

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

Glossary of literary terms

In your study of English, you will need to understand and to use an increasing range of technical terms. The ones that follow are especially important in the study of literature. These technical terms are referred to as the **metalanguage** of the subject English. Here are some that you will use.

A

allegory a narrative in which characters represent certain general qualities

alliteration the repetition of the consonant sound at the beginning of words

allusion a reference to another literary work or to a famous saying, or to a historical or current event or person

ambiguity having two meanings. This can sometimes be deliberate

anticlimax a disappointing or ineffective ending; a descent from the high point of the action

apostrophe as well as being a punctuation mark, the term refers to a literary device where the persona directly addresses either an inanimate object or a person who cannot reply

appropriation the adaptation of a text by transferring it to a different context, allowing new insights into the original text

archaism a word that is no longer in common use

aside a character speaks directly to the audience while other characters are on stage. The convention is that only the audience can hear the aside

assonance the repetition of the vowel sounds in the middle of words

B

blocking the movement and positioning of actors on a stage. This is determined during rehearsal

C

camera angle the angle from which the camera views a person or object, such as an overhead shot (the camera is directly above), a high-angle shot (the camera is looking down at the person or object), an eye-level shot (the camera is at the same level as the person's head), a low-angle shot (taken from below), and an undershot (taken from ground level)

camera distance the distance between the subject and the viewer of a film. The most common terms to describe camera distance are an extreme close-up (a very close image of an object or part of a face), a close-up (head and shoulders of a person or a very detailed view of an object), a medium shot (upper body), a full shot (full-length view of a person), a long shot (mainly background), an establishing shot or an extreme long shot (a very wide shot)

caricature a representation in words or images that deliberately exaggerates certain features of a person or thing

catalyst a person or thing that precipitates or causes a change

character a representation in a narrative, usually of a human being, although animals can be characters (sometimes with human qualities) and even abstract concepts have been made characters in a story (for example, 'Nature' or 'Fate') although again they are often given human traits

cliff-hanger an ending that is excitingly uncertain

climax a technical term used for that moment in the plot of a narrative that represents the highest point of a rising sense of tension, or a turning point that will lead to the text's resolution

coda a comment added at the end of a narrative to round off a story

collage a collection of different kinds of images jumbled together

coming-of-age novel a fiction genre often referred to by the German word *bildungsroman*, because the term was first used to describe a novel by the great German dramatist, Goethe. *Bildungsroman* literally means 'a novel of development'. A *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, follows a protagonist from childhood to the brink of adulthood, through significant experiences that shape the character. In most cases, the development is positive: the character faces adult life having learnt from experience and having become stronger as a result

complication the technical term used about that point in a narrative where a complicating factor is introduced which is going to need some kind of resolution

connotation an association or an idea suggested by a word in addition to its primary meaning

context the social, historical and cultural background of the writer or of the reader

conventions rules, often unwritten, that everyone accepts, such as the dramatic convention that a character on stage speaking a soliloquy is thinking aloud

cutscene special sequences in video games where the player has limited or no control over gameplay. Usually, cutscenes are triggered by particular actions such as completing a key task or a level, or entering a particular location in the game's universe. Cutscenes are often rendered in higher quality graphics than the rest of the game because they do not require smooth gameplay, and because of this, they can be much more creative and aesthetically detailed than the rest of the game

D

diegetic sound sound that is natural to the location or action, such as the squealing of tyres accompanying an image of a car taking a corner too fast

dialect a variety of a language used by a particular group of speakers, especially those from a particular region

dialogue the spoken words of characters in a text

dramatic irony the audience understands that the words or actions (of a character) in a play have much greater significance than the character realises

E

elegy a poem that remembers someone who has died

epigraph a short quotation used at the beginning of a text to signify its theme

epilogue the conclusion of a literary work; a postscript

eulogy a speech praising someone who has died

F

fable a short story designed to teach a moral lesson. Many fables have animal characters which are given human qualities

fandom a TV, movie, comic book and novel series or sometimes one-off title that generates a large following where fans form a subculture around the series and devote some time to their fan activities, especially in science-fiction and fantasy genres

farce a dramatic text intended to arouse laughter, often by the presentation of ridiculous and improbable situations

first-person narration the telling of a story from the point of view of a narrator who uses the first-person pronouns ('I', 'me' and 'my'). The use of such a narrator allows the reader access to the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist, but the view of the world is limited

flashback a part of a narrative which tells of an event or scene that occurred in the past

foreshadowing a narrative device that hints at something to come

framed narrative a story within a story

free verse verse that does not use conventional rhyme schemes or metrical stanzas and that does not follow the rules of particular poetic forms. It has been especially popular since the beginning of the twentieth century where it has produced some of the greatest poems in the language, as well as many mediocre efforts, but it has been used in English for decades. The translations The Psalms and of The Song of Solomon in the St James version of the Bible are examples of free verse

G

genre a kind or type. Film genres are categories of texts such as romantic comedy, thriller, horror movie and historical epic. Literary genres are categories of texts such as romance fiction, science fiction, horror fiction and fantasy

H

half-rhyme words with a similar sound and shape but not an exact rhyme

hyperbole an exaggerated statement, not intended to be taken literally

hyperfiction fiction with hyperlinks. Hyperfiction is interactive – a story that can change. By clicking on the links, readers can determine how they read the story. They become autonomous readers, independent of the writer, deciding where to go next and what to explore

