fall Nouns: Rain, dirt, pavement, shadow An analogy you create from this list might be: "his shadow falls on the pavement how rain falls on the dirt in May. Your analogy might end up being silly or poetic, strange or evocative. But, by forcing yourself to make connections between seemingly disparate items, you're using these literary devices to hone the skills of effective, interesting writing. 4. Imagery Is imagery a literary device? Absolutely! Imagery can be both literal and figurative, and it relies on the interplay of language and sensation to create a sharper image in your brain. Imagery is what it sounds like—the use of figurative language to describe something. Imagery is what it sounds like—the use of figurative language to describe something. In fact, we've already seen imagery in action through the previous literary devices: by describing the tree as a "god", the tree looks large and sturdy in the reader's mind. However, imagery doesn't just involve visual descriptions; the best writers use imagery to appeal to all five senses. By appealing to the reader's sense of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, your writing will create a vibrant world for readers to live and breathe in. The best writers use imagery to appeal to all five senses. Let's use imagery to describe that same tree. (I promise I can write about more than just trees, but it's a very convenient image for these common literary devices, don't you think?) Sight imagery: The tree spread its gigantic, sun-flecked shoulders. Sound imagery: The forest was hushed, resounding with echoes of the tree's stoic silence. Touch imagery: The tree felt smooth as sandstone. Taste imagery: The tree's leaves tasted bitter, like unroasted coffee beans. Smell imagery: As we approached the tree, the air around it smelled crisp and precise. There are two other, less discussed types of imagery: organic and kinesthetic imagery. Organic imagery refers to descriptions of internal sensations—things happening within the body. Kinesthetic imagery is imagery of motion and movement—think of the sensations one might feel when running against the wind. Organic imagery: The tree felt its xylem collapse at the news. (This is also an example of personification, since trees can't "feel" the way people feel.) Kinesthetic imagery: The tree cooled down as its own leaves rushed against its bark. Notice how these literary device examples also used metaphors and similes? Literary devices often pile on top of each other, which is why so many great works of literature can be analyzed endlessly. Because imagery depends on the object's likeness to other objects, imagery upholds the idea that a literary device is synonymous with comparison. Imagery Writing Exercise Want to try your hand at imagery? You can practice this concept by describing an object in the same way that this article describes a tree! Choose something to write about—any object, image, or idea—and describe it using the five senses. ("This biscuit has the tidy roundness of a lady's antique hat." "The biscuit tastes of brand-new cardboard." and so on!) Then, once you've written five (or more) lines of imagery, try combining these images until your object is sharp and clear in the reader's head. Imagery is one of the most essential common literary devices. To learn more about imagery, or to find more imagery writing exercises, take a look at our article Imagery Definition: 5+ Types of Imagery in Literature. 5. Symbolism Symbolism combines a lot of the ideas presented in metaphor and imagery. Essentially, a symbol is the use of an object to represent a concept—it's kind of like a metaphor, except more concise! Symbols are everywhere in the English language, and we often use these common literary devices in speech and design without realizing it. The following are very common examples of symbolism: A few very commonly used symbols include: "Peace" represented by a white dove "Love" represented by a red rose "Conformity" represented by sheep "Idea" represented by a light bulb switching on The symbols above are so widely used that they would likely show up as clichés in your own writing. (Would you read a poem, written today, that started with "Let's release the white dove of peace"?) In that sense, they do their job "too well"—they're such a good symbol for what they symbolize that they've become ubiquitous, and you'll have to add something new in your own writing. Symbols are often contextually specific as well. For example, a common practice in Welsh marriage is to give your significant other a lovespoon, which the man has designed and carved to signify the relationship's unique, everlasting bond. In many Western cultures, this same bond is represented by a diamond ring—which can also be unique and everlasting! Symbolism makes the core ideas of your writing concrete. Finally, notice how each of these examples are a concept represented by a concrete object. Symbolism makes the core ideas of your writing concrete, and also allows you to manipulate your ideas. If a rose represents love, what does a wilted rose or a rose on fire represent? Symbolism Writing Exercise Often, symbols are commonly understood images—but not always. You can invent your own symbols to capture the reader's imagination, too! Try your hand at symbolism by writing a poem or story centered around a symbol. Choose a random object, and make that object represent something. For example, you could try to make a blanket represent the idea of loneliness. When you've paired an object and a concept, write your piece with that symbol at the center: The down blanket lay crumpled, unused, on the empty side of our bed. The goal is to make it clear that you're associating the object with the concept. Make the reader feel the same way about your symbol as you do! 6. Personification Personification, giving human attributes to nonhuman objects, is a powerful way to foster empathy in your readers. Personification is exactly what it sounds like: giving human attributes to nonhuman objects. Also known as anthropomorphism, personification is a powerful way to foster empathy in your readers. Think about personification as if it's a specific type of imagery. You can describe a nonhuman object through the five senses, and do so by giving it human descriptions. You can even impute thoughts and emotions—mental events—to a nonhuman or even nonliving thing. This time, we'll give human attributes to a car—see our personification examples below! Personification (using sight): The car ran a marathon down the highway. Personification (using sound): The car coughed, hacked, and spluttered. Personification (using touch): The car was smooth as a baby's bottom. Personification (using taste): The car tasted the bitter asphalt. Personification (using smell): The car needed a cold shower. Personification (using mental events): The car remembered its first owner fondly. Notice how we don't directly say the car is like a human—we merely describe it using human behaviors. Personification exists at a unique intersection of imagery and metaphor, making it a powerful literary device that fosters empathy and generates unique descriptions. Personification Writing Exercise Try writing personification yourself! In the above example, we chose a random object and personified it through the five senses. It's your turn to do the same thing: find a concrete noun and describe it like it's a human. Here are two examples: The ancient, threadbare rug was clearly tired of being stepped on. My phone issued notifications with the grimly efficient extroversion of a sorority chapter president. Now start writing your own! Your descriptions can be active or passive, but the goal is to foster empathy in the reader's mind by giving the object human traits. 7. Hyperbole You know that one friend who describes things very dramatically? They're probably speaking in hyperboles. Hyperbole is just a dramatic word for being over-dramatic—which sounds a little hyperbolic, don't you think? Basically, hyperbole refers to any sort of exaggerated description or statement. We use hyperbole all the time in the English language, and you've probably heard someone say things like: I've been waiting a billion years for this I'm so hungry I could eat a horse I feel like a million bucks You are the king of the kitchen None of these examples should be interpreted literally: there are no kings in the kitchen, and I doubt anyone can eat an entire horse in one sitting. This common literary device allows us to compare our emotions to something extreme, giving the reader a sense of how intensely we feel something in the moment. This is what makes hyperbole so fun! Coming up with crazy, exaggerated statements that convey the intensity of the speaker's emotions can add a personable element to your writing. After all, we all feel our emotions to a certain intensity, and hyperbole allows us to experience that intensity to its fullest. Hyperbole Writing Exercise To master the art of the hyperbole, try expressing your own emotions as extremely as possible. For example, if you're feeling thirsty, don't just write that you're thirsty, write that you could drink the entire ocean. Or, if you're feeling homesick, don't write that you're yearning for home, write that your homeland feels as far as Jupiter. As a specific exercise, you can try writing a poem or short piece about something mundane, using more and more hyperbolic language with each line or sentence. Here's an example: It was a brutally hot 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The April spring sun boiled blood and sent birds exploding. I'm sorry that I'm mowing my lawn on THE SURFACE OF THE SUN. (…and so on!) A well-written hyperbole helps focus the reader's attention on your emotions and allows you to play with new images, making it a fun, chaos-inducing literary device. 