

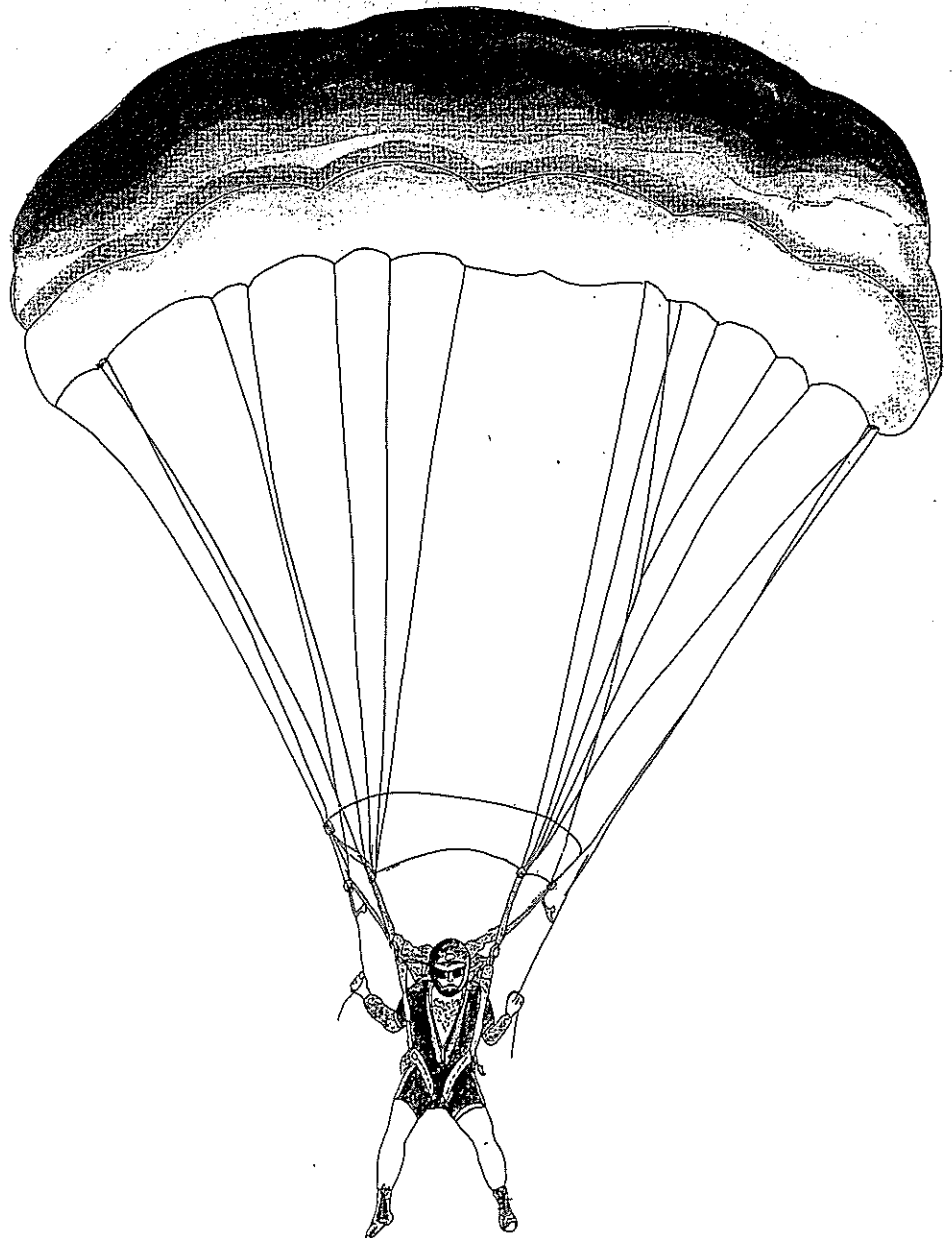
# Literary techniques and features

Literary techniques are the tools writers use to create features of texts including non-fiction, prose fiction, poetry and drama. There are hundreds of literary techniques and no analysis could ever cover them all. They vary in effect, importance and relevance to specific forms, genres and sub-genres of texts.

The key to strong analysis of techniques and features is to select the most significant ones to discuss. The following silly but memorable sentence gives you a list of 32 literary techniques. They are explained in more detail on the pages that follow. For a list of even more techniques, refer to the comprehensive glossary at the back of the book.

