

A REFERENCE FOR THE CLASSROOM AND THE WRITING DESK

A GLOSSARY OF LITERARY AND WRITING TERMS

Plain Definitions for Readers, Writers, Students, and Teachers



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HOW TO USE THIS GLOSSARY

This glossary gathers, in one alphabetical list, the terms that readers, writers, students, and teachers meet most often: the vocabulary of fiction and poetry, of drama and the essay, of literary history and criticism, and of the working writer's trade, from *cover letter* to *word count*. Each definition is brief and, where it helps, gives an example from a well-known work.

Cross-references point you to related entries (*compare* or *see*). Terms connected to the craft of the short story are developed at greater length in the companion booklets *The Shape of a Short Story*, *Writing the Short Story*, and *The Short Story Today*.

TERMS A TO Z

A

Allegory

A narrative in which characters, places, and events stand for abstract ideas or moral qualities, so that the story carries a second, systematic meaning. Example: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*; Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" leans toward allegory.

Alliteration

The repetition of initial consonant sounds in nearby words: "the fair breeze blew, the white foam flew" (Coleridge).

Allusion

A brief reference to a person, place, event, or text outside the work, which the reader is expected to recognize.

Ambiguity

The deliberate use of language or events that support more than one meaning. Open endings often rely on it.

Anachronism

Something placed in a period to which it does not belong, whether by error or for effect.

Anagnorisis

Aristotle's term for recognition: the moment a character passes from ignorance to knowledge.

Analogy

An extended comparison that explains something unfamiliar by likening it to something familiar.

Anaphora

The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines, clauses, or sentences.

Antagonist

The character, force, or institution that opposes the protagonist.

Anthology

A collection of works by several writers, chosen by an editor.

Antihero

A central character who lacks conventional heroic qualities such as courage, idealism, or moral clarity.

Aphorism

A short, memorable statement of a general truth.

Apostrophe

A direct address to an absent person, a dead person, an object, or an idea: "Death, be not proud."

Archetype

A character type, image, or pattern that recurs across many cultures and periods: the journey, the trickster, the wise elder.

Aside

In drama, a short speech to the audience that other characters on stage are understood not to hear.

Assonance

The repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words.

Atmosphere

The emotional feeling a work creates in the reader, largely through setting and description. Compare mood.

Autobiography

An account of a person's life written by that person. Compare memoir.

B

Backstory

Events that took place before the story begins and that shape the present action.

Ballad

A narrative poem or song, usually in short stanzas with a refrain, often telling a dramatic or tragic tale.

Bildungsroman

A novel of education or coming of age, following a young person's growth into adulthood.

Blank verse

Unrhymed iambic pentameter, the line of Shakespeare's plays and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

C

Caesura

A pause within a line of poetry, often marked by punctuation.

Canon

The body of works regarded as most important or most often taught in a tradition; the term also names the accepted works of a single author.

Catharsis

Aristotle's term for the purging or clarifying of pity and fear that tragedy produces in its audience.

Character arc

The change a character undergoes over the course of a story.

Characterization

The means by which a writer reveals character: through action, speech, thought, appearance, and the responses of others (indirect), or through the narrator's statement (direct).

Chekhov's gun

The principle, attributed to Anton Chekhov, that every significant detail introduced in a story should matter later.

Chorus

In Greek drama, a group that comments on the action; by extension, any voice that speaks for a community.

Cliché

An expression or idea used so often that it has lost its force.

Climax

The point of highest tension, at which the conflict reaches its decisive moment.

Close reading

Careful, detailed analysis of a short passage, attending to word choice, syntax, sound, image, and structure.

Comedy

A work that moves from difficulty toward a happy resolution, often ending in reconciliation or marriage.

Coming-of-age story

A story about a young person's passage into adult knowledge or responsibility.

Conceit

An extended and often surprising comparison, as in the Metaphysical poets.

Conflict

The struggle between opposing forces that drives a plot: person against person, against society, against nature, or against self.

Connotation

The associations and emotional coloring a word carries beyond its literal meaning. Compare denotation.

Consonance

The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the ends of words.

Couplet

Two consecutive lines of verse, usually rhymed.

Cover letter

A brief letter accompanying a submission to a magazine, giving the title, the word count, and a few lines about the writer.

Creative nonfiction

Factual prose written with the techniques of fiction and poetry: scene, voice, structure, and image. Includes memoir and the personal essay.

D

Denotation

The literal, dictionary meaning of a word.

Denouement

The final part of a plot, after the climax, in which events are resolved or settled.

Deus ex machina

An improbable event or device that resolves a plot artificially; literally "god from the machine."

Dialect

A form of a language particular to a region or social group, reproduced in dialogue to characterize speakers.

Dialogue

The words characters speak to one another.

Diction

A writer's choice of words, from plain to elevated, concrete to abstract.

Didactic

Intended mainly to teach or instruct.

Draft

A version of a work in progress. Writers commonly speak of first, second, and final drafts.

Dramatic irony

A situation in which the audience knows something a character does not.

Dramatic monologue

A poem spoken by a single character to a silent listener, revealing the speaker's character.
Example: Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess."