8. Irony Is irony a literary device? Yes—but it's often used incorrectly. People often describe something as being ironic, when really it's just a moment of dark humor. So, the colloquial use of the word irony is a bit off from its official definition as a literary device. Irony is when the writer describes something by using opposite language. As a real-life example, if someone is having a bad day, they might say they're doing "greaaaaaat", clearly implying that they're actually doing quite un-greatly. Or a story's narrator might write: Like most bureaucrats, she felt a boundless love for her job, and was eager to share that good feeling with others. In other words, irony highlights the difference between "what seems to be" and "what is." In literature, irony can describe dialogue, but it also describes ironic situations: situations that proceed in ways that are elaborately contrary to what one would expect. A clear example of this is in The Wizard of Oz. All of the characters already have what they are looking for, so when they go to the wizard and discover that they all have brains, hearts, etc., their petition—making a long, dangerous journey to beg for what they already have—is deeply ironic. Irony Writing Exercise For verbal irony, try writing a sentence that gives something the exact opposite qualities that it actually has: The triple bacon cheeseburger glistened with health and good choices. For situational irony, try writing an imagined plot for a sitcom, starting with "Ben lost his car keys and can't find them anywhere." What would be the most ironic way for that situation to be resolved? (Are they sitting in plain view on Ben's desk… at the detective agency he runs?) Have fun with it! 9. Juxtaposition Juxtaposition refers to the placement of contrasting ideas next to each other, often to produce an ironic or thought-provoking effect. Writers use juxtaposition in both poetry and prose, though this common literary device looks slightly different within each realm of literature. In poetry, juxtaposition is used to build tension or highlight an important contrast. Consider the poem "A Juxtaposition" by Kenneth Burke, which juxtaposes nation & individual, treble & bass, and loudness & silence. The result is a poem that, although short, condemns the paradox of A citizen trapped in their own nation. Just a note: these juxtapositions are also examples of antithesis, which is when the writer juxtaposes two completely opposite ideas. Juxtaposition doesn't have to be completely contrarian, but in this poem, it is. Juxtaposition accomplishes something similar in prose. A famous example comes from the opening A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of time." Dickens opens his novel by situating his characters into a world of contrasts, which is apt for the extreme wealth disparities pre-French Revolution. Juxtaposition Writing Exercise One great thing about juxtaposition is that it can dismantle something that appears to be a binary. For example, black and white are often assumed to be polar opposites, but when you put them next to each other, you'll probably get some gray in the middle. To really master the art of juxtaposition, try finding two things that you think are polar opposites. They can be concepts, such as good & evil, or they can be people, places, objects, etc. Juxtapose your two selected items by starting your writing with both of them—for example: Across the town from her wedding, the bank robbers were tying up the hostages. I put the box of chocolates on the coffee table, next to the gas mask. Then write a poem or short story that explores a "gray area," relationship, commonality, or resonance between these two objects or events—without stating as much directly. If you can accomplish what Dickens or Burke accomplishes with their juxtapositions, then you, too, are a master! 10. Paradox A paradox is a juxtaposition of contrasting ideas that, while seemingly impossible, actually reveals a deeper truth. One of the trickier literary devices, paradoxes are powerful tools for deconstructing binaries and challenging the reader's beliefs. A simple paradox example comes to us from Ancient Rome. Catullus 85 (translated from Latin) I hate and I love. Why I do this, perhaps you ask. I know not, but I feel it happening and I am tortured. Often, "hate" and "love" are assumed to be opposing forces. How is it possible for the speaker to both hate and love the object of his affection? The poem doesn't answer this, merely telling us that the speaker is "tortured," but the fact that these binary forces coexist in the speaker is a powerful paradox. Catullus 85 asks the reader to consider the absoluteness of feelings like hate and love, since both seem to torment the speaker equally. Another paradox example comes from Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up." Here, "natural" and "pose" are conflicting ideas. Someone who poses assumes an unnatural state of being, whereas a natural poise seems effortless and innate. Despite these contrasting ideas, Wilde is exposing a deeper truth: to seem natural is often to keep up appearances, and seeming natural often requires the same work as assuming any other pose. Note: paradox should not be confused with oxymoron. An oxymoron is also a statement with contrasting ideas, but a paradox is assumed to be true, whereas an oxymoron is merely a play on words (like the phrase "same difference"). Paradox Writing Exercise Paradox operates very similarly to literary devices like juxtaposition and irony. To write a paradox, juxtapose two binary ideas. Try to think outside of the box here: "hate and love" are an easy binary to conjure, so think about something more situational. Wilde's paradox "natural and pose" is a great one; another idea could be the binaries "awkward and graceful" or "red-handed and innocent." Now, situate those binaries into a certain situation, and make it so that they can coexist. Imagine a scenario in which both elements of your binary are true at the same time. How can this be, and what can we learn from this surprising juxtaposition? 11. Allusion If you haven't noticed, literary devices are often just fancy words for simple concepts. A metaphor is literally a comparison and hyperbole is just an over-exaggeration. In this same style, allusion is just a fancy word for a literary reference; when a writer alludes to something, they are either directly or indirectly referring to another, commonly-known piece of art or literature. The most frequently-alluded to work is probably the Bible. Many colloquial phrases and ideas stem from it, since many themes and images from the Bible present themselves in popular works, as well as throughout Western culture. Any of the following ideas, for example, are Biblical allusions: Referring to a kind stranger as a Good Samaritan Describing an ideal place as Edenic, or the Garden of Eden Saying someone "turned the other cheek" when they were passive in the face of adversity When something is described as lasting "40 days and 40 nights," in reference to the flood of Noah's Ark Of course, allusion literary devices aren't just Biblical. You might describe a woman as being as beautiful as the Mona Lisa, or you might call a man as stoic as Hemingway. Why write allusions? Allusions appeal to common experiences: they are metaphors in their own right, as we understand what it means to describe an ideal place as Edenic. Like the other common literary devices, allusions are often metaphors, images, and/or hyperboles. And, like other literary devices, allusions also have their own sub-categories. Allusion Writing Exercise See how densely you can allude to other works and experiences in writing about something simple. Go completely outside of good taste and name-drop like crazy: Allusions (way too much version): I wanted Nikes, not Adidas, because I want to be like Mike. But still, "a rose by any other name"—they're just shoes, and "if the shoe fits, wear it." From this frenetic style of writing, trim back to something more tasteful: Allusions (more tasteful version): I had wanted Nikes, not Adidas—but "if the shoe fits, wear it." 12. Allegory An allegory is a story whose sole purpose is to represent an abstract concept or idea. As such, allegories are sometimes extended allusions, but the two common literary devices have their differences. For example, George Orwell's Animal Farm is an allegory for the deterioration of Communism during the early establishment of the U.S.S.R. The farm was founded on a shared goal of overthrowing the farming elite and establishing an equitable society, but this society soon declines. Animal Farm mirrors the Bolshevik Revolution, the overthrow of the Russian aristocracy, Lenin's death, Stalin's execution of Trotsky, and the nation's dissolution into an amoral, authoritarian police state. Thus, Animal Farm is an allegory/allusion to the U.S.S.R.: Allusion (excerpt from Animal Farm): "There were times when it seemed to the animals that they worked longer hours and fed no better than they had done in [Farmer] Jones's day." However, allegories are not always allusions. Consider Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," which represents the idea of enlightenment. By representing a complex idea, this allegory could actually be closer to an extended symbol rather than an extended allusion. Allegory Writing Exercise Pick a major trend going on in the world. In this example, let's pick the growing reach of social media as our "major trend." Next, what are the primary properties of that major trend? Try to list them out: More connectedness A loss of privacy People carefully massaging their image and sharing that image widely Next, is there something happening at—or that could happen at—a much smaller scale that has some or all of those primary properties? This is where your creativity comes into play. Well… what if elementary school children not only started sharing their private diaries, but were now expected to share their diaries? Let's try writing from inside that reality: I know Jennifer McMahon made up her diary entry about how much she misses her grandma. The tear smudges were way too neat and perfect. Anyway, everyone loved it. They photocopied it all over the bulletin boards and they even read it over the PA, and Jennifer got two extra brownies at lunch. Try your own! You may find that you've just written your own Black Mirror episode. 13. Ekphrasis Ekphrasis refers to a poem or story that is directly inspired by another piece of art. Ekphrastic literature often describes another piece of art, such as the classic "Ode on a Grecian Urn": O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede Of marble men and maidens overwrought, With forest branches and the trodden weed; Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral! When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Ekphrasis can be considered a direct allusion because it borrows language and images from other artwork. For a great example of ekphrasis—as well as a submission opportunity for writers!—check out the monthly ekphrastic challenge that Rattle Poetry runs. Ekphrasis writing exercise Try your hand at ekphrasis by picking a piece of art you really enjoy and writing a poem or story based off of it. For example, you could write a story about Mona Lisa having a really bad day, or you could write a black-out poem created from the lyrics of your favorite song. Or, try Rattle's monthly ekphrastic challenge! All art inspires other art, and by letting ekphrasis guide your next poem or story, you're directly participating in a greater artistic and literary conversation. 