**Elements of Style**

 **Figures of Speech**

**Figures of speech** are expressions that stretch words beyond their literal meanings. By connecting or juxtaposing different sounds and thoughts, figures of speech increase the breadth and subtlety of expression.

**Alliteration:** The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words. For example, Robert Frost’s poem “Out, out—” contains the alliterative phrase “sweet scented stuff.”

**Aposiopesis:** A breaking-off of speech, usually because of rising emotion or excitement. For example, “Touch me one more time, and I swear—”

**Apostrophe:** A direct address to an absent or dead person, or to an object, quality, or idea. Walt Whitman’s poem “O Captain, My Captain,” written upon the death of Abraham Lincoln, is an example of apostrophe.

**Assonance:** The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sequence of nearby words. For example, Alfred, Lord Tennyson creates assonance with the “o” sound in this line from “The Lotos-Eaters”: “All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone.”

**Cacophony:** The clash of discordant or harsh sounds within a sentence or phrase. Cacophony is a familiar feature of tongue twisters but can also be used to poetic effect, as in the words “anfractuous rocks” in T. S. Eliot’s “Sweeney Erect.” Although dissonance has a different musical meaning, it is sometimes used interchangeably with “cacophony.”

**Chiasmus:** Two phrases in which the syntax is the same but the placement of words is reversed, as in these lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Pains of Sleep”: “To be beloved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed.”

**Cliché:** An expression such as “turn over a new leaf” that has been used so frequently it has lost its expressive power.

**Colloquialism:** An informal expression or slang, especially in the context of formal writing, as in Philip Larkin’s “Send No Money”: “All the other lads there / Were itching to have a bash.”

**Conceit:** An elaborate parallel between two seemingly dissimilar objects or ideas. The **metaphysical poets** (*see* Literary Movements, *below*) are especially known for their conceits, as in John Donne’s “The Flea.”

**Epithet:** An adjective or phrase that describes a prominent feature of a person or thing. “Richard ‘the Lionheart’ ” and “ ‘Shoeless’ Joe Jackson” are both examples of epithets.

**Euphemism:** The use of decorous language to express vulgar or unpleasant ideas, events, or actions. For example, “passed away” instead of “died”; “ethnic cleansing” instead of “genocide.”

**Euphony:** A pleasing arrangement of sounds. Many consider “cellar door” one of the most euphonious phrases in English.

**Hyperbole:** An excessive overstatement or conscious exaggeration of fact: “I’ve told you about it a million times already.”

**Idiom:** A common expression that has acquired a meaning that differs from its literal meaning, such as “it’s raining cats and dogs” or “a bolt from the blue.”

**Litotes:** A form of understatement in which a statement is affirmed by negating its opposite: “He is not unfriendly.”

**Meiosis:** Intentional understatement, as, for example, in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet,* when Mercutio is mortally wounded and says it is only “a scratch.” Meiosis is the opposite of **hyperbole** and often employs **litotes** to ironic effect.

**Metaphor:** The comparison of one thing to another that does not use the terms “like” or “as.” Shakespeare is famous for his metaphors, as in *Macbeth*: “Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.”

* **Mixed metaphor:** A combination of metaphors that produces a confused or contradictory image, such as “The company’s collapse left mountains of debt in its wake.”

**Metonymy:** The substitution of one term for another that generally is associated with it. For example, “suits” instead of “businessmen.”

**Onomatopoeia:** The use of words, such as “pop,” “hiss,” and “boing,” that sound like the thing they refer to.

**Oxymoron:** The association of two contrary terms, as in the expressions “same difference” or “wise fool.”

**Paradox:** A statement that seems absurd or even contradictory on its face but often expresses a deeper truth. For example, a line in Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “And all men kill the thing they love.”

**Paralipsis:** Also known as **praeteritio,** the technique of drawing attention to something by claiming not to mention it. For example, from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: “We will not speak of all Queequeg’s peculiarities here; how he eschewed coffee and hot rolls, and applied his undivided attention to beefsteaks, done rare.”

**Parallelism:** The use of similar grammatical structures or word order in two sentences or phrases to suggest a comparison or contrast between them. In Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 129”: “Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.” Parallelism also can refer to parallels between larger elements in a narrative (*see* Literary Techniques, *below*).

**Pathetic fallacy:** The attribution of human feeling or motivation to a nonhuman object, especially an object found in nature. For example, John Keats’s “Ode to Melancholy” describes a “weeping” cloud.

**Periphrasis:** An elaborate and roundabout manner of speech that uses more words than necessary. Saying “I appear to be entirely without financial resources” instead of “I’m broke” is an example. Euphemisms often employ periphrasis.

**Personification:** The use of human characteristics to describe animals, things, or ideas. Carl Sandburg’s poem “Chicago” describes the city as “Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders.”