## SOLO JUMPS CREATED MARTIN'S CHEST HAIR

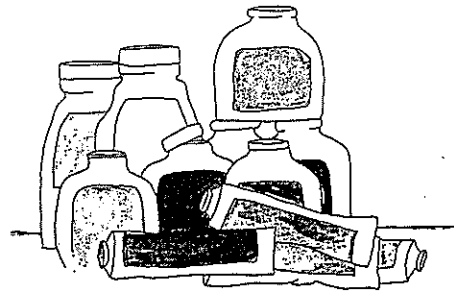
- S Structure
- O Oxymoron
- L Language level
- O Onomatopoeia
  
- J Juxtaposition
- U Understatement
- M Metonymy
- P Personification
- S Simile and metaphor
  
- C Colloquial language
- R Rhythm
- E Emotive language
- A Assonance
- T Theme
- E Euphemism
- D Diction
  
- M Modality
- A Alliteration
- R Rhyme
- T Tone
- I Inference
- N Narrative style
- S Superlatives
  
- C Contrast
- H Hyperbole
- E Enjambment
- S Symbolism
- T Transitions
  
- H Humour
- A Allusion
- I Irony
- R Repetition



## Thirty-two literary techniques and features explained

**structure:** the length, complexity and arrangement of sentences, paragraphs and stanzas; organisation and order in a text; the layout and physical form of textual content.

**oxymoron:** an expression that places together two contradictory terms that are direct opposites, such as *organised chaos* or *bittersweet*.



**language level (or register):** the degree of suitability of vocabulary, expression and style to a specific target audience; for example, a **formal language** level would not use contractions like *wouldn't* or *they're*.

**onomatopoeia:** the use of words that spell out the sounds of things they describe to create a mimicking effect, such as *splash*, *fizz*, *crackle*, *buzz* or *woof*. Onomatopoeia is not a realistic way to portray sounds. Over the years, we have become conditioned to accept various clichés about how certain things sound. Onomatopoeic words are usually quite familiar to us from childhood. Although they don't really represent realistic noises, they enable us to make attempts at spelling out common sound effects.

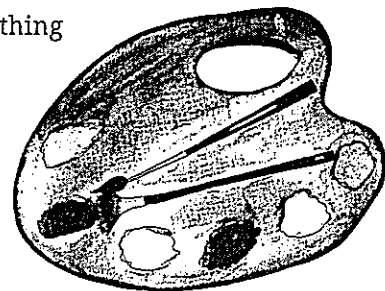
**juxtaposition:** a way to relate together two seemingly incongruous things to create a dramatic effect such as contrast, comparison or suspense; for example: *In front of the advancing army tank there lay a small, white puppy*.

**understatement:** deliberately lessening the importance or strength of a statement; for example: *The woman committed the murder because she became cross with her husband*.

**metonymy:** using the name of something closely associated with a thing rather than the thing itself; for example, we might refer to loyalty to our country as allegiance to *the flag*, where *flag* is a **symbol** for 'country'. Another example is to refer to the film industry as *Hollywood*, a place associated with film making. (Metonymy is easily confused with **synecdoche**, which occurs when we refer to a part of the thing, not just something closely associated with it. An example of synecdoche is calling someone's car their *wheels*.)

**personification:** attributing human qualities, characteristics and thoughts to non-human or inanimate things. For example, *The storm crouched overhead, waiting. It fixed its menacing gaze upon us* implies that the storm has motives and intentions. Poets often attempt to elicit an emotional response from their audience, and if poetic expressions can make us approach a topic from a personal angle, we are more likely to respond with our emotions.

**simile and metaphor:** a simile is a comparative description where one thing is described as being *like* or *as* another; a metaphor is a non-literal description where one thing is described as if it is another. Similes ask us to imagine one thing 'as if' it is another. This gives us a better grasp of the new concept being presented. For example: *The waterfall was as clear as aquamarine* or *The snow fell on the forest trail like breadcrumbs*. Similes make weaker comparisons than metaphors, which are more direct in asking us to imagine that one thing *is* another. Metaphors are very common expressions that pervade our ordinary conversation as well as our poetry. Clichés are often metaphors, although they have lost their powerful effect because they have been overused and no longer present fresh, interesting comparisons. The primary aim of using metaphors is to create a vivid mental picture in the mind of the responder. For example: *The city lights were gemstones on a black velvet cloth*.