14. Onomatopoeia Flash! Bang! Wham! An onomatopoeia is a word that sounds like the noise it describes. Conveying both a playfulness of language and a serious representation of everyday sounds, onomatopoeias draw the reader into the sensations of the story itself. Onomatopoeia words are most often used in poetry and in comic books, though they certainly show up in works of prose as well. Some onomatopoeias can be found in the dictionary, such as "murmur," "gargle," and "rumble," "click," and "vroom." However, writers make up onomatopoeia words all the time, so while the word "ptoo" definitely sounds like a person spitting, you won't find it in Merriam Webster's. Here's an onomatopoeia example, from the poem "Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio" by Carl Sandburg. It's a jazz affair, drum crashes and cornet razzes. The trombone pony neighs and the tuba jackass snorts. The banjo tickles and titters too awful. The chippies talk about the funnies in the papers. The cartoonists weep in their beer. The onomatopoeias have been highlighted in bold. These common literary devices help make your writing fresh, interesting, and vivid, creating a sonic setting that the reader can fall into. Learn more about onomatopoeias here! Onomatopoeia Writing Exercise Onomatopoeias are fun literary devices to use in your work, so have fun experimenting with them. In this exercise, take a moment to listen to the noises around you. Pay close attention to the whir of electronics, the fzzzzzzz of the heater, the rumbling of cars on the street, or the tintintintin of rain on the roof. Whatever you hear, convert those sounds into onomatopoeias. Make a list of those sounds. Try to use a mix of real words and made up ones: the way you represent noise in language can have a huge impact on your writing style. Do this for 5 to 10 minutes, and when you have a comprehensive list of the sounds you hear, write a poem or short story that uses every single word you've written down. 15. Pun If you built your political campaign off of wordplay, would you be punning for president? A pun is a literary device that plays with the sounds and meanings of words to produce new, often humorous ideas. For example, let's say you used too much butter in your recipe, and it ruined the dish. You might joke that you were "outside the margarine of error," which is a play on the words "margin of error." Puns have a rich literary history, and famous writers like Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, as well as famous texts like The Bible, have used puns to add depth and gravity to their words. Pun Writing Exercise Jot down a word or phrase that you commonly use. If you're not sure of what to write down, take a look at this list of English idioms. For example, I might borrow the phrase "blow off steam," which means to let out your anger. Take any saying, and play around with the sounds and meanings of the words in that saying. Then, incorporate the new phrase you've created into a sentence that allows for the double meaning of the phrase. Here's two examples: If I play with the sound of the words, I might come up with "blowing off stream." Then, I would put that into a sentence that plays with the original meaning of the phrase. Like: "Did you hear about the river boat that got angry and went off course? It was blowing off stream." Or, I might play with the meanings of words. For example, I might take the word "blowing" literally, and write the following: "someone who cools down their tea when they're angry is blowing off steam." Searching for ways to add double meanings and challenge the sounds of language will help you build fresh, exciting puns. Learn more about these common literary devices in our article on puns in literature. 16–27. Common Literary Devices in Poetry The following 12 devices apply to both poetry and prose writers, but they appear most often in verse. Learn more about: Anaphora Conceit Apostrophe Metonymy/Synecdoche Enjambment Zeugma Repetition Rhyme Alliteration Consonance/Assonance Euphony/Cacophony Meter 12 Literary Devices in Poetry: Identifying Poetic Devices 28–30. Additional Sound Devices in Literature Our article on sound devices covers many of the same ones as our article on poetic devices, but we make mention of three unique devices as well in this article: Elision Homophony Sibilance Sound Devices in Poetry and Literature 31–40. Common Literary Devices in Prose The following 10 devices show up in verse, but are far more prevalent in prose. Learn more about: 10 Important Literary Devices in Prose: Examples & Analysis 41–52. Repetition Literary Devices Though they have uncommon names, these common literary devices are all forms of repetition. Anadiplosis Anaphora (prose) Antanaclasis Antimetabole Antistrophe Chiasmus Epanalepsis Epimone Epizeuxis Polyptoton Symploce Motif Repetition Definition: Types of Repetition in Poetry and Prose 53–61. Dialogue Literary Devices While these literary elements pertain primarily to dialogue, writers use euphemisms, idioms, and neologisms all the time in their work. Colloquialism Vernacular Dialect Slang Jargon Idiom Euphemism Proverb Neologism How to Write Dialogue in a Story 62–71. Word Play Literary Devices The following literary devices push language to the limits. Have fun with these! Anthimeria Double Entendre Kenning Malapropism Metalepsis Oxymoron Palindrome Paraprosdokian Portmanteau Spoonerism Word Play: Examples of a Play on Words 72–76. Parallelism Literary Devices Parallelism is a stylistic device where a sentence is composed of equally weighted items. In essence, parallel structure allows form to echo content. Learn all about this essential stylistic literary device below. Grammatical parallelism Rhetorical parallelism Synthetic parallelism Antithetical parallelism Synonymous parallelism Parallelism Definition: Writing With Parallel Structure 77–116. Rhetorical Devices Rhetorical devices are literary devices intended to persuade the reader of something. You might have heard of ethos, pathos, and logos, but do you know your aposiopesis from your hyperbaton? Many literary devices can also be considered rhetorical devices. After all, a metaphor can convince you of something just as well as a syllogism. Nonetheless, the following 40 rhetorical/literary devices will sharpen your style, argumentation, and writing abilities. Kairos Ethos Logos Pathos Anacoluthon Antithesis Asyndeton Hypallage Hyperbaton Hypotaxis Parataxis Polysyndeton Synesis Accismus Anecdote Antanagoge Aporia Bdelygmia Enthymeme Hypophora Procatalepsis Reductio ad Absurdum Syllogism Adynaton Amplification Antiphrasis Asterismos Litotes Meiosis Metanoia Paralipsis Overstatement Tmesis Adnomination Aposiopesis Circumlocution Dysphemism Ellipsis Isocolon Pleonasm Common Rhetorical Devices List: The Art of Argument Master These Common Literary Devices With Writers.com! The instructors at Writers.com are masters of literary devices. Through masterful instruction and personal expertise, our instructors can help you add, refine, and improve your literary devices, helping you craft great works of literature. Check out our upcoming courses, and join our writing community on Facebook! Common literary devices, such as metaphors and similes, are the building blocks of literature, and what make literature so enchanting. Language evolves through the literary devices in poetry and prose; the different types of figurative language make literature spark in different ways. Consider this your crash course in common literary devices. Whether you're studying for the AP Lit exam or looking to improve your creative writing, this article is crammed with literary devices, examples, and analysis. Let's start with the basics. What are literary devices? What are Literary Devices? Literary devices take writing beyond its literal meaning. They help guide the reader in how to read the piece. Literary devices are ways of taking writing beyond its straightforward, literal meaning. In that sense, they are techniques for helping guide the reader in how to read the piece. Central to all literary devices is a quality of connection: by establishing or examining relationships between things, literary devices encourage the reader to perceive and interpret the world in new ways. One common form of connection in literary devices is comparison. Metaphors and similes are the most obvious examples of comparison. A metaphor is a direct comparison of two things—"the tree is a giant," for example. A simile is an indirect comparison—"the tree is like a giant." In both instances, the tree is compared to—and thus connected with—something (a giant) beyond what it literally is (a tree). Other literary devices forge connections in different ways. For example, imagery, vivid description, connects writing richly to the worlds of the senses. Alliteration uses the sound of words itself to forge new literary connections ("alligators and apples"). By enabling new connections that go beyond straightforward details and meanings, literary devices give literature its power. What all these literary devices have in common is that they create new connections: rich layers of sound, sense, emotion, narrative, and ultimately meaning that surpass the literal details being recounted. They are what sets literature apart, and what makes it uniquely powerful. Read on for an in-depth look and analysis at 116 common literary devices. Literary Devices List: 14 Common Literary Devices In this article, we focus on literary devices that can be found in both poetry and prose. There are a lot of literary devices to cover, each of which require their own examples and analysis. As such, we will start by focusing on common literary devices for this article: literary devices that can be found in both poetry and prose. With each device, we've included examples in literature and exercises you can use in your own creative writing. Afterwards, we've listed other common literary devices you might see in poetry, prose, dialogue, and rhetoric. Let's get started! Metaphors, also known as direct comparisons, are one of the most common literary devices. A metaphor is a statement in which two objects, often unrelated, are compared to each other. Example of metaphor: This tree is the god of the forest. Obviously, the tree is not a god—it is, in fact, a tree. However, by stating that the tree is the god, the reader is given the image of something strong, large, and immovable. Additionally, using "god" to describe the tree, rather than a word like "giant" or "gargantuan," makes the tree feel like a spiritual center of the forest. Metaphors allow the writer to pack multiple descriptions and images into one short sentence. The metaphor has much more weight and value than a direct description. If the writer chose to describe the tree as "the large, spiritual center of the forest," the reader won't understand the full importance of the tree's size and scope. 