

Literary Devices and Terms

Anecdote

A short narrative revealing a curious, amusing or insightful incident that illustrates a point or reinforces an idea. Anecdotes frequently contain dialogue, provide explicit detail and sometimes incorporate plays on words or humorous endings.

Black Humor

A kind of humor that concentrates on social issues and social outcasts. It is somber and destructive in tone. Black humor comments on societal problems through grotesque and nightmarish means.

Cliché

A trite word or phrase that lacks originality or impact because of frequent and prolonged use. Clichés clutter a manuscript and should be avoided, except when used deliberately as sarcasm or as a revealing commentary through the dialogue of a particular character. "Cool as a cucumber" and "green with envy" are examples of clichés.

Conceit

A particularly striking or imaginative extended image or metaphor found most often in poetry, especially in Elizabethan verse and the work of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. Robert Frost's poem "Departmental," in which a community of ants is treated as a bureaucracy, is a modern conceit.

Figures of Speech

Writing techniques that furnish the writer with a nonliteral means of conveying images. Figures of speech include hyperbole, irony, metaphor, metonymy, onomatopoeia, oxymoron, paradox, personification, simile, synecdoche and understatement. When used effectively, figures of speech are appropriate to the characters and the setting of a story. A skillful writer uses them selectively and in moderation.

Hyperbole

An exaggeration that is so extreme as to render the writer's meaning clearer than it would be in literal form. Hyperbole is used to characterize in the following statement: "Mary changed her mind as often as she inhaled." Other functions hyperbole can serve are to describe someone or something...and to establish a mood.

Humor

Anything written, spoken or acted out that causes amusement. Based on incongruity, humor consists primarily of the recognition and expression of peculiarities, oddities and absurdities in a situation or action. There are two categories of humor: subject-matter humor (something funny by itself) and literary humor (something funny in the phrasing). The former depends on the writer being able to recognize the humorous thing or event and then report it clearly; the latter relies on the means by which the object or event is

described, and is often based on the element of surprise. Humor lies in the angle or point of view from which a writer approaches a subject. The writer may use one or more of the following devices to create humor: irony, exaggeration, parody, understatement, pun, double entendre, malapropism, manufactured words, spoonerism, pairing of unlikely elements, and fancy and imagination.

Imagery

Imagery is description that clarifies for the reader a sensory experience, an action, a thing, a place or an idea. To create imagery, the writer chooses words so carefully that the reader feels he is experiencing a situation or a sensation. Imagery can be literal or figurative. Literal meaning is directly conveyed through the words as they stand; in using figurative imagery, the writer speaks indirectly to stir the reader's imagination.

Irony

A figure of speech in which the intended meaning of a word or statement is the opposite of its literal meaning.... What is stated ironically need not always be precisely the opposite of what is suggested, however. Irony may assert somewhat less than it suggests by the use of understatement; for instance, author Fran Lebowitz once remarked, "Having been unpopular in high school is not just cause for book publication." In addition to understatement, irony may be achieved through the use of devices such as hyperbole, sarcasm and satire.

Metaphor

A figurative comparison that usually uses some form of the word *is*, although a verb is not absolutely essential to a metaphor. It is generally considered a strengthened simile (and doesn't use the words *like* or *as*). "He's nothing but a bag of wind," or "She's a doll" exemplify this technique. The mixed metaphor, which is an inconsistent image, should be avoided, e.g., "Publicity is a two-edged sword, somebody said once, and it can get you into hot water." Metaphors must be used with caution. Too many, too close together, can obscure rather than clarify meaning.

Metonymy

The figure of speech that substitutes the name of one thing for the name of another. With this technique, the substituted name is associated with the original by a common quality or function, as when "Pollyanna" refers to a person who is excessively optimistic, or "the White House" refers to the President. Metonymy can be used for quick characterization.

Onomatopoeia

A word whose sound represents a physical sound. Deliberate use of such words is most frequent in poetry, but occurs in prose—and in common speech—as well. *Plop*, *click* and *sizzle* are onomatopoeic words.

Oxymoron

A Greek word meaning "acutely silly," oxymoron names a figure of speech that combines contradictions, [such as] *jumbo shrimp* and *thunderous silence*.

