

Hacking classical literature: 24 basic terms to know



You'll come out way ahead if you take time to knock back a few literary terms before tackling your next book. Then read and let your new background knowledge illuminate the words. You'll be reading with a different kind of understanding; see if you can identify what literary devices and grammatical techniques the author is using.

From Swinton:

I.

DEF. 1. A **figure of speech** is a deviation from the direct and literal meaning of a word or phrase.

DEF. 2. A **simile**, or comparison, is the statement of a likeness between one thing and another:

The tear down childhood's cheek that flows
Is like the dewdrop on the rose.

DEF. 3. A **metaphor** speaks of one object as if it were another:

Virtue is a *jewel*.

Simile and metaphor both express comparison. In the simile, one object is said to *resemble* another; and some sign of comparison (*as, like, etc.*) stands between them. In the metaphor, an object is spoken of as if it were another, and no sign of comparison is used. A **metaphor** is an *implied simile*. Thus,—

SIMILE. — He is *like a lion* in the fight.

METAPHOR. — He *is a lion* in the fight.

DEF. 4. **Personification** is a figure of speech in which an inanimate object is represented as animated or endowed with personality:

The mountains *sing together*, the hills *rejoice* and *clap hands*.

DEF. 5. **Antithesis** is the statement of a contrast or opposition of thoughts and words:

I do not *live* that I *may eat*, but I *eat* that I *may live*.

DEF. 6. **Climax** (meaning literally *a ladder*) is a series of statements rising in strength or importance until the last:

Learning is better than wealth; *culture* is better than learning; WISDOM is better than culture.

DEF. 7. **Synecdoche**¹ is the figure of speech by which the whole of a thing is put for a part, or a part for the whole:

Sail, for *ship*.

Daily *bread*, for daily *food*.

DEF. 8. **Metonymy**² is the use of the name of one object to represent some related object:

Gray hairs, meaning *old age*.

The fatal *cup*, meaning the *drink* in the cup.

DEF. 9. **Hyperbole** consists in magnifying objects beyond their natural bounds to make a statement more emphatic:

"Swift as the wind"

"Rivers of blood, and hills of slain"

DEF. 10. **Apostrophe** consists in addressing some absent person or thing as if present:

Milton, thou shouldst be with us at this hour!

DEF. 11. **Irony** is the use of words to express meanings that are opposite their literal meaning:

Brutus is an *honorable* [meaning *not honorable*] man!

DEF. 12. **Ellipsis** is the omission of words grammatically necessary, but supplied by the thought:

Sit down [meaning *You sit down*].

II.

DEF. 13. The direct or **grammatical order** of words is their ordinary prose arrangement:

In the sentence, "*I shall neither attempt to palliate nor deny the atrocious crime of being a young man,*"³ the words are arranged in the **grammatical order**,—subject, verb, object.

DEF. 14. The indirect or **rhetorical order** of words is an inverted arrangement of words adopted to make a statement more impressive:

In the form, "*The atrocious crime of being a young man, I shall neither attempt to palliate nor deny,*" the words are arranged in the indirect or **rhetorical order**.

DEF. 15. A **period sentence** is one in which the meaning is suspended, by using an inverted order of words, till the end or near the end of the sentence:

On the rich and the eloquent, on nobles and priests, the Puritans looked down with contempt.

DEF. 16. A **loose sentence** is one which may be brought to a grammatical close at one or more points before the end:

The Puritans looked down with contempt on the rich | and the eloquent, | on nobles and priests.

III.

DEF. 17. **Description** is the representation of things observed at any one point in time.

DEF. 18. **Narration** is the report of a succession of events observed chronologically.

DEF. 19. **Exposition** is the discussion of principles.

DEF. 20. **Poetry** is a kind of composition in which words are arranged in lines and verses containing a definite number and order of accented and unaccented syllables.

DEF. 21. **Rhyme** is a kind of verse in which there is a **concord** of sounds in words at the end of lines.

DEF. 22. **Blank verse** consists of unrhymed lines containing five feet of two syllables each, with the accent on the second syllable.

DEF. 23. A **refrain** is a phrase or verse which occurs at the end of each stanza of a poem.

DEF. 24. **Style** is the peculiar manner in which thought is expressed in language. There are many descriptive words used to denote the various kinds of style: *figurative, flowery, plain, verbose, terse, simple, sublime, witty, epigrammatic*.