

Literary Elements Handout

The following are literary elements and other terms that you will be held accountable for throughout our short story unit and each novel/play unit we complete this year. Know them backwards and forwards!!!

1. **CHARACTER** – This is a person, animal, or an object in fiction or drama. Characters are described based upon their personalities, actions, appearance, and thoughts. There is a main character who is the most important character in a story and sets the plot in motion [protagonist], and there are minor characters who are not as important to the plot as the main character. The character who blocks the protagonist or (main character) is called the antagonist. Sometimes the antagonist is a villain who is a person, but an antagonist can also be a force opposing the main character. Character traits are described in the following terms: Characters that change are dynamic or round, while characters that do not change are referred to as static or flat.

- Characterization is the means by which writers reveal character. A quality that a character exhibits is called a character trait. This trait can be indicated by the character's statements, actions, or thoughts.

For instance, an author may create a fictitious character by simply describing the character:

Karen was small for her age and inclined to plumpness. Her blue eyes viewed the people and events around her with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. She was not a woman, but she was past being a child; too sophisticated for toys, she might still, on impulse, turn a somersault on the living rug.

An author may also reveal a character through his speech or actions.

"But why can't I go?" Karen wailed. "Everyone else is going. You never let me go anywhere!" You just don't want me to grow up and have fun!" Karen wheeled around and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

An author may give the reactions and opinions of other characters.

"I've known Karen for a long time, ever since first grade. We've been best friends since last year. I like her because...well, I guess it's because she is always so happy and sure of herself and she's good at things like baseball, and swimming and painting and stuff." Joanie paused, then added, "Everybody at school likes her."

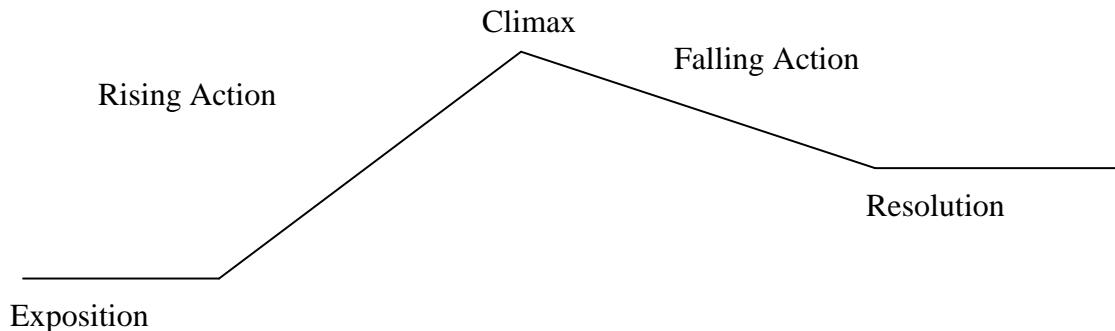
An author may show the character's inner thoughts and feelings.

The sunlight trickled between the slates of the bamboo blinds. Karen stretched luxuriously, pleasantly aware of the tingling sensation in her muscles. She really ought to get up, she thought. Sally was coming over at eleven. Maybe she should make some sandwiches so they could eat out in the backyard. Mrs. Henley was taking them to the beach in the afternoon. She should finish that letter to Peggy...maybe she would tonight...if she remembered...and if she had time.

2. **PLOT** – Plot is the series of events that make up the story or drama/play. The parts of plot are: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action and Resolution/Denouement.

- **Exposition** – The part of a work of fiction where readers learn about the characters and the conflicts they experience. It is sometimes referred to as the basic situation; provides needed background information.
- **Rising Action** -the suspense builds because complications arise that make the conflict more difficult for the main characters to resolve
- **Climax** – or the turning point of the action, this is when the reader's interest reaches its highest point
- **Falling Action** - This is the part of the plot that occurs after the climax has been reached and the resolution of the conflict has occurred
- **Resolution** – Solution to the conflict. This is often called denouement; loose ends are tied up; end of the story/conflict

Plot Diagram:



3. **CONFLICT** – is a central problem around which a story revolves. There are 2 types of conflict that can occur:

- (1) Internal conflict occurs within a person or character
- (2) External conflict occurs between a person & another person, a machine, nature, or society.