2. Simile Similes, also known as indirect comparisons, are similar in construction to metaphors, but they imply a different meaning. Like metaphors, two unrelated objects are being compared to each other. Unlike a metaphor, the comparison relies on the words "like" or "as." Example of simile: This tree is like the god of the forest. OR: This tree acts as the god of the forest. What is the difference between a simile and a metaphor? The obvious difference between these two common literary devices is that a simile uses "like" or "as," whereas a metaphor never uses these comparison words. Additionally, in reference to the above examples, the insertion of "like" or "as" creates a degree of separation between both elements of the device. In a simile, the reader understands that, although the tree is certainly large, it isn't large enough to be a god; the tree's "godhood" is simply a description, not a relevant piece of information to the poem or story. Simply put, metaphors are better to use as a central device within the poem/story, encompassing the core of what you are trying to say. Similes are better as a supporting device. Does that mean metaphors are better than similes? Absolutely not. Consider Louise Gluck's poem "The Past." Gluck uses both a simile and a metaphor to describe the sound of the wind: it is like shadows moving, but is her mother's voice. Both devices are equally haunting, and ending the poem on the mother's voice tells us the central emotion of the poem. Learn more about the difference between similes and metaphors here: Simile vs. Metaphor vs. Analogy: Definitions and Examples Simile and Metaphor Writing Exercise: Tenors and Vehicles Most metaphors and similes have two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor refers to the subject being described, and the vehicle refers to the image that describes the tenor. So, in the metaphor "the tree is a god of the forest," the tenor is the tree and the vehicle is "god of the forest." To practice writing metaphors and similes, let's create some literary device lists. grab a sheet of paper and write down two lists. In the first list, write down "concept words"—words that cannot be physically touched. Love, hate, peace, war, happiness, and anger are all concepts because they can all be described but are not physical objects in themselves. In the second list, write down only concrete objects—trees, clouds, the moon, Jupiter, New York brownstones, uncut sapphires, etc. Your concepts are your tenors, and your concrete objects are your vehicles. Now, randomly draw a one between each tenor and each vehicle, then write an explanation for your metaphor/simile. You might write, say: "Peace, like an uncut sapphire, gleams with labor." Have fun, write interesting literary devices, and try to incorporate them into a future poem or story! 3. Analogy An analogy is an argumentative comparison: it compares two unalike things to advance an argument. Specifically, it argues that two things have equal weight, whether that weight be emotional, philosophical, or even literal. Because analogical literary devices operate on comparison, it can be considered a form of metaphor. For example: Making pasta is as easy as one, two, three. This analogy argues that making pasta and counting upwards are equally easy things. This format, "A is as B" or "A is to B", is a common analogy structure. Another common structure for analogy literary devices is "A is to B as C is to D." For example: Gordon Ramsay is to cooking as Meryl Streep is to acting. The above constructions work best in argumentative works. Lawyers and essayists will often use analogies. In other forms of creative writing, analogies aren't as formulaic, but can still prove to be powerful literary devices. In fact, you probably know this one: "That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" —Romeo & Juliet by William Shakespeare To put this into the modern language of an analogy, Shakespeare is saying "a rose with no name smells as a rose with a name does." The name "rose" does not affect whether or not the flower smells good. Analogy Writing Exercise Analogies are some of the most common literary devices, alongside similes and metaphors. Here's an exercise for writing one yourself. On a blank sheet of paper: write down the first four nouns that come to mind. Try to use concrete, visual nouns. Then, write down a verb. If you struggle to come up with any of these, any old word generator on the internet will help. The only requirement is that two of your four nouns should be able to perform the verb. A dog can swim, for example, but it can't fly an airplane. Your list might look like this: Verb: Fall Nouns: Rain, dirt, pavement, shadow An analogy you create from this list might be: "his shadow falls on the pavement how rain falls on the dirt in May. Your analogy might end up being silly or poetic, strange or evocative. But, by forcing yourself to make connections between seemingly disparate items, you're using these literary devices to hone the skills of effective, interesting writing. 4. Imagery Is imagery a literary device? Absolutely! Imagery can be both literal and figurative, and it relies on the interplay of language and sensation to create a sharper image in your brain. Imagery is what it sounds like—the use of figurative language to describe something. Imagery is what it sounds like—the use of figurative language to describe something. In fact, we've already seen imagery in action through the previous literary devices: by describing the tree as a "god", the tree looks large and sturdy in the reader's mind. However, imagery doesn't just involve visual descriptions; the best writers use imagery to appeal to all five senses. By appealing to the reader's sense of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, your writing will create a vibrant world for readers to live and breathe in. The best writers use imagery to appeal to all five senses. Let's use imagery to describe that same tree. (I promise I can write about more than just trees, but it's a very convenient image for these common literary devices, don't you think?) Sight imagery: The tree spread its gigantic, sun-flecked shoulders. Sound imagery: The forest was hushed, resounding with echoes of the tree's stoic silence. Touch imagery: The tree felt smooth as sandstone. Taste imagery: The tree's leaves tasted bitter, like unroasted coffee beans. Smell imagery: As we approached the tree, the air around it smelled crisp and precise. There are two other, less discussed types of imagery: organic and kinesthetic imagery. Organic imagery refers to descriptions of internal sensations—things happening within the body. Kinesthetic imagery is imagery of motion and movement—think of the sensations one might feel when running against the wind. Organic imagery: The tree felt its xylem collapse at the news. (This is also an example of personification, since trees can't "feel" the way people feel.) Kinesthetic imagery: The tree cooled down as its own leaves rushed against its bark. Notice how these literary device examples also used metaphors and similes? Literary devices often pile on top of each other, which is why so many great works of literature can be analyzed endlessly. Because imagery depends on the object's likeness to other objects, imagery upholds the idea that a literary device is synonymous with comparison. Imagery Writing Exercise Want to try your hand at imagery? You can practice this concept by describing an object in the same way that this article describes a tree! Choose something to write about—any object, image, or idea—and describe it using the five senses. ("This biscuit has the tidy roundness of a lady's antique hat." "The biscuit tastes of brand-new cardboard." and so on!) Then, once you've written five (or more) lines of imagery, try combining these images until your object is sharp and clear in the reader's head. Imagery is one of the most essential common literary devices. To learn more about imagery, or to find more imagery writing exercises, take a look at our article Imagery Definition: 5+ Types of Imagery in Literature. 5. Symbolism Symbolism combines a lot of the ideas presented in metaphor and imagery. Essentially, a symbol is the use of an object to represent a concept—it's kind of like a metaphor, except more concise! Symbols are everywhere in the English language, and we often use these common literary devices in speech and design without realizing it. The following are very common examples of symbolism: A few very commonly used symbols include: "Peace" represented by a white dove "Love" represented by a red rose "Conformity" represented by sheep "Idea" represented by a light bulb switching on The symbols above are so widely used that they would likely show up as clichés in your own writing. (Would you read a poem, written today, that started with "Let's release the white dove of peace"?) In that sense, they do their job "too well"—they're such a good symbol for what they symbolize that they've become ubiquitous, and you'll have to add something new in your own writing. Symbols are often contextually specific as well. For example, a common practice in Welsh marriage is to give your significant other a lovespoon, which the man has designed and carved to signify the relationship's unique, everlasting bond. In many Western cultures, this same bond is represented by a diamond ring—which can also be unique and everlasting! Symbolism makes the core ideas of your writing concrete. Finally, notice how each of these examples are a concept represented by a concrete object. Symbolism makes the core ideas of your writing concrete, and also allows you to manipulate your ideas. If a rose represents love, what does a wilted rose or a rose on fire represent? Symbolism Writing Exercise Often, symbols are commonly understood images—but not always. You can invent your own symbols to capture the reader's imagination, too! Try your hand at symbolism by writing a poem or story centered around a symbol. Choose a random object, and make that object represent something. For example, you could try to make a blanket represent the idea of loneliness. When you've paired an object and a concept, write your piece with that symbol at the center: The down blanket lay crumpled, unused, on the empty side of our bed. The goal is to make it clear that you're associating the object with the concept. Make the reader feel the same way about your symbol as you do! 6. Personification Personification, giving human attributes to nonhuman objects, is a powerful way to foster empathy in your readers. Personification is exactly what it sounds like: giving human attributes to nonhuman objects. Also known as anthropomorphism, personification is a powerful way to foster empathy in your readers. Think about personification as if it's a specific type of imagery. You can describe a nonhuman object through the five senses, and do so by giving it human descriptions. You can even impute thoughts and emotions—mental events—to a nonhuman or even nonliving thing. This time, we'll give human attributes to a car—see our personification examples below! Personification (using sight): The car ran a marathon down the highway. Personification (using sound): The car coughed, hacked, and spluttered. Personification (using touch): The car was smooth as a baby's bottom. Personification (using taste): The car tasted the bitter asphalt. Personification (using smell): The car needed a cold shower. Personification (using mental events): The car remembered its first owner fondly. Notice how we don't directly say the car is like a human—we merely describe it using human behaviors. Personification exists at a unique intersection of imagery and metaphor, making it a powerful literary device that fosters empathy and generates unique descriptions. Personification Writing Exercise Try writing personification yourself! In the above example, we chose a random object and personified it through the five senses. It's your turn to do the same thing: find a concrete noun and describe it like it's a human. Here are two examples: The ancient, threadbare rug was clearly tired of being stepped on. My phone issued notifications with the grimly efficient extroversion of a sorority chapter president. Now start writing your own! Your descriptions can be active or passive, but the goal is to foster empathy in the reader's mind by giving the object human traits. 