**colloquial language:** expressions peculiar to a specific group or culture, containing informal terms; for example: *Hey! That dude nicked me wallet.*

**rhythm:** the creation of a beat or pattern using emphasis on certain syllables of words.

Many different rhythms can be achieved using written and spoken language, which create **metre**—the rhythm and rhyme patterns in poetry.

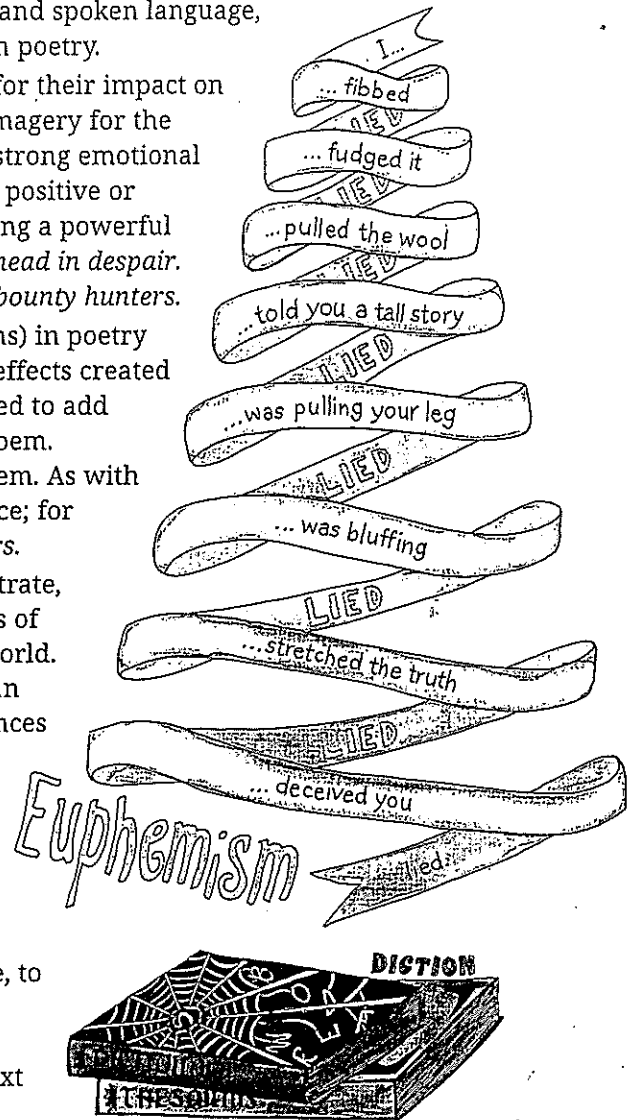
**emotive language:** words and phrases selected and used for their impact on our feelings. Emotive language could be described as ‘imagery for the feelings’. Often, a composer’s main aim is to provoke a strong emotional response within the responder. Whether the reaction is positive or negative is sometimes less important than simply creating a powerful emotional response; for example: *The fugitive hung his head in despair. He was hopelessly trapped and at the mercy of the cruel bounty hunters.*

**assonance:** the repetition of vowels (or vowel combinations) in poetry to create a sound effect. As with alliteration, the sound effects created with assonance are not meant to be realistic, but are used to add to an overall sense of pace, tone and mood within the poem. Assonant vowels help to unify the overall sound of a poem. As with alliteration, look for patterns, rather than direct sequence; for example: *The brown owls flew around the house for hours.*

**theme:** the main concept that the composer wishes to illustrate, or the key idea that underlies the story. Common themes of poetry are feelings, war and the beauty of the natural world. Common themes in film include the complexity of human relationships, triumph over adversity and the consequences of social injustices.

**euphemism:** the use of more polite or non-confronting terms to refer to certain topics. For example, instead of saying someone has died, we might use a gentler term and say they’ve *passed away*. Another example is calling the toilet *the bathroom*.

**diction:** a composer’s specific choice of words. For example, to describe the light emanating from a star, the composer might use *starlight* rather than *luminescence* or *stellar radiance*, depending on the purpose, audience and context for their text. Diction is closely related to register and vocabulary.