Conflict is necessary to every story. In short stories, there is usually one major conflict. In longer stories, there could be several conflicts. Conflict adds excitement and suspense to a story. The conflict usually becomes clear to the beginning of a story. As the plot unfolds, the reader starts to wonder what will happen next and how the characters will handle the situation. Many readers enjoy trying to predict the final outcome.

As you read a story:

1. identify the main characters
2. decide what conflict they face
3. look for steps they take to settle that conflict
4. see if the steps cause other conflict
5. watch for clues and try to predict what the characters will do
6. enjoy the buildup of suspense
7. put yourself in the story
8. decide if you would have solved the conflict in the same way

4. **SETTING**– The time and place in which a story takes place. Details of a setting include:

- **Time/Historical Period** – the general period of the plot and the main location of the story (ex – the story took place during the 1960's at Woodstock)
- **Physical Features** – what the place/location of the setting looks like physically (ex – mountains, streams and fields of grass)
- **Geographic Location** – the actual location of the place (ex – the story took place in China Town of NYC)

5. **FORESHADOWING** – This device uses clues that hint as to things that will happen later in the plot.

6. **POINT OF VIEW** – The voice telling the story is the narrator. Point of view refers to the voice in which the story is told. It is the set of eyes the author uses to let the reader see the action unfold. The three points of view or voices follow; however, of the three, first and third persons are the most commonly used in writing stories:

- **First-Person** – One can spot first person point of view by the pronouns “I, we, & us” used by the narrator. With the use of first person, the narrator is an actual character in the story. His or her knowledge is, therefore, limited to that one person’s perspective.
- **Third-Person** – When writing in third person, the narrator uses names of characters & pronouns like “he, him, she, her, they, & them.” If the narrator relates thoughts of only one character in the story, it is **third person limited**, as in limited to the knowledge of the thought process for that one character. In **third person omniscient** point of view, the narrator knows and relates not only action of all characters in the story, but of each character’s thoughts as well, thus the term omniscient or all-knowing.
- **Second-Person** – A narrator using second person is rather rare. The pronoun “you” is used in this type of writing. An example follows: “You feel the salt

air on your skin. You feel alone and isolated on the beach; yet, you feel deep inside of yourself that you are not alone.”

7. **THEME** – is the underlying focus of a story. Subjects or main ideas of works can often be expressed in one word, e.g., love. But, a theme is underlying; a theme is something the writer wants the reader discover. Some universal literary themes are:

- Heroes must undergo trials and endure losses before they can claim their rightful kingdom.
- Arrogance and pride can bring destruction
- When the rule of law is broken, chaos and anarchy will result.
- Love will endure and triumph over evil.

There may be more than one theme in a literary work.

8. **MOOD** – Mood happens when authors use descriptive words/adjectives to create a certain feeling or mood in the reader of the story. Examples of mood might be: ominous, happy, sad, etc. Setting often helps create mood in the reader.

9. **TONE** – Tone is the attitude that the author conveys about his/her subject through his/her choice of words. Examples of tone follow: serious / light-hearted / bitter / angry / ironic / sarcastic

10. **PARABLE** – This is a story with a moral or lesson about life.

11. **IRONY** – This is the difference or gap between what is said and what is actually meant in a text. The 3 forms of irony are:

- **Verbal irony** – This is when a character or narrator says something but means exactly the opposite. An example might be, "Boy, she is really pretty" said about a muddy puppy with burs in her fur.
- **Situational irony** – This is the difference between what appears to be and what actually is true. It is often demonstrated by an actual result being different than what is expected. For example, a story's main character could find the bad guy & bring him to justice, but walk out of the police station and be killed by a train.
- **Dramatic irony** – This occurs when the reader/observer knows something that the character in a film or written text does not know. For instance, a woman might think that her husband has forgotten her birthday, but the reader/audience knows that he has really bought her a diamond ring that is hidden in her dessert at dinner.