7. Hyperbole You know that one friend who describes things very dramatically? They're probably speaking in hyperboles. Hyperbole is just a dramatic word for being over-dramatic—which sounds a little hyperbolic, don't you think? Basically, hyperbole refers to any sort of exaggerated description or statement. We use hyperbole all the time in the English language, and you've probably heard someone say things like: I've been waiting a billion years for this I'm so hungry I could eat a horse I feel like a million bucks You are the king of the kitchen None of these examples should be interpreted literally: there are no kings in the kitchen, and I doubt anyone can eat an entire horse in one sitting. This common literary device allows us to compare our emotions to something extreme, giving the reader a sense of how intensely we feel something in the moment. This is what makes hyperbole so fun! Coming up with crazy, exaggerated statements that convey the intensity of the speaker's emotions can add a personable element to your writing. After all, we all feel our emotions to a certain intensity, and hyperbole allows us to experience that intensity to its fullest. Hyperbole Writing Exercise To master the art of the hyperbole, try expressing your own emotions as extremely as possible. For example, if you're feeling thirsty, don't just write that you're thirsty, write that you could drink the entire ocean. Or, if you're feeling homesick, don't write that you're yearning for home, write that your homeland feels as far as Jupiter. As a specific exercise, you can try writing a poem or short piece about something mundane, using more and more hyperbolic language with each line or sentence. Here's an example: It was a brutally hot 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The April spring sun boiled blood and sent birds exploding. I'm sorry that I'm mowing my lawn on THE SURFACE OF THE SUN. (…and so on!) A well-written hyperbole helps focus the reader's attention on your emotions and allows you to play with new images, making it a fun, chaos-inducing literary device. 8. Irony Is irony a literary device? Yes—but it's often used incorrectly. People often describe something as being ironic, when really it's just a moment of dark humor. So, the colloquial use of the word irony is a bit off from its official definition as a literary device. Irony is when the writer describes something by using opposite language. As a real-life example, if someone is having a bad day, they might say they're doing "greaaaaaat", clearly implying that they're actually doing quite un-greatly. Or a story's narrator might write: Like most bureaucrats, she felt a boundless love for her job, and was eager to share that good feeling with others. In other words, irony highlights the difference between "what seems to be" and "what is." In literature, irony can describe dialogue, but it also describes ironic situations: situations that proceed in ways that are elaborately contrary to what one would expect. A clear example of this is in The Wizard of Oz. All of the characters already have what they are looking for, so when they go to the wizard and discover that they all have brains, hearts, etc., their petition—making a long, dangerous journey to beg for what they already have—is deeply ironic. Irony Writing Exercise For verbal irony, try writing a sentence that gives something the exact opposite qualities that it actually has: The triple bacon cheeseburger glistened with health and good choices. For situational irony, try writing an imagined plot for a sitcom, starting with "Ben lost his car keys and can't find them anywhere." What would be the most ironic way for that situation to be resolved? (Are they sitting in plain view on Ben's desk… at the detective agency he runs?) Have fun with it! 9. Juxtaposition Juxtaposition refers to the placement of contrasting ideas next to each other, often to produce an ironic or thought-provoking effect. Writers use juxtaposition in both poetry and prose, though this common literary device looks slightly different within each realm of literature. In poetry, juxtaposition is used to build tension or highlight an important contrast. Consider the poem "A Juxtaposition" by Kenneth Burke, which juxtaposes nation & individual, treble & bass, and loudness & silence. The result is a poem that, although short, condemns the paradox of a citizen trapped in their own nation. Just a note: these juxtapositions are also examples of antithesis, which is when the writer juxtaposes two completely opposite ideas. Juxtaposition doesn't have to be completely contrarian, but in this poem, it is. Juxtaposition accomplishes something similar in prose. A famous example comes from the opening A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of time." Dickens opens his novel by situating his characters into a world of contrasts, which is apt for the extreme wealth disparities pre-French Revolution. Juxtaposition Writing Exercise One great thing about juxtaposition is that it can dismantle something that appears to be a binary. For example, black and white are often assumed to be polar opposites, but when you put them next to each other, you'll probably get some gray in the middle. To really master the art of juxtaposition, try finding two things that you think are polar opposites. They can be concepts, such as good & evil, or they can be people, places, objects, etc. Juxtapose your two selected items by starting your writing with both of them—for example: Across the town from her wedding, the bank robbers were tying up the hostages. I put the box of chocolates on the coffee table, next to the gas mask. Then write a poem or short story that explores a "gray area," relationship, commonality, or resonance between these two objects or events—without stating as much directly. If you can accomplish what Dickens or Burke accomplishes with their juxtapositions, then you, too, are a master! 10. Paradox A paradox is a juxtaposition of contrasting ideas that, while seemingly impossible, actually reveals a deeper truth. One of the trickier literary devices, paradoxes are powerful tools for deconstructing binaries and challenging the reader's beliefs. A simple paradox example comes to us from Ancient Rome. Catullus 85 (translated from Latin) I hate and I love. Why I do this, perhaps you ask. I know not, but I feel it happening and I am tortured. Often, "hate" and "love" are assumed to be opposing forces. How is it possible for the speaker to both hate and love the object of his affection? The poem doesn't answer this, merely telling us that the speaker is "tortured," but the fact that these binary forces coexist in the speaker is a powerful paradox. Catullus 85 asks the reader to consider the absoluteness of feelings like hate and love, since both seem to torment the speaker equally. Another paradox example comes from Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up." Here, "natural" and "pose" are conflicting ideas. Someone who poses assumes an unnatural state of being, whereas a natural poise seems effortless and innate. Despite these contrasting ideas, Wilde is exposing a deeper truth: to seem natural is often to keep up appearances, and seeming natural often requires the same work as assuming any other pose. Note: paradox should not be confused with

oxymoron. An oxymoron is also a statement with contrasting ideas, but a paradox is assumed to be true, whereas an oxymoron is merely a play on words (like the phrase “same difference”). Paradox Writing Exercise Paradox operates very similarly to literary devices like juxtaposition and irony. To write a paradox, juxtapose two binary ideas. Try to think outside of the box here: “hate and love” are an easy binary to conjure, so think about something more situational. Wilde’s paradox “natural and pose” is a great one; another idea could be the binaries “awkward and graceful” or “red-handed and innocent.” Now, situate those binaries into a certain situation, and make it so that they can coexist. Imagine a scenario in which both elements of your binary are true at the same time. How can this be, and what can we learn from this surprising juxtaposition? 