

ScienceNews

Background Sheet: Literary Devices and Creative Writing

Creative writers employ a variety of devices to engage readers. Common literary devices include simile, metaphor, symbolism, imagery, allegory, colloquialism, humor, dialogue, hooks, parody and satire, anthropomorphism and personification. Each device has a specific purpose and can be used in a variety of contexts to convey meaning. Below are descriptions of common literary devices. Additional resources that provide descriptions of different types of writing include [Lexico](#) and the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#).

Allegory is a description in which characters, events, settings, or objects represent abstractions or ideas. Another way to describe this is that an allegory is a story within a story. For example, many classic fables are allegories, such as the story of the tortoise and the hare, in which the tortoise represents steady, conscientious work and the hare represents the prideful waste of talent or advantage.

Anthropomorphism is a technique in which a writer ascribes human traits, ambitions, emotions or behaviors to animals, objects or phenomena. Many classic children's stories use anthropomorphism, including *The Cat in the Hat*, *Winnie the Pooh* and *The Little Engine That Could*. In those stories, main characters act and speak as humans even though they are not.

Colloquialism features informal or conversational language and often appears in dialogue. "Y'all," "I was on cloud nine," "he is as old as the hills" and "she needs to step up to the plate" are examples of colloquial language.

Dialogue refers to quotes, conversations or lines spoken by characters in a story. It establishes context, voice, tone and setting. The following is an example of dialogue: "Where have you been?" his mother asked. "Right here," he replied.

Hooks grab the reader's attention and hold it. Hooks can be descriptions, contradictions or mysteries that the reader wants to explore. For example, a hook could be "You're probably wondering how" or "It all started as you might expect, but things got really strange when..."

Humor is a technique used to amuse the reader. Authors use humor to point out something incongruous, ridiculous, exaggerated or surprising. The Marvel Cinematic Universe uses wisecracks or absurd comments to explore characters and diffuse tense situations.

Imagery is the use of figurative language to evoke a sensory response in a reader. These words and phrases conjure sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touches and feelings. "The autumn leaves formed a crimson and gold quilt beneath the skeletal trees" is sentence that uses imagery and metaphor.

Metaphors are figures of speech that make comparisons between two things that are not alike. This device is commonly used to equate objects or people with abstract ideas or themes. A famous example of a metaphor is from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. "What light through yonder window breaks? 'Tis the east, and Juliet is the sun." In this metaphor, Romeo says that Juliet is the sun, but she obviously is not literally the sun.

Parody is an exaggerated imitation of another person or work to highlight peculiarities to produce a comic effect. Parody can be seen in videos or song lyrics that spoof original works.

Personification is a device where a writer gives human attributes or feelings to a nonhuman animal or object or speech to the animal or object. “My computer isn’t cooperating with me today” and “the wind whispered through the pines” are examples of personification.

Satire is often compared with parody, but satire pokes fun at a subject without directly imitating it. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is full of satire, including the opening line: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

Simile makes a direct comparison between two things by using the words “like” or “as” to establish equivalency. “My head is pounding like a drum” and “I slept like a log” are examples of similes.

Symbolism is the use of an object, word, character, idea or concept to stand for or suggest something else. A symbol can be used to embody a concept or to evoke meaning or significance for the thing it represents. For example, in classic Western films, the heroes wore white hats and the villains dressed in black.