Dynamic character

A character who changes during the story.
Compare static character.

E

Elegy

A poem of mourning or meditation on death.

Enjambment

The continuation of a sentence from one line of poetry to the next without a pause.

Epic

A long narrative poem on a grand scale about heroic deeds, such as the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, or *Paradise Lost*.

Epigraph

A quotation placed at the start of a book, chapter, or poem.

Epiphany

A sudden moment of insight or revelation, often prompted by something ordinary. James Joyce gave the word its modern literary sense.

Epistolary

Written in the form of letters, diary entries, or other documents.

Essay

A short prose work exploring a subject from the writer's point of view.

Exposition

Background information about characters, setting, and situation, especially near the beginning of a story.

F

Fable

A short tale, often with animal characters, that illustrates a moral.

Falling action

The events that follow the climax and lead to the resolution.

Farce

Comedy built on improbable situations, physical humor, and rapid action.

Fiction

Imaginative prose narrative: the short story, the novella, and the novel.

First person

Narration by an "I" who is usually a character in the story.

Flash fiction

A very short story, commonly 1,000 words or fewer.

Flashback

A scene that interrupts the present action to show an earlier event.

Flat character

A character built around a single trait or idea. Compare round character.

Foil

A character whose contrasting qualities highlight those of another.

Folio

A page number in a printed book or document.

Foreshadowing

Hints of what is to come.

Form

The shape or structure of a work: sonnet, villanelle, short story, essay, and so on.

Frame story

A story that contains another story, as in *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Decameron*.

Free indirect discourse

Third-person narration that takes on the thoughts and idiom of a character without quotation marks or tags.

Free verse

Poetry without regular meter or rhyme.

G

Genre

A category of literature: poetry, drama, fiction, nonfiction; or within fiction, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, and so on.

Gothic

Fiction marked by mystery, terror, the supernatural, and decaying settings; in America, from Poe to Faulkner and O'Connor.

H

Haiku

A Japanese verse form traditionally of three lines with five, seven, and five syllables, usually centered on an image from nature.

Hamartia

Aristotle's term for the error or flaw that leads to a tragic hero's downfall.

Hero

The central figure of a work, especially one who acts with courage.

Hubris

Excessive pride or self-confidence, often the cause of a tragic fall.

Hyperbole

Deliberate exaggeration for emphasis or effect.

I

Iamb

A metrical foot of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one: "be-LOW."

Iambic pentameter

A line of five iambs, the most common meter in English poetry.

Iceberg theory

Ernest Hemingway's principle that a writer may omit much, if he knows it well, and the omitted part will still be felt.

Image

Language that appeals to the senses.

Imagery

The pattern of images in a work.

In medias res

Beginning a narrative in the middle of the action; literally “into the middle of things.”

Inciting incident

The event that sets the central conflict in motion.

Interior monologue

The direct representation of a character’s thoughts.

Irony

A gap between what is said and what is meant (verbal irony), between what is expected and what happens (situational irony), or between what a character knows and what the audience knows (dramatic irony).

J**Juxtaposition**

The placing of two things side by side to invite comparison or contrast.

K**Kenning**

A compound metaphor in Old English and Norse poetry, such as “whale-road” for the sea.

L**Line break**

The point at which a line of poetry ends; a powerful tool of emphasis and timing.

Literary fiction

Fiction valued chiefly for its style, depth of character, and treatment of human experience rather than for genre conventions.

Lyric

A short poem expressing personal feeling or thought.

M**Magical realism**

Fiction in which magical events occur in an otherwise realistic world and are treated as ordinary.

Manuscript

An author’s text submitted to an editor, publisher, or agent.

Memoir

An account of a part of the writer’s life, organized around a theme, period, or relationship rather than the whole life.

Metafiction

Fiction that draws attention to its own status as fiction.

Metaphor

An implied comparison that speaks of one thing as if it were another.

Meter

The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse.

Metonymy

A figure in which something is named by something closely associated with it: “the crown” for the monarch.

Microfiction

An extremely short story, often 400 words or fewer.

Minimalism

A spare style that uses few words, little ornament, and much implication; associated with Raymond Carver.

Modernism

The movement in the arts, about 1900 to 1945, marked by experiment, fragmentation, and interiority: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Faulkner.

Monologue

An extended speech by a single character.

Mood

The emotional atmosphere a work creates for the reader.

Motif

A recurring image, idea, or situation that develops a theme.

N

Narrative

An account of connected events.

Narrator

The voice that tells a story.

Naturalism

A form of realism that depicts characters as shaped by heredity and environment.

Novel

A long work of prose fiction, commonly 40,000 words or more.

Novelette

A work of fiction between 7,500 and 17,500 words, in the definitions used by the Hugo and Nebula awards.

Novella

A work of fiction between the short story and the novel, often defined as 17,500 to 40,000 words.

O

Objective point of view

Narration that reports only what can be seen and heard, without entering any character's mind.

Ode

A formal lyric poem of praise or meditation.

Omniscient narrator

A narrator who knows the thoughts and actions of all characters.

Onomatopoeia

A word that imitates the sound it names: buzz, hiss, murmur.