11. Allusion If you haven’t noticed, literary devices are often just fancy words for simple concepts. A metaphor is literally a comparison and hyperbole is just an over-exaggeration. In this same style, allusion is just a fancy word for a literary reference; when a writer alludes to something, they are either directly or indirectly referring to another, commonly-known piece of art or literature. The most frequently-alluded to work is probably the Bible. Many colloquial phrases and ideas stem from it, since many themes and images from the Bible present themselves in popular works, as well as throughout Western culture. Any of the following ideas, for example, are Biblical allusions: Referring to a kind stranger as a Good Samaritan Describing an ideal place as Edenic, or the Garden of Eden Saying someone “turned the other cheek” when they were passive in the face of adversity When something is described as lasting “40 days and 40 nights,” in reference to the flood of Noah’s Ark Of course, allusion literary devices aren’t just Biblical. You might describe a woman as being as beautiful as the Mona Lisa, or you might call a man as stoic as Hemingway. Why write allusions? Allusions appeal to common experiences: they are metaphors in their own right, as we understand what it means to describe an ideal place as Edenic. Like the other common literary devices, allusions are often metaphors, images, and/or hyperboles. And, like other literary devices, allusions also have their own sub-categories. Allusion Writing Exercise See how densely you can allude to other works and experiences in writing about something simple. Go completely outside of good taste and name-drop like crazy: Allusions (way too much version): I wanted Nikes, not Adidas, because I want to be like Mike. But still, “a rose by any other name”—they’re just shoes, and “if the shoe fits, wear it.” From this frenetic style of writing, trim back to something more tasteful: Allusions (more tasteful version): I had wanted Nikes, not Adidas—but “if the shoe fits, wear it.” 12. Allegory An allegory is a story whose sole purpose is to represent an abstract concept or idea. As such, allegories are sometimes extended allusions, but the two common literary devices have their differences. For example, George Orwell’s Animal Farm is an allegory for the deterioration of Communism during the early establishment of the U.S.S.R. The farm was founded on a shared goal of overthrowing the farming elite and establishing an equitable society, but this society soon declines. Animal Farm mirrors the Bolshevik Revolution, the overthrow of the Russian aristocracy, Lenin’s death, Stalin’s execution of Trotsky, and the nation’s dissolution into an amoral, authoritarian police state. Thus, Animal Farm is an allegory/allusion to the U.S.S.R.: Allusion (excerpt from Animal Farm): “There were times when it seemed to the animals that they worked longer hours and fed no better than they had done in [Farmer] Jones’s day.” However, allegories are not always allusions. Consider Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” which represents the idea of enlightenment. By representing a complex idea, this allegory could actually be closer to an extended symbol rather than an extended allusion. Allegory Writing Exercise Pick a major trend going on in the world. In this example, let’s pick the growing reach of social media as our “major trend.” Next, what are the primary properties of that major trend? Try to list them out: More connectedness A loss of privacy People carefully massaging their image and sharing that image widely Next, is there something happening at—or that could happen at—a much smaller scale that has some or all of those primary properties? This is where your creativity comes into play. Well… what if elementary school children not only started sharing their private diaries, but were now expected to share their diaries? Let’s try writing from inside that reality: I know Jennifer McMahon made up her diary entry about how much she misses her grandma. The tear smudges were way too neat and perfect. Anyway, everyone loved it. They photocopied it all over the bulletin boards and they even read it over the PA, and Jennifer got two extra brownies at lunch. Try your own! You may find that you’ve just written your own Black Mirror episode. 13. Ekphrasis Ekphrasis refers to a poem or story that is directly inspired by another piece of art. Ekphrastic literature often describes another piece of art, such as the classic “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede Of marble men and maidens overwrought, With forest branches and the trodden weed; Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral! When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” Ekphrasis can be considered a direct allusion because it borrows language and images from other artwork. For a great example of ekphrasis—as well as a submission opportunity for writers!—check out the monthly ekphrastic challenge that Rattle Poetry runs. Ekphrasis writing exercise Try your hand at ekphrasis by picking a piece of art you really enjoy and writing a poem or story based off of it. For example, you could write a story about Mona Lisa having a really bad day, or you could write a black-out poem created from the lyrics of your favorite song. Or, try Rattle’s monthly ekphrastic challenge! All art inspires other art, and by letting ekphrasis guide your next poem or story, you’re directly participating in a greater artistic and literary conversation. 14. Onomatopoeia Flash! Bang! Wham! An onomatopoeia is a word that sounds like the noise it describes. Conveying both a playfulness of language and a serious representation of everyday sounds, onomatopoeias draw the reader into the sensations of the story itself. Onomatopoeia words are most often used in poetry and in comic books, though they certainly show up in works of prose as well. Some onomatopoeias can be found in the dictionary, such as “murmur,” “gargle,” and “rumble,” “click,” and “vroom.” However, writers make up onomatopoeia words all the time, so while the word “ptoo” definitely sounds like a person spitting, you won’t find it in Merriam Webster’s. Here’s an onomatopoeia example, from the poem “Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio” by Carl Sandburg. It’s a jazz affair, drum crashes and cornet razzes. The trombone pony neighs and the tuba jackass snorts. The banjo tickles and titters too awful. The chippies talk about the funnies in the papers. The cartoonists weep in their beer. The onomatopoeias have been highlighted in bold. These common literary devices help make your writing fresh, interesting, and vivid, creating a sonic setting that the reader can fall into. Learn more about onomatopoeias here! Onomatopoeia Writing Exercise Onomatopoeias are fun literary devices to use in your work, so have fun experimenting with them. In this exercise, take a moment to listen to the noises around you. Pay close attention to the whir of electronics, the fzzzzzzz of the heater, the rumbling of cars on the street, or the tintintintintin of rain on the roof. Whatever you hear, convert those sounds into onomatopoeias. Make a list of those sounds. Try to use a mix of real words and made up ones: the way you represent noise in language can have a huge impact on your writing style. Do this for 5 to 10 minutes, and when you have a comprehensive list of the sounds you hear, write a poem or short story that uses every single word you’ve written down. 15. Pun If you built your political campaign off of wordplay, would you be punning for president? A pun is a literary device that plays with the sounds and meanings of words to produce new, often humorous ideas. For example, let’s say you used too much butter in your recipe, and it ruined the dish. You might joke that you were “outside the margarine of error,” which is a play on the words “margin of error.” Puns have a rich literary history, and famous writers like Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, as well as famous texts like The Bible, have used puns to add depth and gravity to their words. Pun Writing Exercise Jot down a word or phrase that you commonly use. If you’re not sure of what to write down, take a look at this list of English idioms. For example, I might borrow the phrase “blow off steam,” which means to let out your anger. Take any saying, and play around with the sounds and meanings of the words in that saying. Then, incorporate the new phrase you’ve created into a sentence that allows for the double meaning of the phrase. Here’s two examples: If I play with the sound of the words, I might come up with “blowing off stream.” Then, I would put that into a sentence that plays with the original meaning of the phrase. Like: “Did you hear about the river boat that got angry and went off course? It was blowing off stream.” Or, I might play with the meanings of words. For example, I might take the word “blowing” literally, and write the following: “someone who cools down their tea when they’re angry is blowing off steam.” Searching for ways to add double meanings and challenge the sounds of language will help you build fresh, exciting puns. Learn more about these common literary devices in our article on puns in literature. 16–27. Common Literary Devices in Poetry The following 12 devices apply to both poetry and prose writers, but they appear most often in verse. Learn more about: Anaphora Conceit Apostrophe Metonymy/Synecdoche Enjambment Zeugma Repetition Rhyme Alliteration Consonance/Assonance Euphony/Cacophony Meter 12 Literary Devices in Poetry: Identifying Poetic Devices 28–30. Additional Sound Devices in Literature Our article on sound devices covers many of the same ones as our article on poetic devices, but we make mention of three unique devices as well in this article: Elision Homophony Sibilance Sound Devices in Poetry and Literature 31–40. Common Literary Devices in Prose The following 10 devices show up in verse, but are far more prevalent in prose. Learn more about: 10 Important Literary Devices in Prose: Examples & Analysis 41–52. Repetition Literary Devices Though they have uncommon names, these common literary devices are all forms of repetition. Anadiplosis Anaphora (prose) Antanaclasis Antimetabole Antistrophe Chiasmus Epanalepsis Epimone Epizeuxis Polyptoton Symploce Motif Repetition Definition: Types of Repetition in Poetry and Prose 53–61. Dialogue Literary Devices While these literary elements pertain primarily to dialogue, writers use euphemisms, idioms, and neologisms all the time in their work. Colloquialism Vernacular Dialect Slang Jargon Idiom Euphemism Proverb Neologism How to Write Dialogue in a Story 62–71. Word Play Literary Devices The following literary devices push language to the limits. Have fun with these! Anthimeria Double Entendre Kenning Malapropism Metalepsis Oxymoron Palindrome Paraprosdokian Portmanteau Spoonerism Word Play: Examples of a Play on Words 72–76. Parallelism Literary Devices Parallelism is a stylistic device where a sentence is composed of equally weighted items. In essence, parallel structure allows form to echo content. Learn all about this essential stylistic literary device below. Grammatical parallelism Rhetorical parallelism Synthetic parallelism Antithetical parallelism Synonymous parallelism Parallelism Definition: Writing With Parallel Structure 77–116. Rhetorical Devices Rhetorical devices are literary devices intended to persuade the reader of something. You might have heard of ethos, pathos, and logos, but do you know your aposiopesis from your hyperbaton? Many literary devices can also be considered rhetorical devices. After all, a metaphor can convince you of something just as well as a syllogism. Nonetheless, the following 40 rhetorical/literary devices will sharpen your style, argumentation, and writing abilities. Kairos Ethos Logos Pathos Anacoluthon Antithesis Asyndeton Hypallage