Paradox

An apparently self-contradictory statement that actually contains truth. For example, Oscar Wilde said, "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about." George Bernard Shaw once remarked, "The truth is the only thing that no one will believe." Like wise sayings and quotable quotes, paradoxes come to an individual in a flash of inspiration. A writer ordinarily cannot sit down at his typewriter with the intention of creating a paradox; for this reason, paradoxes are found infrequently in most writing.

Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which inanimate objects, abstractions, animals and ideas are attributed human form, characteristics or sensibilities. "The wind shrieked through the windows," and "The sauce bubbled over onto the burner, hissing for attention," are examples of personification. Personification is frequently used as a literary device in poetry. The prose writer—both of fiction and nonfiction—also uses personification to strengthen the imagery of his article or story.

Poetic License

Refers to the privilege claimed by a writer...to deviate from conventional form, established rules and perhaps even fact and logic to achieve a desired effect. Writers, particularly poets, have claimed the "license" to invert word order, introduce archaisms, use—or overuse—figurative language, employ contractions such as e'er and o'er and otherwise depart from standards of ordinary speech. But such breaches of grammar, misuse of idiom, mispronunciation for the sake of rhyme, or similar devices are no longer accepted in serious verse.

Redundancy

The use of more words or phrases than are necessary to communicate an idea; needless repetition.

Sarcasm

This term applies to taunting, bitter remarks spoken or written with the intention of hurting another's feelings. Sarcasm involves a deliberate personal attack, and is usually expressed in a contemptuous manner. Sarcasm may make use of irony, i.e., saying one thing but meaning the opposite. Unlike true irony, however, sarcasm makes no attempt to disguise the real meaning beneath the apparent one.

Satire

A literary technique that mocks a powerful or influential personality, institution, moral code or social trend, often using exaggeration and irony to point out the flaws and shortcomings of its target. While anger and contempt frequently underlie a work of satire, the satirist's most powerful tools are wit and humor, which pique the reader's or listener's sense of the ridiculous and thus undermine the subject....

Simile

A figure of speech based on comparison. In a simile, two things are compared to each other, generally using either the word *like* or the phrase *as...as*. The two things or person

and thing being compared must be dissimilar in more ways than they are similar, since one purpose of the simile is to make the unfamiliar (e.g., a new character) immediately familiar to the reader. For example..., in his description of a student's rented room, John Irving used this simile: "It was a cheerless place, as dry and as crowded as a dictionary...."

Spoonerism

Named for W.A. Spooner, an English clergyman and warden of New College, Oxford, who frequently made such slips, spoonerism describes a transposition of the initial or some other sounds of two or more words. "let me sew you to a sheet" (for "Let me show you to a seat") and "a well-boiled icicle" (for "a well-oiled Bicycle") are examples of spoonerisms. A spoonerism may be a witty turn of phrase or an accidental slip of the tongue.

Synecdoche

A figure of speech that substitutes a part for the whole or a whole for the part. For example, in "The pen is mightier than the sword," *pen* substitutes *discourse* and *sword* substitutes *warfare*.

Tautology

Unnecessary repetition of the same idea in different words, without the addition of meaning or clarity. Tautologies such as "free giveaway" and "advance reservations" are frequently found in spoken and written expression. The careful, concise writer ruthlessly edits redundancy from his work.

Triteness

Words or phrases that have lost freshness, originality and effectiveness because of overuse. Cliché and hackneyed language are two other terms used to describe triteness.... Sometimes, however, a cliché or well-known slogan can be twisted to produce a fresh, original thought. For example, "He who laughs last has no sense of humor," or "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you place the blame."

Understatement

A device in which a writer uses deliberate restraint in expressing his idea. In understating, a writer phrases his remark less strongly than would be expected, or communicate the idea in negative terms. A critic for a Hearst newspaper, for example, who was assigned to write a review of Hearst friend Marion Davies's latest film, is reported to have closed his review this way: "Marion Davies was never better." Context is important in making sure the reader realizes an idea is being understated.

Verbiage

Wordiness; an overabundance of words in written or spoken expression. The word has a negative connotation, often implying communication that is meaningless and insincere.