

The Basics

Characterization The ways individual characters are represented by the narrator or author of a text. This includes descriptions of the characters' physical appearances, personalities, actions, interactions, and dialogue.

Dialogue Spoken exchanges between characters in a dramatic or literary work, usually between two or more speakers.

Genre A kind of literature. For instance, comedy, mystery, tragedy, satire, elegy, romance, and epic are all genres.

Imagery A term used to describe an author's use of vivid descriptions "that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or 'concrete' objects, scenes, actions, or states."

Plot The sequence of events that occur through a work to produce a coherent narrative or story.

The Basics (cont)

Point of View The perspective (visual, interpretive, bias, etc.) a text takes when presenting its plot and narrative. For instance, an author might write a narrative from a specific character's point of view, which means that that character is our narrative and readers experience events through his or her eyes.

Style Comprising an author's diction, syntax, tone, characters, and other narrative techniques, "style" is used to describe the way an author uses language to convey his or her ideas and purpose in writing. An author's style can also be associated to the genre or mode of writing the author adopts, such as in the case of a satire or elegy with would adopt a satirical or elegiac style of writing.

The Basics (cont)

Symbolism An object or element incorporated into a narrative to represent another concept or concern. Broadly, representing one thing with another. Symbols typically recur throughout a narrative and offer critical, though often overlooked, information about events, characters, and the author's primary concerns in telling the story.

Theme A theme may be defined as "a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number or literary works." Themes in literature tend to differ depending on author, time period, genre, style, purpose, etc.

Tone A way of communicating information (in writing, images, or sound) that conveys an attitude. Authors convey tone through a combination of word-choice, imagery, perspective, style, and subject matter. By adopting a specific tone, authors can help readers accurately interpret meaning in a text.



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Terms for Interpreting Authorial Voice

Apology Often at the beginning or conclusion of a text, the term “apology” refers to an instance in which the author or narrator justifies his or her goals in producing the text.

Irony typically refers to saying one thing and meaning the opposite, often to shock audiences and emphasize the importance of the truth.

Satire A style of writing that mocks, ridicules, or pokes fun at a person, belief, or group of people in order to challenge them. Often, texts employing satire use sarcasm, irony, or exaggeration to assert their perspective.

Stream of consciousness A mode of writing in which the author traces his or her thoughts verbatim into the text. Typically, this style offers a representation of the author’s exact thoughts throughout the writing process and can be used to convey a variety of different emotions or as a form of pre-writing.

Terms for Interpreting Layers of Meaning

Allegory A literary mode that attempts to convert abstract concepts, values, beliefs, or historical events into characters or other tangible elements in a narrative.

Allusion When a text references, incorporates, or responds to an earlier piece (including literature, art, music, film, event, etc).

Hyperbole exaggerated language, description, or speech that is not meant to be taken literally, but is used for emphasis.

Metaphor a figure of speech that refers to one thing by another in order to identify similarities between the two (and therefore define each in relation to one another).

Metonymy a figure of speech that substitutes a quality, idea, or object associated with a certain thing for the thing itself. For instance, referring to a woman as “a skirt” or the sea as “the deep” are examples of metonymy.

Parody a narrative work or writing style that mocks or mimics another genre or work. Typically, parodies exaggerate and emphasize elements from the original work in order to ridicule, comment on, or criticize their message.

Simile a figure of speech that compares two people, objects, elements, or concepts using “like” or “as.”

Interpreting Word Choice, Dialogue, and Speech

Alliteration The repetition of the same sounds—usually initial consonants of words or of stressed syllabus—in any sequence of neighboring words.

Apostrophe This figure of speech refers to an address to “a dead or absent person, or an abstraction or inanimate object” and is “usually employed for emotional emphasis, can become ridiculous [or humorous] when misapplied.”

Diction Word choice, or the specific language an author, narrator, or speaker uses to describe events and interact with other characters.

Terms for Interpreting Characters

Antagonist A character in a text who the protagonist opposes. The antagonist is often (though not always) the villain of a story.

Anti-hero A protagonist of a story who embodies none of the qualities typically assigned to traditional heroes and heroines. Not to be confused with the antagonist of a story, the anti-hero is a protagonist whose failings are typically used to humanize him or her and convey a message about the reality of human existence.

Terms for Interpreting Characters (cont)

Epithet "An adjective, noun, or phrase expressing some characteristic quality of a thing or person or a descriptive name applied to a person, as Richard the Lion-Hearted." An epithet usually indicates some notable quality about the individual with whom it addresses, but it can also be used ironically to emphasize qualities that individual might actually lack.

Personification The artistic representation of a concept, quality, or idea in the form of a person. Personification can also refer to "a person who is considered a representative type of a particular quality or concept." Many classical deities are good examples of personifications. For instance, the Greek god Ares is a personification of war.

Protagonist The primary character in a text, often positioned as "good" or the character with whom readers are expected to identify. Protagonists usually oppose an antagonist.

Terms for Interpreting Plot

Climax The height of conflict and intrigue in a narrative. This is when events in the narrative and characters' destinies are most unclear; the climax often appears as a decision the protagonist must make or a challenge he or she must overcome in order for the narrative to obtain resolution.

Terms for Interpreting Plot (cont)

Denouement The "falling action" of a narrative, when the climax and central conflicts are resolved and a resolution is found. In a play, this is typically the last act and in a novel it might include the final chapters.

Deus Ex Machina Literally, in Latin, the 'god from the machine'; a deity in Greek and Roman drama who was brought in by stage machinery to intervene in the action; hence, any character, event, or device suddenly introduced to resolve the conflict.

Exposition Usually located at the beginning of a text, this is a detailed discussion introducing characters, setting, background information, etc. readers might need to know in order to understand the text that follows. This section is particularly rich for analysis because it contains a lot of important information in a relatively small space.

Frame Narrative a story that an author encloses around the central narrative in order to provide background information and context. This is typically referred to as a "story within a story" or a "tale within a tale."