Hyperbaton Hypotaxis Parataxis Polysyndeton Synesis Accismus Anecdote Antanagoge Aporia Bdelygmia Enthymeme Hypophora Procatalepsis Reductio ad Absurdum Syllogism Adynaton Amplification Antiphrasis Asterismos Litotes Meiosis Metanoia Paralipsis Overstatement Tmesis Adnomination Aposiopesis Circumlocution Dysphemism Ellipsis Isocolon Pleonasm Common Rhetorical Devices List: The Art of Argument Master These Common Literary Devices With Writers.com! The instructors at Writers.com are masters of literary devices. Through masterful instruction and personal expertise, our instructors can help you add, refine, and improve your literary devices, helping you craft great works of literature. Check out our upcoming courses, and join our writing community on Facebook! Literary elements might sound like a scary technical term, but many people are surprised to learn how commonly these devices are found in everyday life. As an author, literary elements are especially beneficial, and it’s helpful to have a list of literary elements next to you as you write to maximize the power of your words. If you’ve read a book or two, or even listened carefully to some song lyrics, it’s highly likely that you’ve encountered several literary elements without realizing it. But what is a literary element, and how do you use one successfully in your writing? To improve your writing and make it more powerful, you’ll need to become closely acquainted with these techniques no matter what book genres you are writing, so you can feel comfortable using them in your stories. Today we will break down what literary elements are, and give you a list of literary elements examples so you know precisely how to use them. Literary elements, also known as literary devices, are writing techniques used to create artistic special effects that immerse the reader. They are considered the main tools in a writer’s toolbox. Popular literary elements examples include allusion, diction, foreshadowing, imagery, metaphors, similes, and personification, which we’ll cover more in our list of literary elements below. What is a literary element used for? You can think of is like adding spice to your writing. Literary elements prevent your book or story from tasting dull and bland to the reader. Some common examples of literary elements that most people are familiar with are metaphors, similes, personification, alliteration, and symbolism. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more elements to consider, with more advanced or less-known devices such as aphorism, archetype, red herring, mood, and more. The more literary elements you have to use in your arsenal, the more powerful your writing will be. This will also prevent you from overusing the same literary elements in your writing. While it’s natural that as you practice and develop your writing skills, you’ll likely stick to a handful of devices that become part of your style, variety is always beneficial – especially for strengthening your writing craft. It’s important to use literary elements in your storytelling to improve your narrating technique. As you become a strong writer and work to continuously improve your writing development, the use of literary elements and other techniques will make you a prolific writer and storyteller. Maybe you have a love-hate relationship with writing. Maybe you’re of the mind that the more simplistic writing is, the better it is. Maybe you just don’t want to overcomplicate things. We get it! But if you take a look at most successful writers, both modern authors and classic authors, you’ll find that remarkable writers use literary elements in their work. Here are the main reasons to use literary devices in your writing: They add special effects to your writing. Part of showing, and not telling, through your story involves the use of literary elements and other techniques in your storytelling. They help you connect with the reader. You can draw the reader into your story and encourage them to engage with the text. Literary elements can also stimulate the reader’s mind, giving them a deeper reading experience. They make your writing more interesting to read. No one likes to read a boring story. By incorporating literary techniques in your writing, you add life to your words. They convey abstract information. More common in fiction stories, literary elements can help the author convey abstract concepts or information to the reader. They can help communicate specific themes in books without the writer having to directly state the purpose. They paint a vivid picture with your words. Literary techniques can help paint a visual picture or image in the reader’s imagination. Again, it all comes back to showing the reader what’s happening, rather than simply telling. Authors use literary elements to enhance their creative expression, and to add artistic flair to their writing, which provides an unforgettable reader experience. Learn how to become an author by studying the greats – the more literature you read, the more you’ll see just how often famous writers rely on literary elements to strengthen their writing. The most common literary devices used in literature, art, and everyday language are similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism. However, many people don’t know the actual names of literary elements, so they don’t realize when they encounter them in everyday situations. While these literary elements are most commonly used, there are numerous other devices that are alive and used by writers often, which we’ll cover in the literary elements list. As you become familiar with this literary elements list, you’ll find that using these elements in your own writing will come more natural. With practice, you’ll soon be able to identify literary devices in your own work-in-progress, as well as the work of other authors and storytellers. Even if you’re learning how to become a non-fiction author, you’ll want to use literary elements because they are an effective way to captivate readers on any topic. Read the work of other writers. Make it a point to study the craft of other authors whose writing you admire. The more you encounter the natural use of literary elements in others’ work, the more familiar you will be with identifying them and learning how to use them in your own writing. Don’t overdo it. Remember when we compared literary elements to being a spice? Think of it in terms of how you would use seasoning in an actual recipe. Sprinkle in literary elements – don’t just dump them! Make it seem natural. This is an art in itself. You should be strategic about where and how you use literary devices in your writing. When in doubt, don’t use literary devices. If you don’t understand exactly how a literary element works, don’t use it. Instead, familiarize yourself with each device first. Make it understandable for your readers. Readers shouldn’t have to interrupt their reading to pause and think about what you are trying to say. Look for real-life examples. Pay closer attention to the songs, poetry, screenplays, and books you encounter in everyday life. Now that you understand what literary elements are, and some tips for using them effectively in your writing, let’s dive into the actual list of literary elements. From Shakespeare to Kristin Hannah, writers have been using literary elements to write powerful sentences and prose for ages. Here is a list of the 21 most commonly used literary elements: An allusion is a literary device that indirectly refers to external people, events, or things. An easy way to remember the definition of an allusion is to think of the verb “allude.” When you allude to something, you are referencing something else. An example of allusion: With a deep frown on his face as he stormed through the Christmas market, Johnny looked like a real Scrooge. Alliteration is when words with the same sound or letter appear in a sentence, often consecutively. Popular uses for alliteration include book titles, business names, nursery rhymes, and tongue twisters. Alliteration is an easy literary element to use because it’s a simple way to enhance phrases. These classic book titles are great examples of alliteration: Pride and Prejudice The Great Gatsby Of Mice and Men Sense and Sensibility Love’s Labor’s Lost However, alliteration is also used in actual sentences, like the example below in Edgar Allen Poe’s famous Gothic poem, “The Raven.” Anaphora is similar to alliteration in the sense that it relies on repetition. The difference is that an anaphora repeats the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences. Used widely in rhetoric, examples of anaphoras can be found in many famous speeches. In the example of anaphora below, look at the repeated use of “it was” at the beginning of each new concept: Diction is the literary element that’s all about word choice. The specific choice of words used helps determine the style in which the person is speaking or writing. Diction comes in handy when you’re trying to show the reader a particular situation or encounter between characters. The word choice a certain character uses will indirectly show the reader what a character is like, and what type of social setting the character is in. Formal diction is when the word choice is considered formal. It’s typically used in situations to convey a sense of social class or education, or in formal situations. Informal diction is when the word choice is informal, more geared towards a casual conversation. It’s typically used to convey a sense of familiarity, such as in a letter to a friend. Colloquial diction is when words are used in everyday situations, and are often different depending on the region or community. Slang diction is when newly created, trendy words, or impolite words are used. Here are examples of the different types of diction: A euphemism is used to refer to something indirectly, or to describe something in a more pleasant or polite way. Use euphemisms in your own writing when you want to add in some humor, or when you want to soften the blow or use less harsh imagery or phrasing. For example, doctors use the euphemism “negative patient outcome.” This is a more polite or “pleasant” way of saying that a patient has died. The opposite of anaphora, which we covered earlier in this literary elements list, is an epistrophe. It is defined as the repetition of a word or phrase at the end of a sentence. Use an epistrophe in your own writing when you want to add rhythm to a paragraph, or to emphasize a point. Since the reader is drawn to the end of words in a sentence, euphemisms are a strategic way to subtly call attention to something. Examples of epistrophes can be found in many famous speeches, such as Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” in the lines: “…government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Flashbacks