



Writing Centre

Literary Devices

In a literary essay, you are expected to write about *what* the author says (that is, the work's plot and theme) as well as *how* the author says it. In order to write effectively about *how* the author conveys meaning, it will help to know a few common literary devices.

It is not enough to simply identify a literary device. You are expected to explain the *impact* a literary device has on the text *as a whole*. For instance, how does a particular simile change the reader's opinion of a character or place?

Narrative Structure and Perspective

How is the story told? Is it a *linear* narrative, starting at the beginning and ending at the end? Or is it *non-linear*, starting somewhere in the middle and circling backward? Are there any flashbacks or digressions? Structural choices like these can have a variety of effects. For example, a non-linear narrative can build suspense or make the reader more sympathetic toward a character by withholding key information.

From whose *perspective* (or *point of view*) is the story told? How would the story change if it were told from a different perspective? Remember not to confuse the *author* (the real person who wrote the text) with the *narrator* of a story or novel or the *speaker* of a poem.

Characterization

Characterization is closely related to plot.

- What does the character want, and why is it important to them? Does the character help to resolve the conflict, or make it worse (either by accident or on purpose)?
- How does the character change over the course of the story? (A character who does not change, or about whom we learn very little, is sometimes described as *flat*.)
- What parts of the story helped form your opinion of the character? Pay attention to any differences between what people *say* about a character and what the character *does*.

Diction and Style

Pay special attention to the *words* the author chooses, especially if the word seems unusual or out of place. Diction is closely related to symbolism, setting, and characterization. What does a person's choice of words imply about their personality, age, culture, or social class? If a story has a first-person narrator, think about whom that narrator is "speaking" to, and how they want to be seen by others.

- *Example:* A narrator could say, "He understood the rules," "He comprehended the instructions," or "He got it." The meaning is the same, but the diction of each sentence gives us a different impression of the narrator.

Another important part of literary style is *sentence structure*. Some writers write in fragments. Like this. It builds tension. By way of contrast, some stories are narrated in long, winding sentences, and this creates a reflective mood and often provides an opportunity for dry humour.



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Comparison

- *Simile*: The girl's laugh gurgled **like** a stream.
- *Metaphor*: The girl's laugh **was** a gurgling stream.
- *Juxtaposition*: The judge kept speaking solemnly as the child was dragged kicking and screaming from the courtroom.

In the first two figures of speech, the author is comparing the *literal* subject of the sentence (the girl) to another object (a stream) based on an abstract quality (the sound of running water). A **simile** makes the comparison explicitly (using *like* or *as*), whereas a **metaphor** does so implicitly. In a **juxtaposition**, the author is accentuating the difference between two objects or ideas (here, age and youth or power and powerlessness).

Symbols and Motifs

We call something “symbolic” when it has a strong, non-literal meaning. These meanings vary widely by culture, so take the author’s culture into account when interpreting symbols. For example, in Canada, the colour white is associated with purity, weddings, and happiness, but in Korea, it is associated with death. However, not every writer makes use of these associations; the colour white may not have any special meaning at all!

Is there any image, phrase, or location that comes up over and over? A *motif* is any element that acquires extra significance through repetition. Take note of the way the object changes over the course of the text.

If you think an object or character represents an abstract idea, a political movement, or anything else, prove it. Otherwise, assume that a cigar is just a cigar.

Irony

In *verbal irony*, a statement is understood to mean the *opposite* of its literal meaning. Verbal irony can be light and funny or angry and sarcastic. It is a key element in satire (literary works that ridicule a political institution or belief system).

In *dramatic irony*, the reader or audience knows something that a character doesn't know yet (e.g., Juliet is only pretending to be dead; Cesario is really Viola in disguise). Dramatic irony is important for building comedy, tragedy, and suspense.



Figure 1. Verbal irony (comic by KC Green, 2013, <http://gunshowcomic.com/648>)