

Canadian Academy  
English Department

## Prose Fiction Techniques

The following list of literary technique definitions may help you analyze how a novelist or short story writer makes meaning.

### A Few Literary Techniques to Consider:

In the body of your literature essays and your commentaries, you will be discussing the methods that authors use to convey their message or to achieve their purpose. Some of the possible ideas that you might check for are listed below:

Technique:	Definition and/or What you should ask yourself
<b>Action:</b>	The events that happen in a story. The action can be used to move the plot along. See “ <b>Plot</b> .”
<b>Allusion:</b>	A reference to a historical event or another literary work. Ask yourself, "What effect does the author achieve with this reference?" “How does the reference convince you?”
<b>Alliteration:</b>	Alliteration is the repetition of the first consonant sound in a line of prose or verse. It is often used to indicate beauty—however, in <i>Macbeth</i> , it is a mark of the evil witches.
<b>Antagonist:</b>	An antagonist is the character or force that opposes the <b>protagonist</b> in the story. By standing in the protagonist’s way, the antagonist can create tension in the story.
<b>Anthropomorphism:</b>	Anthropomorphism is when a writer gives an animal (or other living thing) human characteristics. (The technique is much like <b>personification</b> —with the focus here on “living things.”)
<b>Apostrophe:</b>	The direct and explicit address either to an absent person or to an abstract or nonhuman entity. The technique functions much like a confidant, in that it allows the character to give voice to her thoughts.
<b>Atmosphere:</b>	The overall feeling in the passage. Ask yourself, “How does the feeling in the work affect the reader?” <b>Mood</b> is similar; however, <b>tone</b> is different—as tone describes an attitude that the writer wants you to take toward a character or subject.
<b>Cacophony:</b>	In texts, cacophony is an unpleasant set of sounds that hurt the ear. In general, a cacophony often parallels another unpleasant aspect of the poem—perhaps an unpleasant theme or speaker. See “ <b>Dissonance</b> .”

<b>Character:</b>	<p>Characters are any of the persons involved in a story, novel, or drama—or the distinguishing moral qualities of a character.</p> <p><b>Flat character:</b> A character whose characteristics can be summed up in one or two traits—or which does not change over the course of the story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Round character:</b> a character whose qualities are complex—or which changes during the story.</li> </ul>
<b>Characterization:</b>	The method a writer uses to reveal the personality of a character in a literary work: Methods may include (1) by what the character says about himself or herself; (2) by what others reveal about the character; and (3) by the character's own actions.
<b>Climax:</b>	The "great event" of the story. How does this resolution of the conflict affect you? See " <b>Plot</b> ."
<b>Close Reading:</b>	The detailed analysis of complex interrelations and ambiguities (multiple meanings) of both the figurative and verbal components within a work. This is done both within texts and with short passages of text (such as with commentaries).
<b>Comparison:</b>	Comparison is when the author presents two "things" or "characters" as similar. Ask yourself, why would the author want you to see this similarity?
<b>Confidant:</b>	A confidant is a character in drama or a novel who plays only a minor role in the action, but serves the protagonist as a trusted friend, to whom he or she confesses intimate thoughts, problems, and feelings. The character serves an effective way to reveal the protagonist's thoughts.
<b>Conflict:</b>	A struggle between two sides. Consider which side the author wants you to take?
<b>Connotation:</b>	When considering the diction used in a literary work, you will want to consider the connotation of a word. While the word "murder" means killing someone—"murder" also connotes blame. See " <b>Denotation</b> " and " <b>Tone</b> ."
<b>Contrast:</b>	Differences--between two ideas, characters, images, etc. Usually the author wants you to take one of the two sides presented. This is similar to <b>juxtaposition</b> .
<b>Denotation:</b>	Denotation indicates what the word means in the dictionary. While that is the "correct" meaning of the word—that definition often misses the "connotation" of the word—or the meaning behind the same word. See " <b>Connotation</b> " and " <b>Tone</b> ."

