

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN AP LITERATURE EXAMS

TERMS USED IN ESSAY INSTRUCTIONS

The following are the most important terms used in the instructions for essay questions. All of them have been used at least once and often more frequently. You should be familiar with the meaning of these terms.

- **allusion**

A reference in a work of literature to something outside the work, especially to a well-known historical or literary event, person, or work. Lorraine Hansberry's title *A Raisin in the Sun* is an allusion to a phrase in a poem by Langston Hughes. When T. S. Eliot writes, "To have squeezed the universe into a ball" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he is alluding to the lines "Let us roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball" in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." In *Hamlet*, when Horatio says, "ere the mightiest Julius fell," the allusion is to the death of Julius Caesar.

- **attitude**

A speaker's, author's, or character's disposition toward or opinion of a subject. For example, Hamlet's attitude toward Gertrude is a mixture of affection and revulsion, changing from one to the other within a single scene. Jane Austen's attitude toward Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* combines respect for his wit and intelligence with disapproval of his failure to take sufficient responsibility for the rearing of all of his daughters.

- **details (also choice of details)**

Details are items or parts that make up a larger picture or story. Chaucer's "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* is celebrated for its use of a few details to bring the characters to life. The miller, for example, is described as being brawny and big-boned, able to win

wrestling contests or to break a door with his head, and having a wart on his nose on which grew a "tuft of hairs red as the bristles of a sow's ears."

- **devices of sound**

The techniques of deploying the sound of words, especially in poetry. Among devices of sound are rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia. These are defined below under metrical terms. The devices are used for many reasons, including to create a general effect of pleasant or of discordant sound, to imitate another sound, or to reflect a meaning.

- **diction**

Word choice. Nearly all essay questions on a passage of prose or a poem will ask you to talk about diction or about "techniques" that include diction. Any word that is important to the meaning and the effect of a passage can be used in your essay. Often several words with a similar effect are worth discussion, such as George Eliot's use in *Adam Bede* of "sunny afternoons," "slow waggon," and "bargains" to make the leisure of bygone days appealing. These words are also *details*.

- **figurative language**

Writing that uses figures of speech (as opposed to literal language or that which is actual or specifically denoted) such as metaphor, simile, and irony. Figurative language uses words to mean something other than their literal meaning. "The black bat night has flown" is figurative, with the metaphor comparing night and a bat. "Night is over" says the same thing without figurative language. No real bat is or has been on the scene, but night is like a bat because it is dark.

- **imagery**

The images of a literary work; the sensory details of a work; the figurative language of a work. Imagery has several definitions, but the two that are paramount are the visual, auditory, or tactile images evoked by the words of a literary work or the images that figurative language evokes. When an AP question asks you to

discuss the images or imagery of a work, you should look especially carefully at the sensory details and the metaphors and similes of a passage. Some diction (word choice) is also imagery, but not all diction evokes sensory responses.

- **irony**

A figure of speech in which intent and actual meaning differ, characteristically praise for blame or blame for praise; a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement of its own obvious meaning. The term irony implies a discrepancy. In *verbal irony* (saying the opposite of what one means), the discrepancy is between statement and meaning. Sometimes, irony may simply understate, as in "Men have died from time to time . . ." When Mr. Bennet, who loathes Wickham, says he is perhaps his "favorite" son-in-law, he is using irony.

- **metaphor**

A figurative use of language in which a comparison is expressed without the use of a comparative term like "as," "like," or "than." A simile would say, "night is like a black bat"; a metaphor would say, "the black bat night." When Romeo says, "It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," his metaphors compare her window to the east and Juliet to the sun.

- **narrative techniques**

The methods involved in telling a story; the procedures used by a writer of stories or accounts. Narrative techniques is a general term (like "devices," or "resources of language") which asks you to discuss the procedures used in the telling of a story. Examples of the techniques you might use are point of view, manipulation of time, dialogue, or interior monologue.