are a popular literary element not only in stories and books, but in films and screenwriting, too. A flashback is exactly what it sounds like; in writing, it’s when a narrator is mentally transported to an event that happened in the past. Common reasons to use flashbacks in your story are to: Provide the reader with more context about the character, situation, or event. Increase the suspense and tension Clue readers in to an important event that affected the present Look to any popular movie for flashback examples. In Disney’s Tangled, Rapunzel has an important flashback when she looks up at the ceiling in the tower, and notices the sun symbol. Seeing the sun symbol triggers her to have a flashback in which she remembers who her real parents are. Foreshadowing is a literary element used by writers to hint at what will happen next, or at some point, in the story. Use this device in your writing when you want to build suspense in the story, and when you want to hint about something that might happen, without being too obvious. An example of foreshadowing is explained below: Hyberbole is an extreme exaggeration of a real event or situation. Use hyberbole in your writing to add a humorous effect or to emphasize a concept. It’s easy to use, and many examples of this literary element can be found in everyday conversation. Some examples of hyperbole are: I’m so hungry, I can eat a whole cow. It had been forever since they saw each other. She was dying to attend one of the best writers conferences this year. Have you ever read a sentence that allowed you to envision exactly what the author was describing? If so, chances are that the writer was using imagery, which appeals to the reader’s physical senses. A common term for imagery is figurative language, which is how writers show the story, as opposed to telling it. One of the best places to use imagery is in the setting of a story. Visual imagery is when vivid images are conveyed in the reader’s mind. Olfactory imagery is when smells are described to the reader. Gustatory imagery is when tastes are described to the reader. Tactile imagery is all about the reader’s sense of physical touch. Auditory imagery is when sounds are described to the reader. These are examples of the five types of imagery: Juxtaposition is when a writer places two contrasting concepts, people, or events directly side-by-side in a sentence or paragraph. Use this literary element in your own writing when you want to help show the reader the differences or similarities between two things, or when you want to add an element of surprise. An example of juxtaposition is in the classic movie The Godfather, when baptism scenes were juxtaposed with murder scenes. A motif in any work of film or literature is when a recurrent element (such as an image, sound, or concept) is found throughout a story to help develop the theme or central message. A common example of motif in fairy tales, such as Disney adaptations, is the presence of older female villains. For example, in Cinderella and Snow White, there is the presence of the wicked stepmother. In A Little Mermaid, the sea witch is an aging woman who desires youth and beauty. This literary elements list wouldn’t be complete without mentioning metaphors! Not to be confused with simile, which we cover next, a metaphor is an implicit comparison between two or more things. When incorporating metaphors in your own writing, be sure to imply a comparison. The key to using metaphors is to not include the words “like” or “as” in your comparison. An example of a metaphor: “That woman is a devil in disguise.” While a metaphor is an implicit comparison, a simile is an explicit comparison. A simile directly compares two or more things. With a simile, it is clear that the author is showing the reader that one thing is similar or different to another. A simile almost always includes the words “like” and “as.” An example of a simile: “His face was as red as a tomato.” Personification is another fun device that’s worth mentioning on this list of literary elements. As its name implies, personification is a technique used when a writer gives inanimate objects or inhuman beings (like animals) human characteristics or attributes. You can easily use personification in your own writing draw your reader’s attention and convey a deeper meaning. One of the easier writing tips to implement, personification is a simple, but effective, literary technique. Some examples of personification are: The trees whispered to one another in the night. Time waits for no one. The snow whirled and danced across the sky. Difficult to say, but easy to understand, onomatopoeia is a word or phrase that conveys the sound of something. Use this element when you want to show the reader what is happening by stimulating their auditory senses. It’s also a great way to incorporate stronger vocabulary! Common examples of words or phrases that are onomatopoeia: Buzz Ding dong Cock-a-doodle-doo Zap Rustle Splash Meow Oxymoron is a literary element that includes a combination of contrasting, or opposite, words. It’s important to note that an oxymoron is not the same as a paradox – we’ll explain why in the next section. Use oxymorons in your writing when you want to create a dramatic effect for the reader, especially in poetry. An example of an oxymoron is found in these sentences: Writers have a love-hate relationship with writing. Saying goodbye is bittersweet. Well, aren’t you awfully good? A paradox is different from an oxymoron because it is a sentence or a phrase that appears contradictory, but implies some truth. When you want to add a hidden meaning to a concept in your writing, use a paradox. It will engage the reader by subtly adding a sense of mystery to a larger context. Many readers love to read between the lines! An example of a paradox is found in this quote: “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.” Symbolism is when something is used to represent something else, such an idea or concept. Authors commonly use symbols as objects to represent a non-literal meaning. You can use symbols in your own story to make it more powerful. An example of symbolism is in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic novel, The Scarlet Letter. Throughout the story, the letter “A” symbolizes adultery and its effects both on an individual basis, and within society. Tone is defined as a speaker or narrator’s attitude about a subject. It is different from the mood a reader gets during a scene in the story. Set the narrator’s tone in your writing through choosing words that fit the tone you’re trying to convey, and by having the character take a certain stance or position on a topic. Nostalgic writing serves as a powerful literary element by evoking deep emotions and fostering a sense of connection between the readers and the past. It can create an atmosphere of longing and wistfulness, drawing the audience into a world tinged with fond memories and bittersweet reflections. By skillfully incorporating nostalgia, authors can enrich their narratives, add complexity to characters, and transport readers to different eras, making the storytelling experience more immersive and resonant. Literary Devices: Quick Guide Literary ElementDefinitionExample AllusionA literary device that indirectly refers to external people, events, or things.With a deep frown on his face as he stormed through the Christmas market, Johnny looked like a real Scrooge. AlliterationAlliteration is when words with the same sound or letter appear in a sentence, often consecutively.An example of alliteration is the classic book title Pride and Prejudice. AnaphoraAnaphora repeats the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences.It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. DictionThe specific choice of words used helps determine the style in which the person is speaking or writing.See ya later! EuphemismA euphemism is used to refer to something indirectly, or to describe something in a more pleasant or polite way.Bite the big one. EpistropheThe repetition of a word or phrase at the end of a sentence.I want the best, and we need the best, and we deserve the best. FlashbacksWhen a narrator is mentally transported to an event that happened in the past.In the movie "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," there are many flashbacks to illustrate happier times in the couple's relationship. ForeshadowingA hint at what will happen next, or at some point, in the story.It was a cold stormy night that would introduce her to eternal darkness, forever changing the course of her life. HyperboleExtreme exaggeration of a real event or situation.I’m so hungry, I can eat a whole cow. ImageryA literary device that appeals to the reader’s physical senses.The toasty smell of fresh tortillas filled his nostrils. JuxtapositionWhen a writer places two contrasting concepts, people, or events directly side-by-side in a sentence or paragraph.In the classic movie The Godfather, when baptism scenes were juxtaposed with murder scenes. Motifwhen a recurrent element (such as an image, sound, or concept) is found throughout a story, to help develop the theme, or central message.The presence of older female villains in Disney adaptations. MetaphorAn implicit comparison between two or more things.That woman is a devil in disguise. SimileAn explicit comparison between two or more things using the words "like" or "as."You shine like the sun. PersonificationWhen a writer gives inanimate objects or inhuman beings (like animals) human characteristics or attributes.Time waits for no one. OnomatopoeiaA word or phrase that conveys the sound of something.Cock-a-doodle-doo OxymoronA combination of contrasting, or opposite, words. Well, aren’t you awfully good? ParadoxA sentence or a phrase that appears contradictory, but implies some kind truth.Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. SymbolismWhen something is used to represent something else, such an idea or concept.The rose symbolizes eternal love in The Beauty and the Beast. ToneA speaker or narrator’s attitude about a subject.Words like grave, grim, pensive, and austere signify a serious tone. Now that you have a thorough understanding of powerful literary elements to use in your own writing, it’s time to put your skills to the test! Set a writing goal to use at least one different literary element in your work each day to help you practice. Need some inspiration? Use our writing prompt generator to get started! The only way to improve your writing, and ultimately your reader’s experience, is to practice. Keep Chekhov’s Gun in mind too as you write. Start engaging your readers with literary elements today! Learn more about who you are as an author and how you can use literary techniques to enhance your work.