<b>Denouement:</b>	See “ <b>Resolution.</b> ”
<b>Dialogue:</b>	The words spoken in the text. Is it quick or lively to create excitement? Does it slow down the reading to make you pay attention to important information?
<b>Diction:</b>	The words chosen by the author. Why does the author choose that word and not another? For instance, "gal" and "lady" both indicate females--but why would the author choose “lady”--but not “gal.” What feelings do you have toward the word chosen?
<b>Discourse Analysis:</b>	The analysis of the use of language in a running discourse, continued over a sequence of sentences, involving the interaction of the writer and the read in a specific situational context—adhering to the framework of social and cultural conventions.
<b>Fable:</b>	A short and simple story that gives a moral lesson.
<b>Falling action:</b>	The falling action is the series of events, which take place after the climax. See “ <b>Plot.</b> ”
<b>Figurative speech:</b>	Written words that create pictures in your mind. What do the images make you think of? See “ <b>Imagery,</b> ” “ <b>Metaphor,</b> ” “ <b>Simile,</b> ” and “ <b>Personification.</b> ”
<b>Flashback:</b>	A point in the story when the narrator tells a story that happens before the beginning of the play or story. The flashback can reveal information that can increase the tension in the story.
<b>Foil:</b>	A foil is a character, which is placed in sharp contrast to another character—in order to highlight the other character’s qualities. The term comes from effect created when placing a diamond on a piece of gold foil. The foil serves to make the diamond shine all the more.
<b>Foreshadowing:</b>	In drama or novels, writers use foreshadowing to increase tension in the work by giving hints about what might happen in the future.
<b>Genre:</b>	A type of literature—such as the following literary genres: drama, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.
<b>Hyperbole:</b>	Exaggeration. Why would the author exaggerate his/her point? How does it make you feel?
<b>Imagery:</b>	Phrases that engage your senses. While the technique is called “imagery” an example is called an “image.” There are seven types of imagery: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Visual:</b> How do these pictures contribute to a message?</li> </ul>

- **Auditory:** How do these sounds make you feel?
- **Tactile:** How do you react to the texture?
- **Olfactory:** How do the smells make you react?
- **Gustatory:** How do you react to the tastes?
- **Organic:** Images of body functions—such as hearts beating.
- **Kinesthetic:** Descriptions of how muscles or the body moves.

**Juxtaposition:** Differences--between two ideas, characters, or images—pointed out by placing the different aspects next to each other. Usually the author wants you to prefer one of the two sides presented. Often, the writer will end with the idea that he wants you to take. See “**Contrast.**”

**Leitmotif:** A recurring idea in a longer work—which is used to develop the story. Leitmotifs often represent other ideas.

**Mentor:** A character who serves as a guide for the protagonist—contributing to the development of the protagonist.

**Metaphor:** An idea that is compared directly to another idea—for instance “a bear market.” How might the comparison support the author's purpose?

**Mood:** See “**Atmosphere.**”

**Myth:** A myth is an unverifiable story—often involving gods or goddesses. Myths are often used as **allusions**.

**Narrator:** The “voice” that tells a short story or novel—see **Narrative Voice**. See “**speaker**” for how the technique is used in poetry.

**Narrative Voice:** The “voice” that tells the story.

#### **First-person Narrator**

- **First-person point of view:** The story is told by one of the characters, using the first person: “I.” This type of narrator only knows his or her own thoughts—and reports the actions of other characters in the story. He may be reliable or unreliable.

#### **Third-Person Narrators:**

- **Third-person Omniscient:** The narrator acts as an observer of the other characters—using “third-person” terms such as “he” or “she.” “Omniscient” means that the narrator sees both the actions and understands the thoughts of many of the characters. This narrator, being able to understand the thoughts of many, acts like a god—knowing all.

- **Third-person Objective:** The narrator tells the story in the third person; however, the narrator only reports what his characters say or do—she knows neither the reasons for their behavior nor their private thoughts or feelings. She may be reliable or unreliable.
- **Third-Person Limited:** The narrator tells the story in the third person, but is “limited” by having a complete knowledge of only one character’s thoughts. For all other characters, the narrator can only report their actions.

### **Reliability**

- **Reliable:** a reliable narrator that the audience can trust—providing information that the audience depend on when making judgments about characters or attitudes
- **Unreliable:** an unreliable narrator provides information that the audience must question. The technique can be used to discredit early opinions of main characters.