- **omniscient point of view**

The vantage point of a story in which the narrator can know, see, and report whatever he or she chooses. The narrator is free to describe the thoughts of any of the characters, to skip about in time or place, or to speak directly to the reader. Most of the

novels of Austen, Dickens, or Hardy employ the omniscient point of view.

- **point of view**

Any of several possible vantage points from which a story is told. The point of view may be omniscient, limited to that of a single character, or limited to that of several characters. And there are other possibilities. The teller may use the first person (as in *Great Expectations* or *Wuthering Heights*) or the third person (as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or *A Tale of Two Cities*). Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* uses the point of view of all of the members of the Bundren family and others as well in the first person, while in *Wuthering Heights*, Mr. Lockwood tells us the story that Nelly Dean tells him, a first-person narration reported by a second first-person narrator.

- **resources of language**

A general phrase for the linguistic devices or techniques that a writer can use. A question calling for the "resources of language" invites a student to discuss the style and rhetoric of a passage. Such topics as diction, syntax, figurative language, and imagery are all examples of resources of language.

- **rhetorical techniques**

The devices used in effective or persuasive language. The number of rhetorical techniques, like that of the resources of language, is long and runs from apostrophe to zeugma. The more common examples include devices like contrast, repetitions, paradox, understatement, sarcasm, and rhetorical question.

- **satire**

Writing that seeks to arouse a reader's disapproval of an object by ridicule. Satire is usually comedy that exposes errors with an eye to correct vice and folly. A classical form, satire is found in the verse of Alexander Pope or Samuel Johnson, the plays of Ben Jonson or Bernard Shaw, and the novels of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, or Joseph Heller.

- **setting**

The background to a story; the physical location of a play, story, or novel. The setting of a narrative will normally involve both time and place. The setting of *A Tale of Two Cities* is London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution, but the setting of *Waiting for Godot* is impossible to pin down specifically.

- **simile**

A directly expressed comparison; a figure of speech comparing two objects, usually with "like," "as," or "than." It is easier to recognize a simile than a metaphor because the comparison is explicit: my love is like a fever; my love is deeper than a well; my love is as dead as a doornail. The plural of "simile" is "similes" not "similies."

- **strategy (or rhetorical strategy)**

The management of language for a specific effect. The strategy or rhetorical strategy of a poem is the planned placing of elements to achieve an effect. For example, Shakespeare's sonnet 29, "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," spends the first nine lines describing the speaker's discontent, then three describing the happiness the thought of the loved-one brings, all in a single sentence. The effect of this contrast is to intensify the feelings of relief and joy in lines 10–12. The rhetorical strategy of most love poems is deployed to convince the loved-one to return the speaker's love. By appealing to the loved-one's sympathy ("If you don't return my love, my heart will break."), or by flattery ("How could I not love someone as beautiful as you?"), or by threat ("When you're old, you'll be sorry you refused me."), the lover attempts to persuade the loved-one to love in return.

- **structure**

The arrangement of materials within a work; the relationship of the parts of a work to the whole; the logical divisions of a work. The most common principles of structure are series (A, B, C, D, E), contrast (A vs. B, C vs. D, E vs. A), and repetition (AA, BB, AB). The most common units of structure are—play: scene, act; novel: chapter; poem: line, stanza.

- style

The mode of expression in language; the characteristic manner of expression of an author. Many elements contribute to style, and if a question calls for a discussion of style or of “stylistic techniques,” you can discuss diction, syntax, figurative language, imagery, selection of detail, sound effects, and tone, using the ones that are appropriate. Notice that there are several phrases used in the essay questions that invite you to choose among several possible topics: “devices of style,” “narrative techniques,” “rhetorical techniques,” “stylistic techniques,” and “resources of language” are all phrases that call for a consideration of more than one technique but do not specify what techniques you must discuss. Usually one of the two essay questions on a set passage will use one of these phrases, while the other question will specify the tasks by asking for “diction, imagery, and syntax” or a similar three or four topics.