I

imagery figurative language in which non-literal comparisons are made. The most common examples are similes, metaphors and personification

inference a conclusion drawn from data or evidence

internal rhyme rhyming words used within the lines of a poem, rather than at the end

irony a discrepancy between appearance and reality; what appears to be the case may actually be the opposite. Verbal irony is a use of words that points out such a discrepancy

J

juxtaposition the deliberate placing of unlike things side by side

M

melodrama originally, a play in which action and emotion are sensationally exaggerated; any situation involving exaggerated emotions

memoir a personal account of the past

metafiction fiction that is about fiction. A writer of metafiction deliberately draws attention to the fact that the work is an artefact, something made up, something constructed

metaphor an image or figure of speech in which a non-literal comparison is made between two things that are mostly unlike. The comparison identifies the one way in which they are similar. Unlike a simile, a metaphor does not compare by using the words 'like' or 'as'

mise-en-scène literally, 'put in the scene' refers to the physical elements on stage or on a film set, such as sets, lighting, costumes and props

monologue a dramatic speech by one character

montage a series of brief shots which work together to convey a particular meaning

mood the atmosphere or feeling which is evoked

motif something which is repeated in a text, such as an idea, an image, a situation or a saying

N

narrative a narrative is a type of text that tells a story by providing a sequence of events, usually arranged chronologically. Most narratives also involve characters and setting. Conventional narratives begin with an orientation which answers the questions who? where? and when? There is a complication, crisis or climax, leading to a resolution or denouement

non-diegetic sound sound that is not natural to a location or action but which is added during editing, such as a music soundtrack

O

ode a poetic form, originally from Greek literature, in which the poet makes a direct address to a person or thing. The subject matter is usually serious

omniscient narrator the narrator is all-knowing and seeing

onomatopoeia the use of words whose sounds echo the meaning, such as 'boom' or 'zap'

orientation the opening section of a narrative which introduces the characters (the who? of the story) and the setting (the where? and when?). This section may also introduce the first of the series of events that will unfold

P

parable a fictional narrative used to convey a message or moral

paradox a statement which appears to be self-contradictory

parody a work which imitates the features of another work in an exaggerated way for the purposes of humour

persona the voice of the text. It cannot be assumed that the 'I' of the text is the author's own voice. Often an author assumes a persona, or role, and speaks through that voice. Sometimes the author's own views of a subject may be different from that of the persona

personification a figure of speech in which something non-living is compared to a human being or animal

plot used to describe the pattern of events in a narrative. A plot is more than just a series of events. The writer shows how the events are connected

point of view the term used to describe different narrative perspectives

prologue an introduction before the main story begins, such as a short speech which opens a play

protagonist the main character in a narrative

R

resolution the technical term for the ending of a narrative. The term reflects the fact that narratives are structured, with a sequence of events including complications, crises and climaxes, leading to a satisfactory ending. An ending can be satisfactory even if problems remain unsolved or even if questions remain unanswered, as long as the reader feels that the writer has successfully brought the threads of the narrative together

rhetorical devices language techniques used to persuade the reader

rhetorical question a question that is asked for effect; a reply is not expected, such as: 'Are you trying to make me look foolish?'

S

satire the use of ridicule to show in a humorous way that something is silly – or even evil

setting the place and time in which a narrative is represented as happening

simile figurative language in which a comparison is made, using the words 'like' or 'as'

situational comedy comedy that arises from the absurdity of the situation created on stage

soliloquy a speech that an actor makes alone on stage. The accepted convention is that the character's thoughts are being heard. Some soliloquies are spoken directly to the audience; in other cases the audience is eavesdropping

stage directions the instructions in the text of a play to the actors, concerning such things as movement and gesture, position on stage and tone of voice. Stage directions can also refer to props, lighting and sound effects

stichomythia dialogue in alternating lines of verse, using antithesis and repetition, in imitation of Greek drama

storyboard a series of frames – like a comic strip – showing the types of shots used in a film sequence

story universe within fiction, a setting that is fictional and different from reality, but consistent within itself; for example, in some story universes, vampires are always real, whether they are the focus of the universe or not

style the manner of writing typical of a particular writer, evident in such features as word choice and register

subplot a secondary or less important plot which relates in some way to the main plot

symbol something that stands for something else; for example, a cross represents Christianity; a skull and crossbones indicates that a substance is poisonous

synecdoche a figure of speech where the name of a part of a thing is used to represent the thing as a whole

T

technical language terms used within a particular profession, trade, subject or sport

theme a central idea explored in a work. A theme may be expressed explicitly, as in the moral of a fable, but it is usually implicit, something that the reader discerns from the choices that the author makes. Different readings will see some themes as more prominent than others

third-person narration the telling of a story from the point of view of a narrator who uses the third-person pronouns ('he', 'she' and 'they'). Third-person narrative is usually omniscient or all-knowing: the narrator sees and knows everything. However, it can be limited to a particular viewpoint

tone the mood or attitude conveyed by a speaker's or writer's style

tracking shot when the camera is moving and the subject is also moving. This is different from a pan or panning shot, when the camera moves across the scene, either from side to side or up and down. Other terms to describe the way the camera moves include the zoom, which allows the view to move from, say, a long shot to a close-up shot without moving the camera; and the dolly shot, where the camera is fixed to a moving object which moves towards or away from the scene

U

unreliable narrator the voice telling a story cannot always be relied on. Especially when the voice is that of a first-person narrator, the view of the world is limited

V

voiceover the use of a narrative voice in a film. It may or may not be the voice of a character in the film. In a play, a voiceover may be the use of an off-stage voice