**Onomatopoeia:** A word whose sound resembles the sound it denotes, such as “buzz” or “bang.” In a larger sense, a passage that corresponds to or strongly suggest in any way—in size, movement, or force. For instance, a narrow poem with jagged edges about climbing a mountain may be using onomatopoeia. Ask: “why is the author using words to suggest the physical or non-physical characteristics of the subject?”

**Parallelism:** Two ideas or themes being developed in similar ways. One might be physical—the other mental. By structuring ideas in this way, the writer can make the non-physical easier to understand or he can make the theme easier to grasp.

**Persona:** In literature, sometimes an author will insert herself into the text—in such a way that she has created a “fictional voice.” That “author-like” fictional voice is called a “persona.” It is a specific type of “**character**” in which is found in either prose or poetry.

**Personification:** When a non-human object or animal is given human characteristics. Often the similarity between the object and the human helps to explain the reason for the writer’s comparison.

**Plot:** The structure of a story or the sequence in which the author arranges events in a story. The structure of a five-act play often includes the rising action, the climax, the falling action, and the resolution. The plot may have a protagonist who is opposed by antagonist, creating what is called, conflict. A plot may include flashback or it may include a subplot, which is a mirror image of the main plot.

<b>Point of View:</b>	<p>The angle of vision from which a story is told.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>First-person point of view:</b> The story is told by one of the characters, using the first person: "I."</li> <li>• <b>Omniscient point of view:</b> The narrator tells the story, using the third person. He knows what all characters are thinking and can explain why they act as they do.</li> <li>• <b>Limited omniscient point of view:</b> The narrator tells the story in the third person, but limits himself to a complete knowledge of one character in the story, knowing only what that character thinks, feels, and decides.</li> <li>• <b>Objective point of view:</b> The narrator tells the story in the third person; however, the narrator only reports what his characters say or do—he knows neither the reasons for their behavior nor their private thoughts or feelings.</li> </ul>
<b>Prose:</b>	Prose includes both fiction and non-fiction. It excludes verse/poetry.
<b>Protagonist:</b>	A protagonist is the hero or central character of a story. The antagonist often opposes her. It is often through the development of the protagonist that you can better understand the theme of the work.
<b>Register:</b>	<p>The register of a writer's work can be formal or informal. Ask yourself, "Why would the author select a certain register?"</p> <p>Often, informal language might invite us to see the writer as a friend, while a formal register often helps create respect.</p>
<b>Repetition:</b>	Why would the author emphasize that word or phrase by repeating it? What is he/she trying to get you to pay attention to?
<b>Resolution:</b>	The resolution is the point in a text to which the entire novel has been leading. It is the logical outcome of everything that has come before it. The conclusion stems from the nature of the characters. See " <b>Plot</b> ."
<b>Rising action:</b>	<p>The rising action is part of a drama, which begins with the exposition and sets the stage for the climax. In a five-act play, the exposition provides information about the characters and the events, which occurred before the action of the play began. A conflict often develops between the <b>protagonist</b> and an <b>antagonist</b>. The action reaches a high point and results in a <b>climax</b>, the turning point in the play. See "<b>Plot</b>."</p>
<b>Setting:</b>	The time and place of the passage. How do the time and place of the scene affect the message? The setting may be parallel to the theme or purpose of the passage.

<b>Simile:</b>	An idea that is compared to another idea—using the words “as” or “like.” How might the comparison suggest you follow the writer’s logical comparison?
<b>Structure:</b>	You can analyze the structure of a passage—from the beginning to the end. You will want to take notice the order that information is presented—and other details. For instance, in a poem about parachuting, the lack of any punctuation until the final line might parallel the free fall—without stop.
<b>Style:</b>	Style includes the many literary techniques that contribute to the success of a literary work. They include the diction, the tone, the structure, and other key techniques that altogether contribute to the effectiveness of the written work.
<b>Subtext:</b>	The ideas existing below the literal textual interpretation—constructed primarily through literary elements.
<b>Symbol:</b>	The use of a widely recognized object to represent an idea. How might the author be using this idea or object to get you to think about a topic? An American flag is often used as a symbol, whereas a red cat is not.
<b>Syntax:</b>	Syntax is the sequence in which words are ordered in phrases or sentences. Ask yourself, “What effect does the writer achieve by giving the information in this order?” The sophistication or simplicity of the sentence may well help convince you.