- symbol

Something that is simultaneously itself and a sign of something else. Winter, darkness, and cold are real things, but in literature they are also likely to be used as symbols of death. A paper lantern and a light bulb are real things, but in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, they are also symbols of Blanche’s attempt to escape from reality and reality itself. Yorick’s skull is a symbol of human mortality, and Melville’s white whale is certainly a symbol, but exactly what it symbolizes has yet to be agreed upon.

- syntax

The structure of a sentence; the arrangement of words in a sentence. A discussion of syntax in your essay could include such considerations as the length or brevity of the sentences, the kinds of sentences (questions, exclamations, declarative sentences, rhetorical questions—or periodic or loose; simple, complex, or compound). Syntax is often an issue on the English language exam. It has also been used frequently in recent essay questions on the AP literature exams, since it is clear that many students are not prepared to write about syntax. Until this defect has been

repaired, syntax questions will continue to appear regularly in both the multiple-choice and essay sections of the test.

- theme

The main thought expressed by a work. Essay questions may ask for discussion of the theme or themes of a work or may use the words “meaning” or “meanings.” The open question frequently asks you to relate a discussion on one subject to a “meaning of the work as a whole.” When preparing the novels and plays you might use on the open question, be sure to consider what theme or themes you would write about if you are asked to talk about a “meaning of the work.” The question is much harder to answer for some works than others. I’m not sure what I would say is the meaning of *Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *Waiting for Godot*. But I have much less trouble defining a theme in works like *Brave New World* or *Animal Farm*.

- tone

The manner in which an author expresses his or her attitude; the intonation of the voice that expresses meaning. Tone is described by adjectives, and the possibilities are nearly endless. Often a single adjective will not be enough, and tone may change from chapter to chapter or even line to line. Tone is the result of allusion, diction, figurative language, imagery, irony, symbol, syntax, and style to cite only the relevant words on this list. In the Wordsworth passage on the 1992 exam, the tone moves from quiet to apprehensive to confident to exuberant to terrified to panicked to uncertain to resolute in only twenty-five lines.

Exercise on Terms Used in Essay Instructions

Read carefully the following well-known sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” by John Keats. The title alludes to Keats’s first reading of the sixteenth-century poet George Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad*.

D. "western islands"—2, 3, and 5. The comparison now likens poems to islands; the poems have been written by bards devoted to Apollo.

E. "Apollo"—1, 7. The allusion is to the Greek god of poetry. Since we assume that Apollo represents poetry, we can also call this a symbol.

F. "like some watcher of the skies"—2, 3, 6. The figure or image here compares the poet to an astronomer. This is a simile, using "like." His discovery of Chapman's Homer is like the discovery of a new planet.

G. "swims"—2, 3, 5. The metaphor compares motion through water with the motion of a planet as seen by a telescope.

H. "stout Cortez"—1, 2, 3, 6. The allusion, though Keats confuses Cortez and Balboa, is to a Spanish explorer.

I. "eagle eyes"—2, 3, 5. The metaphor compares Cortez's eyes to those of an eagle.

J. "Silent, upon a peak in Darien"—1, 3. The allusion is to the mountain in Panama; the phrase presents an image.

The poem does not use irony.

TERMS USED IN MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

The following terms have been used in multiple-choice questions and answers. The more important ones are marked with an asterisk.

- **allegory**

A story in which people, things, and events have another meaning. Examples of allegory are Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

- **ambiguity**

Multiple meanings a literary work may communicate, especially two meanings that are incompatible.

- ***apostrophe**

Direct address, usually to someone or something that is not present. Keats's "Bright star! would I were steadfast" is an apostrophe to a star, and "To Autumn" is an apostrophe to a personified season.

- ***connotation**

The implications of a word or phrase, as opposed to its exact meaning (denotation). Both China and Cathay denote a region in Asia, but to a modern reader, the associations of the two words are different.

- ***convention**

A device of style or subject matter so often used that it becomes a recognized means of expression. For example, a lover observing the literary love conventions cannot eat or sleep and grows pale and lean. Romeo, at the beginning of the play is a conventional lover, while an overweight lover in Chaucer is consciously mocking the convention.