12. **PROSE** – The ordinary form of spoken or written language is prose. It does not contain a metrical structure like poetry or verse.

13. **SYMBOL** - This occurs when something specific is used to represent something abstract. Example: Moaning wind representing loneliness

14. **IMAGERY** – A set of mental pictures or *images*. The use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas. To make an imaginary world seem real, an author often makes use of words and phrases that appeal to the senses. These words and phrases, called images, help a reader mentally experience what the characters in the literary selection are actually experiencing. A well-written description should arouse a particular response or emotion in the reader's imagination. Sensory imagery is developed using the five senses: sight, sounds, taste, touch and smell.

For example: *The hot July sun beat relentlessly down, casting an orange glare over the farm buildings, the fields, the pond. Even the usually cool green willows bordering the pond hung wilted and dry. Our sun-baked backs ached for relief. We quickly pulled off our sweaty clothes and plunged into the pond, but the tepid water only stifled us and we soon climbed onto the brown, dusty bank. Our parched throats longed for something cool--a strawberry ice, a tall frosted glass of lemonade.*

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE TERMS

Figurative language occurs when writers use language so that words do not mean exactly what they say. The words have more meaning than what might be found in a dictionary if you looked up the word. There is an easy way and a hard way to look at figurative language:

- **Easier** - Figurative language or speech contains images. The writer or speaker describes something through the use of unusual comparisons, for effect, interest, and to make things clearer. The result of using this technique is the creation of interesting images.
- **Harder** - Figurative language is not intended to be interpreted in a literal sense. Appealing to the imagination, figurative language provides new ways of looking at the world. It always makes use of a comparison between different things. Figurative language compares two things that are different in enough ways so that their similarities, when pointed out, are interesting, unique and/or surprising.

1. **ALLITERATION** – This occurs when words are close together that begin with the same consonant sounds. An example is "slippery sullen shadows."

2. **ONOMATOPOEIA** – This occurs when a word actually sounds like its meaning. Examples are: buzz, tick, splash, meow.

3. **METAPHOR** - A comparison of two things that are not usually compared in order to suggest the likeness between them. An example is "That girl is a brick house!" or "Her hair was silk."

4. **SIMILE** – This is a comparison of two things using the words "like" or "as." An example is "Mrs B's heart is like a cold, black lump of coal when students talk while she is teaching."

5. **PERSONIFICATION** – The writer gives objects or natural forces human feelings & characteristics. For example, "The stuffed bear smiled as the boy held hugged him close."

6. **HYPERBOLE** – This is an exaggeration. It puts a picture into the "reader" mind. Hyperbole is frequently used in humorous writing. Hyperbole is often used in descriptions. It emphasizes some qualities of a person or thing by exaggerating them, as in this selection:

The skin on her face was as thin and drawn as tight as the skin of onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two picks —Flannery O'Connor, "Parker's Back"

Hyperbole can also be used to describe a person's emotions. In the following selection, a boy is pulling a man up from a deep hole. See how hyperbole is used to describe the boy's thoughts as he struggles:

It was not a mere man he was holding, but a giant; or a block of granite. The pull was unendurable. The pain unendurable. —James Ramsey Ullman, "A Boy and a Man"

Hyperbole is used for emphasis or humorous effect. With hyperbole, an author makes a point by overstating it.

7. **IDIOM** - or idiomatic expression refers to an expression in one language that cannot be matched or directly translated word-for-word in another language. For instance, the English expression, "She has a bee in her bonnet," meaning "she is obsessed," cannot be literally translated into another language word for word. It's a non-literal idiomatic expression, akin to "She is green with envy." Another example: *A piece of cake* is an expression that doesn't really have anything to do with eating, but rather refers to how easy some task might be.