**modality:** the force or strength of words used to indicate likelihood or obligation; for example, the word *must* has a higher modality than *may* or *could*.

**alliteration:** the repetition of consonant sounds; for example: *Countless crows cawed across the cavern.* This technique manipulates the audible sound of poetry. Poems are usually designed to be read aloud; it is therefore difficult to appreciate alliterative effects without hearing the poem spoken. The sound effects created by alliteration are not meant to be realistic, but merely to suggest different types of sound in order to establish a specific mood. Keep in mind that alliterative words may not be positioned directly after one another in a poetic phrase.

**rhyme:** the use of similar-sounding words in a certain pattern, within lines or at the ends of lines. We’re most familiar with end rhyme; for example: *There was a strange fellow; he was dressed all in yellow.* Rhyme is a tool that has a strong impact on human memory. The use of rhyme allows a poet to reinforce a given idea or message, and also has the effect of unifying the poem to form an orderly sequence of similar sounds. When rhyme is read aloud, it creates a strong impression through the sense of hearing.

## ANALYSING TEXTS

**tone:** the composer's attitude towards the topic, as revealed through their use of language. We describe a composer's tone by using words that refer to specific emotions, personal attitudes and purposes; for example: *The writer's sarcastic tone put some readers offside.*

**inference:** the act of drawing additional implied meaning from a text, using the connotations and shades of meaning intended by the composer.

**narrative style:** the mode and tense, point of view and voice (persona) used by the storyteller; for example: *The short story writer presented the tale in first person past tense, from the point of view of a cat.*

**superlatives:** positive adjectives that are intended to praise; for example: *The cricketer was a brilliant batsman, a superb bowler and an outstanding fielder.*

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**contrast:** the emphasis of differences between two things. Contrast may be found between words and phrases that occur near each other in a line. More complex forms of contrast may be found in separate stanzas (or verses), or in different sections of a poem. Contrast is an effective tool used to bring out the features of one idea or object by showing the features of its opposite; for example: *Of the two business partners, one is a millionaire; the other is millions of dollars in debt.*

**hyperbole:** deliberate exaggeration to emphasise a point; for example: *This broken ankle is killing me!* A poet usually uses hyperbole to create the effect of emphasis. It is effective in producing humour, irony and drama.

**enjambment:** the running of one line of text onto the next line to end a sentence or thought in poetry. The effect produced is to create an uninterrupted flow of rhythm in the text.

**symbolism:** the use of a simple object or idea to represent something more complex; for example, using a heart emoticon to symbolise love. Symbolism may be found in single words or short phrases, whole sentences, lines or stanzas. Symbols may be expressed in simple language, or may incorporate other techniques such as a sensory image or a metaphor. Texts become more complex when composers use symbolism along with other techniques simultaneously. For example, in the film *Gattaca*, visual symbols representing the double helix structure of DNA appear repeatedly in interior scenes.

**transitions:** the use of conjunctions and connective words and phrases to link one part of a text with another, creating a sense of flow, coherence and unity across the text.

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**humour:** literary content that is designed to be funny. Humour can be present in the form of witty statements, jokes, puns, sarcasm, irony, parody, mockery, mimicry, impersonation and funny situations.

**allusion:** a reference to a well-known text, event or other form of cultural knowledge within a text. For example, using the term 'Blitz' in a text is an allusion to the bombing raids on London in World War II. Allusions offer composers an economical means of conveying contextual or additional information within a text without deviating from the main objective or theme.

**irony:** using words that usually convey the opposite meaning to the one expected. Verbal irony is created using words, whereas events are used to create ironic situations. A car that has crashed into a road safety sign is a good example of situational irony. Both forms of irony convey a reality different from the appearance or expectation associated with the subject. Irony causes a reversal between expectation and its fulfilment. The surprise recognition of a sudden ironic development creates a comic effect, which is why irony is usually associated with humour. Irony is often used to create satire. In a satire, effective irony should provide some clues to the responder that the composer's purpose is non-literal.

**repetition:** the repeating of words, phrases and ideas, which is a simple and effective way in which composers can emphasise a particular concept or point of view. Repetition may be limited to only a single repeat, or may be extended to repeating the same thing many times over. Poetry may include the repetition of ideas using different words each time, or may use exactly the same words again and again, in parrot fashion.