- ***denotation**

The dictionary meaning of a word, as opposed to connotation.

- **didactic**
Explicitly instructive. A didactic poem or novel may be good or bad. Pope's "Essay on Man" is didactic; so are the novels of Ayn Rand.
- **digression**
The use of material unrelated to the subject of a work. The interpolated narrations in the novels of Cervantes or Fielding may be called digressions, and *Tristram Shandy* includes a digression on digressions.
- **epigram**
A pithy saying, often using contrast. The epigram is also a verse form, usually brief and pointed.
- **euphemism**
A figure of speech using indirection to avoid offensive bluntness, such as "deceased" for "dead" or "remains" for "corpse."
- **grotesque**
Characterized by distortions or incongruities. The fiction of Poe or Flannery O'Connor is often described as grotesque.
- ***hyperbole**
Deliberate exaggeration, overstatement. As a rule, hyperbole is self-conscious, without the intention of being accepted literally. "The strongest man in the world" or "a diamond as big as the Ritz" are hyperbolic.
- **jargon**
The special language of a profession or group. The term jargon usually has pejorative associations, with the implication that jargon is evasive, tedious, and unintelligible to outsiders. The writings of the lawyer and the literary critic are both susceptible to jargon.
- ***literal**
Not figurative; accurate to the letter; matter of fact or concrete.
- **lyrical**
Songlike; characterized by emotion, subjectivity, and imagination.
- ***oxymoron**
A combination of opposites; the union of contradictory terms. Romeo's line "feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health" has four examples of the device.
- **parable**
A story designed to suggest a principle, illustrate a moral, or answer a question. Parables are allegorical stories.
- ***paradox**
A statement that seems to be self-contradicting but, in fact, is true. The figure in Donne's holy sonnet that concludes "I never shall be 'chaste except you ravish me'" is a good example of the device.
- **parody**
A composition that imitates the style of another composition normally for comic effect. Fielding's *Shamela* is a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*. A contest for parodies of Hemingway draws hundreds of entries each year.
- ***personification**
A figurative use of language which endows the nonhuman (ideas, inanimate objects, animals, abstractions) with human characteristics. Keats personifies the nightingale, the Grecian urn, and autumn in his major poems.
- ***reliability**
A quality of some fictional narrators whose word the reader can trust. There are both reliable and unreliable narrators, that is, tellers of a story who should or should not be trusted. Most

narrators are reliable (Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, Conrad's Marlow), but some are clearly not to be trusted (Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," several novels by Nabokov). And there are some about whom readers have been unable to decide (James's governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Ford's *The Good Soldier*).

- **rhetorical question**

A question asked for effect, not in expectation of a reply. No reply is expected because the question presupposes only one possible answer. The lover of Suckling's "Shall I wasting in despair / Die because a lady's fair?" has already decided the answer is no.

- **soliloquy**

A speech in which a character who is alone speaks his or her thoughts aloud. A monologue also has a single speaker, but the monologist speaks to others who do not interrupt. Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" and "O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I" are soliloquies. Browning's "My Last Duchess" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" are monologues, but the hypocritical monk of his "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" cannot reveal his thoughts to others.

- **stereotype**

A conventional pattern, expression, character, or idea. In literature, a stereotype could apply to the unvarying plot and characters of some works of fiction (those of Barbara Cartland, for example) or to the stock characters and plots of many of the greatest stage comedies.

- **syllogism**

A form of reasoning in which two statements are made and a conclusion is drawn from them. A syllogism begins with a major premise ("All tragedies end unhappily.") followed by a minor premise ("Hamlet is a tragedy.") and a conclusion ("Therefore, Hamlet ends unhappily.").

- **thesis**

The theme, meaning, or position that a writer undertakes to prove or support.

Metrical Terms

The following have been used in the questions or answers of the multiple-choice questions about the metrics of a passage. Those marked with an asterisk are the more important terms; the others appeared only as wrong answers.