Oxymoron

A phrase that joins contradictory terms: "sweet sorrow."

P

Parable

A short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson.

Paradox

A statement that seems contradictory but contains a truth.

Parody

An imitation of a style or work for comic or critical effect.

Pastiche

A work that imitates the style of another writer or period, often in tribute.

Pastoral

A work idealizing rural life.

Pathos

The quality in a work that evokes pity or sorrow.

Persona

The voice or mask a writer adopts, especially in poetry.

Personal essay

A short work of nonfiction exploring the writer's experience and thought.

Personification

Giving human qualities to something not human.

Plot

The arrangement of events in a story.

Point of view

The vantage from which a story is told: first person, second person, third person (limited or omniscient), or objective.

Postmodernism

Literature after about 1945 that questions grand narratives, mixes forms, and often draws attention to its own artifice.

Prologue

An introductory section before the main action.

Prose

Ordinary written language, not arranged in lines of verse.

Prose poem

A poem written in sentences and paragraphs rather than lines.

Protagonist

The central character of a work.

Pseudonym

A name adopted by a writer in place of his or her own.

Q**Quatrain**

A stanza of four lines.

Query letter

A one-page letter pitching a book-length manuscript to a literary agent.

R**Reading period**

The months during which a magazine accepts submissions.

Realism

Writing that represents ordinary life truthfully and in detail.

Refrain

A line or phrase repeated at intervals in a poem or song.

Resolution

The end of a plot, when the conflict is settled.

Rhetoric

The art of persuasion; the strategies a writer uses to move a reader.

Rhyme

The repetition of sounds at the ends of words. End rhyme falls at line endings; internal rhyme within lines; slant rhyme is approximate.

Rhythm

The pattern of sound and stress in language.

Rising action

The events that build tension toward the climax.

Romanticism

The movement, about 1780 to 1850, that prized imagination, emotion, nature, and the individual: Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson.

Round character

A complex, many-sided character who can surprise the reader. Compare flat character.

Running head

A line of text, such as the title, repeated at the top of each page of a book or document.

S

Satire

A work that uses humor, irony, or exaggeration to criticize folly or vice.

Scansion

The analysis of a poem's meter.

Scene

A unit of action presented moment by moment, usually with dialogue. Compare summary.

Second person

Narration addressed to "you."

Setting

The time and place of a work.

Short story

A brief work of prose fiction, commonly under 7,500 words, that can be read at a sitting.

Simile

A comparison using "like" or "as."

Simultaneous submission

Sending the same work to more than one magazine at the same time, which most magazines permit if you withdraw promptly on acceptance.

Single effect

Edgar Allan Poe's principle that a short story should be designed to produce one unified impression.

Slant rhyme

A partial or approximate rhyme: "soul" and "all."

Slush pile

Unsolicited submissions awaiting an editor's reading.

Soliloquy

A speech in which a character alone on stage speaks his or her thoughts aloud.

Sonnet

A fourteen-line poem, usually in iambic pentameter. The Petrarchan sonnet divides into an octave and a sestet; the Shakespearean into three quatrains and a couplet.

Speaker

The voice of a poem, not necessarily the poet.

Stanza

A group of lines forming a unit in a poem.

Static character

A character who does not change. Compare dynamic character.

Stream of consciousness

A technique representing the flow of a character's thoughts and sensations as they occur.

Style

The distinctive manner of a writer: diction, syntax, rhythm, and tone together.

Subplot

A secondary line of action.

Subtext

Meaning beneath the surface of dialogue or action, never stated directly.

Summary

Narration that compresses time, reporting events rather than dramatizing them. Compare scene.

Symbol

An object, person, or event that stands for something beyond itself.

Synecdoche

A figure in which a part stands for the whole: "all hands on deck."

Syntax

The arrangement of words in sentences.

T

Tercet

A stanza of three lines.

Theme

The central idea or insight a work explores. A theme is usually expressed as a statement, not a single word.

Third person limited

Narration that stays close to one character's perceptions and thoughts.

Tone

The writer's or speaker's attitude toward the subject and the reader.

Tragedy

A work in which a protagonist suffers a downfall, often through hamartia, arousing pity and fear.

Tragic flaw

See hamartia.

Transcendentalism

The American movement of the 1830s to 1850s, led by Emerson and Thoreau, that emphasized intuition, nature, and the divinity of the individual soul.

Turn

A shift in thought, feeling, or argument; in a sonnet, the volta.

U

Understatement

Deliberately presenting something as less important than it is.

Unreliable narrator

A narrator whose account cannot be fully trusted.

V

Verisimilitude

The appearance of truth or reality in a work.

Vignette

A brief, evocative sketch or scene.

Villanelle

A nineteen-line poem of five tercets and a quatrain, with two refrains and two rhymes.

Example: Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art."

Voice

The distinctive personality of a narrator or writer as heard on the page.

Volta

The turn in a sonnet, where the argument or feeling shifts.

W**Word count**

The number of words in a manuscript; the measure editors use to determine length.

Workshop

A group in which writers read and discuss one another's work in progress.

Z**Zeugma**

A figure in which one word governs two others in different senses: "She lost her hat and her temper."