**Pun:** A play on words that exploits the similarity in sound between two words with distinctly different meanings. For example, the title of Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a pun on the word “earnest,” which means “serious or sober,” and the name “Ernest,” which figures into a scheme that some of the play’s main characters perpetrate.

**Rhetorical question:** A question that is asked not to elicit a response but to make an impact or call attention to something. For example, the question “Isn’t she great?” expresses regard for another person and does not call for discussion.

**Sarcasm:** A simple form of **verbal irony** (*see* Literary Techniques, *below*) in which it is obvious from context and tone that the speaker means the opposite of what he or she says. Sarcasm usually, but not always, expresses scorn. Commenting “That was graceful” when someone trips and falls is an example.

**Simile:** A comparison of two things through the use of “like” or “as.” The title of Robert Burns’s poem “My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose” is a simile.

**Synaesthesia:** The use of one kind of sensory experience to describe another, such as in the line “Heard melodies are sweet” in John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

**Synecdoche:** A form of metonymy in which a part of an entity is used to refer to the whole, for example, “my wheels” for “my car.”

**Trope:** A category of figures of speech that extend the literal meanings of words by inviting a comparison to other words, things, or ideas. Metaphor, metonymy, and simile are three common tropes.

**Zeugma:** The use of one word in a sentence to modify two other words in the sentence, typically in two different ways. For example, in Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers,* the sentence “Mr. Pickwick took his hat and his leave” uses the word “took” to mean two different things.

**Literary Techniques**

Whereas figures of speech work on the level of individual words or sentences, writers also use a variety of techniques to add clarity or intensity to a larger passage, advance the plot in a particular way, or suggest connections between elements in the plot.

**Allusion:** An implicit reference within a literary work to a historical or literary person, place, or event. For example, the title of William Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* alludes to a line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Authors use allusion to add symbolic weight because it makes subtle or implicit connections with other works. For example, in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick,* Captain Ahab’s name alludes to the wicked and idolatrous biblical king Ahab—a connection that adds depth to our understanding of Ahab’s character.

**Anagnorisis:** A moment of recognition or discovery, primarily used in reference to Greek tragedy. For example, in Euripides’ *The Bacchae,* Agave experiences anagnorisis when she discovers that she has murdered her own son, Pentheus.

**Bathos:** A sudden and unexpected drop from the lofty to the trivial or excessively sentimental. Bathos sometimes is used intentionally, to create humor, but just as often is derided as miscalculation or poor judgment on a writer’s part. An example from Alexander Pope: “Ye Gods! Annihilate but Space and Time / And make two lovers happy.”

**Caricature:** A description or characterization that exaggerates or distorts a character’s prominent features, usually to elicit mockery. For example, in *Candide,* Voltaire portrays the character of Pangloss as a mocking caricature of the optimistic rationalism of philosophers like Leibniz.

***Deus ex machina:*** Greek for “God from a machine.” The phrase originally referred to a technique in ancient tragedy in which a mechanical god was lowered onto the stage to intervene and solve the play’s problems or bring the play to a satisfactory conclusion. Now, the term describes more generally a sudden or improbable plot twist that brings about the plot’s resolution.

**Epiphany:** A sudden, powerful, and often spiritual or life changing realization that a character reaches in an otherwise ordinary or everyday moment. Many of the short stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* involve moments of epiphany.

**Foreshadowing:** An author’s deliberate use of hints or suggestions to give a preview of events or themes that do not develop until later in the narrative. For example, in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights,* the nightmares Lockwood has the night he spends in Catherine’s bed prefigure later events in the novel.

***In medias rest:*** Latin for “in the middle of things.” The term refers to the technique of starting a narrative in the middle of the action. For example, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost,* which concerns the war among the angels in Heaven, opens after the fallen angels already are in Hell and only later examines the events that led to their expulsion from Heaven.

**Interior monologue:** A record of a character’s thoughts, unmediated by a narrator. Interior monologue sometimes takes the form of **stream-of-consciousness** narration (*see* Point of View, *above*) but often is more structured and logical than stream of consciousness.

**Invocation:** A prayer for inspiration to a god or muse usually placed at the beginning of an epic. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* both open with invocations.

**Irony:** A wide-ranging technique of detachment that draws awareness to the discrepancy between words and their meanings, between expectation and fulfillment, or, most generally, between what is and what seems to be.