- **alliteration**

The repetition of identical or similar consonant sounds, normally at the beginning of words. "Gnus never know pneumonia" is an example of alliteration, since despite the spellings, all four words begin with the "n" sound.

- **assonance**

The repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds. "A land laid waste with all its young men slain" repeats the same "a" sound in "laid," "waste," and "slain."

- **ballad meter**

A four-line stanza rhymed abcb with four feet in lines one and three and three feet in lines two and four.

O mother, mother make my bed.

O make it soft and narrow.

Since my love died for me today,

I'll die for him tomorrow.

- **blank verse**

Unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell

From heaven, they fabled, thrown by angry Jove

Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn

To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve.

Blank verse is the meter of most of Shakespeare's plays, as well as that of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

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- **dactyl**
A metrical foot of three syllables, an accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables.
 - ***end-stopped**
A line with a pause at the end. Lines that end with a period, comma, colon, semicolon, exclamation point, or question mark are end-stopped lines.
 - ***free verse**
Poetry which is not written in a traditional meter but is still rhythmical. The poetry of Walt Whitman is perhaps the best-known example of free verse.
 - ***heroic couplet**
Two end-stopped iambic pentameter lines rhymed aa, bb, cc with the thought usually completed in the two-line unit.

When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust,
This lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name.
 - **hexameter**
A line containing six feet.
 - ***iamb**
A two-syllable foot with an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. The iamb is the most common foot in English poetry.
 - **internal rhyme**
Rhyme that occurs within a line, rather than at the end.

"God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—
Why look'st thou so?"—With my crossbow
I shot the Albatross.

Line three contains the internal rhyme of "so" and "'bow."
 - **onomatopoeia**
The use of words whose sound suggests their meaning. Examples are "buzz," "hiss," or "honk."
 - ***pentameter**
A line containing five feet. The iambic pentameter is the most common line in English verse written before 1950.
 - **rhyme royal**
A seven-line stanza of iambic pentameter rhymed ababbcc, used by Chaucer and other medieval poets.
 - ***sonnet**
Normally a fourteen-line iambic pentameter poem. The conventional Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet is rhymed abba, abba, cde, cde; the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet is rhymed abab, cdcd, efef, gg.
 - ***stanza**
Usually a repeated grouping of three or more lines with the same meter and rhyme scheme.
 - **terza rima**
A three-line stanza rhymed aba, bcb, cdc. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is written in terza rima.
 - ***tetrameter**
A line of four feet.
- Grammatical Terms**
- **antecedent**
That which goes before, especially the word, phrase, or clause to which a pronoun refers. In the sentence "The witches cast their spells," the antecedent of the pronoun "their" is the noun "witches."

- **clause**

A group of words containing a subject and its verb that may or may not be a complete sentence. In the sentence "When you are old, you will be beautiful," the first clause ("When you are old") is a dependent clause and not a complete sentence. "You will be beautiful" is an independent clause and could stand by itself.

- **ellipsis**

The omission of a word or several words necessary for a complete construction that is still understandable. "If rainy, bring an umbrella" is clear though the words "it is" and "you" have been left out.

- **imperative**

The mood of a verb that gives an order. "Eat your spinach" uses an imperative verb.

- **modify**

To restrict or limit in meaning. In the phrase "large, shaggy dog," the two adjectives modify the noun; in the phrase "very shaggy dog," the adverb "very" modifies the adjective "shaggy," which modifies the noun "dog."

- **parallel structure**

A similar grammatical structure within a sentence or within a paragraph. Winston Churchill's "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields" speech or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech depend chiefly on the use of parallel structure.

- **periodic sentence**

A sentence grammatically complete only at the end. A loose sentence is grammatically complete before the period. The following are (1) periodic and (2) loose sentences.

1. When conquering love did first my heart assail, / Unto mine aid I summoned every sense.
2. Fair is my love, and cruel as she's fair.

Periodic sentences complete the important idea at the end, while loose sentences put the important idea first. Neither is a better sentence. Good writers use both.

- **syntax**

The structure of a sentence. See *syntax*, page 130.