#### Understanding Syntax: Five Types of Sentences that Create Effects

##### Simple and Complex Sentences

Sentences come in simple and direct forms as well as complex and interrelated forms. Both types create effects.

- **Simple Sentence:** Contains only an independent clause with both a main subject and main verb (with no subordinators or subordinate clauses). **Possible uses:** The simple nature of this sentence can parallel a simple idea. A short simple sentence can demand the reader’s attention—especially when placed in contrast to many long and complex sentences.
  - Example: “**But I am not tragically colored.**” (p. 827) Or “**But the piece ends.**” (p. 828)
- **Complex Sentence:** Contains at least an independent clause (main subject and main verb) as well as *a subordinate clause (subordinator + subject + verb)*. **Possible uses:** The increasing complexity of the sentence can parallel the complexity of an idea. The relationship between ideas can also be established with complex sentences.
  - Example: “**Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less.**” (p. 827)

##### Loose and Periodic Sentences

Every sentence has a main point. Where the main point is placed in the sentence can create different effects

- **Loose Sentence:** Situates the main idea (in the sentence’s independent clause) towards the beginning of the sentence—and is usually followed by the *dependent clauses*

*afterwards*. Loose sentences are the most natural for native English speakers. We almost always write and speak by discussing the main topic first—and sometimes modifying that main topic later in the sentence. **Possible uses:** Loose sentences are often used for a conversational effect—or to make the information easy to understand. Because most speakers are used to the main information coming first, they can read this information quickly.

- Example: **No brown spectre pulls up a chair beside *me* when I sit down to eat.** (p. 828)

- **Periodic Sentence:** Situates the main idea (the independent clause) at the end of the sentence—with the depending clauses coming at the beginning. At the beginning of the sentence, the reader doesn't know what the writer's main point is. An occasional periodic sentence is not only dramatic but persuasive: even if the reader does not agree with the writer's conclusion, the reader will read the evidence first with an open mind. Alternatively, if a writer uses a loose sentence with hostile readers, the readers will probably close their minds before considering any of the evidence. A good periodic sentence will force the reader to slow down—and might even cause the reader to reread/reconsider the sentence. **Possible uses:** Periodic sentences are often used to highlight a major point—or to surprise a reader. By hiding the information until the end of the sentence, the writer can lead a reader to agree with or consider his opinion by using a periodic sentence.

- Example: **For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is *The New World Cabaret* with a white person, my color comes.** (p. 828)

#### Rhetorical Questions

- **Rhetorical Question:** Pose a question that leads the reader to only one answer. The reader is disarmed—being forced to agree with the writer. Often the writer has led up to the rhetorical question by giving all the necessary details so that the reader is left to passively nod in agreement. **Possible uses:** The main uses are either to gain the reader's agreement—or to have the reader leave a piece of writing considering the writer's main ideas.
  - **Example:** Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—who knows?

**Theme:** The theme is what the work is about. It gives the work unity or focus.

**Tone:** Tone is the attitude the writer wants you to take toward a subject or a character. Tone is often created through the diction, imagery, details, language level (register), and syntax that the writer chooses. It is different from **atmosphere** and **mood**—which both describe the more general feeling of the passage.

These are some of the attitude words that you can use to describe tone:

Angry	Tired	Confused	Sentimental
Sharp	Bitter	Childish	Complimentary
Upset	Dreamy	Peaceful	Condescending
Silly	Restrained	Mocking	Sympathetic
Boring	Proud	Objective	Contemptuous
Afraid	Dramatic	Vibrant	Apologetic
Happy	Sad	Frivolous	Humorous
Hollow	Cold	Audacious	Horrific
Joyful	Urgent	Shocking	Sarcastic
Allusive	Joking	Somber	Nostalgic



Sweet Vexed Pitiful	Poignant Detached Seductive	Giddy Provocative Benevolent	Zealous Irreverent Didactic
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**Understatement:** The opposite of hyperbole: representing something as much less in important that it actually is. Usually the writer’s effect is to create irony—such as when Mark Twain wrote: “The reports of my death a greatly exaggerated.”

**Voice:** That sense of a pervasive authorial presence—or intelligence and moral sensibility, who has invented, ordered, and presented the literary characters and material in just this way.