* **Verbal irony:** The use of a statement that, by its context, implies its opposite. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar,* Antony repeats, “Brutus is an honorable man,” while clearly implying that Brutus is dishonorable. **Sarcasm** (*see* Figures of Speech, *above*) is a particularly blunt form of verbal irony.
* **Situational irony:** A technique in which one understanding of a situation stands in sharp contrast to another, usually more prevalent, understanding of the same situation. For example, Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” comments on the grotesque difference between politicians’ high-minded praise of the noble warrior and the unspeakably awful conditions of soldiers at the front.
* **Romantic irony:** An author’s persistent reminding of his or her presence in the work. By drawing attention to the artifice of the work, the author ensures that the reader or audience will maintain critical detachment and not simply accept the writing at face value. Laurence Sterne employs romantic irony in *Tristram Shandy* by discussing the writing of the novel in the novel itself.
* **Dramatic irony:** A technique in which the author lets the audience or reader in on a character’s situation while the character himself remains in the dark. With dramatic irony, the character’s words or actions carry a significance that the character is not aware of. When used in tragedy, dramatic irony is called **tragic irony.** One example is in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex,* when Oedipus vows to discover his father’s murderer, not knowing, as the audience does, that he himself is the murderer.
* **Cosmic irony:** The perception of fate or the universe as malicious or indifferent to human suffering, which creates a painful contrast between our purposeful activity and its ultimate meaninglessness. Thomas Hardy’s novels abound in cosmic irony.

**Melodrama:** The use of sentimentality, gushing emotion, or sensational action or plot twists to provoke audience or reader response. Melodrama was popular in Victorian England, but critics now deride it as manipulative and hokey. Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop,* for example, is a particularly melodramatic work.

**Parallelism:** Similarities between elements in a narrative (such as two characters or two plot lines). For instance, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear,* both Lear and Gloucester suffer at the hands of their own children because they are blind to which of their children are goodhearted and which areKing Lear, evil. Parallelism can also occur on the level of sentences or phrases (*see* Figures of Speech, *above*).

**Pathos:** From the Greek word for “feeling,” the quality in a work of literature that evokes high emotion, most commonly sorrow, pity, or compassion. Charles Dickens exploits pathos very effectively, especially when describing the deaths of his characters.

**Poetic diction:** The use of specific types of words, phrases, or literary structures that are not common in contemporary speech or prose. For example, Wilfred Owen’s “Sonnet On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought Into Action,” though written in the 20th century, uses antiquated diction and the time-tested sonnet form. The intentional discrepancy creates an ironic contrast between the horrors of modern war and the way poets wrote about war in the past: “Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm, / Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse.”

**Poetic license** The liberty that authors sometimes take with ordinary rules of syntax and grammar, employing unusual vocabulary, metrical devices, or figures of speech or committing factual errors in order to strengthen a passage of writing. For example, the poet e. e. cummings takes poetic license in violating rules of capitalization in his works.

**Wit:** A form of wordplay that displays cleverness or ingenuity with language. Often, but not always, wit displays humor. Oscar Wilde’s plays are famous for their witty phrases, which expose the hypocrisies of the intellectual beliefs of Wilde’s time.

**Thematic Meaning**

Literature becomes universal when it draws connections between the particular and the general. Often, certain levels of a literary work’s meaning are not immediately evident. The following terms relate to the relationship between the words on the page and the deeper significance those words may hold.

**Archetype:** A **theme, motif, symbol,** or **stock character** that holds a familiar and fixed place in a culture’s consciousness. For example, many cultures across the world feature an archetype of the resurrected god to herald the coming of spring. The Fisher King, Jesus Christ, and the goddess Persephone are three familiar instances of this archetype in Western culture.

**Emblem:** A concrete object that represents something abstract. For example, the Star of David is an emblem of Judaism. An emblem differs from a **symbol** in that an emblem’s meaning is fixed: the Star of David always represents Judaism, regardless of context.

**Imagery:** Language that brings to mind sense-impressions, especially via figures of speech. Sometimes, certain imagery is characteristic of a particular writer or work. For example, many of Shakespeare’s plays contain nautical imagery.

**Motif:** A recurring structure, contrast, or other device that develops or informs a work’s major themes. A motif may relate to concrete objects, like Eastern vs. Western architecture in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India,* or may be a recurrent idea, phrase, or emotion, like Lily Bart’s constant desire to move up in the world in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth.*

**Symbol:** An object, character, figure, or color that is used to represent an abstract idea or concept. For example, the two roads in Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” symbolize the choice between two paths in life. Unlike an **emblem,** a symbol may have different meanings in different contexts.

**Theme:** A fundamental and universal idea explored in a literary work. For example, a major theme of John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* is the perpetual contest between good and evil.

**Thesis:** The central argument that an author makes in a work. Although the term is primarily associated with nonfiction, it can apply to fiction. For example, the thesis of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* is that Chicago meatpacking plants subject poor immigrants to horrible and unjust working conditions, and that the government must do something to address the problem.

**Tone:** The general atmosphere created in a story, or the narrator’s attitude toward the story or reader. For example, the tone of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* is outraged, defiant, and claustrophobic.