

AP Language and Composition - Literary, Rhetorical, & Syntactical Terms

Active Voice - The subject of the sentence performs the action. This is a more direct and preferred style of writing in most cases. "Anthony drove while Toni searched for the house." The opposite is **passive voice** – when the subject of the sentence receives the action. "The car was driven by Anthony." Passive voice is often overused, resulting in lifeless writing. When possible, try to use active voice.

Alliteration - Used for poetic effect, a repetition of the initial sounds of several words in a group. The following line from Robert Frost's poem "Acquainted with the Night provides us with an example of alliteration,": "I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet." The repetition of the s sound creates a sense of quiet, reinforcing the meaning of the line.

Allegory – Where every aspect of a story is representative, usually symbolic, of something else, usually a larger abstract concept or important historical/geopolitical event. Lord of the Flies provides a compelling allegory of human nature, illustrating the three sides of the psyche through its sharply-defined main characters. A form of extended metaphor, in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. The underlying meaning has moral, social, religious, or political significance, and characters are often personifications of abstract ideas as charity, greed, or envy.

Thus an allegory is a story with two meanings, a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning

Allusion - An indirect reference to something (usually a literary text, although it can be other things commonly known, such as plays, songs, historical events) with which the reader is supposed to be familiar.

Alter-ego – A character that is used by the author to speak the author's own thoughts; when an author speaks directly to the audience through a character. In Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare talks to his audience about his own upcoming retirement, through the main character in the play, Prospero. Do not confuse with **persona**.

Ambiguity - "The expression of an idea in language that gives more than one meaning and leaves uncertainty as to the intended significance of the statement." Unintentional ambiguity can lead to confusion. Writers should avoid statements like "A long time ago" or "He went to the hospital because he was hurt." However, intentional ambiguity used in many literary works enriches the writing. Ambiguity can allow the language to function on levels other than the denotative (Holman). In Jarold Ramsey's "The Tally Stick," line 2 says, "I have carved our lives in secret." The word "secret" is ambiguous because it could mean that the speaker literally carved the stick alone and kept it a secret, or the speaker could be describing the secret love life he shares with his/her spouse.

Anecdote - A brief recounting of a relevant episode. Anecdotes are often inserted into fictional or non fictional texts as a way of developing a point or injecting humor. Example: Sylvia emphasized Sam's kindness by telling the story of the time he stopped to help a stranded motorist in the pouring rain.

Antecedent - The word, phrase, or clause referred to by a pronoun. The AP language exam occasionally asks for the antecedent of a given pronoun in a long, complex sentence or in a group of sentences. "If I could command the wealth of all the world by lifting my finger, I would not pay such a price for it." An AP question might read: "What is the antecedent for "it"?"

Anthropomorphism - Where animals or inanimate objects are portrayed in a story as people, such as by walking, talking, or being given arms, legs, facial features, human locomotion or other anthropoid form. (This technique is often incorrectly called personification.) The King and Queen of Hearts and their playing-card courtiers comprise only one example of Carroll's extensive use of anthropomorphism in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Aphorism - A brief statement which expresses an observation on life, usually intended as a wise observation. Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" contains numerous examples, one of which is Drive thy business; let it not drive thee. A brief saying embodying a moral, a concise statement of a principle or precept given in pointed words. Example:

Hippocrates: *Life is short, art is long, opportunity fleeting, experimenting dangerous, reasoning difficult.* Pope: *Some praise at morning what they blame at night.* Emerson: *Imitation is suicide.* Franklin: *Lost Time is never Found again.*

Apostrophe - A figure of speech wherein the speaker speaks directly to something nonhuman. In these lines from John Donne's poem "The Sun Rising" the poet scolds the sun for interrupting his nighttime activities:

Busy old fool, unruly sun, Why dost thou thus...

Adage – A folk saying with a lesson. "A rolling stone gathers no moss." Similar to aphorism and colloquialism.

Comic relief – when a humorous scene is inserted into a serious story, in order to lighten the mood somewhat. The "gatekeeper scene" in *Macbeth* is an example of comic relief.

Diction - Word choice, particularly as an element of style. Different types of words have significant effects on meaning. An essay written in academic diction would be much less colorful, but perhaps more precise than street slang. You should be able to describe an author's diction. You SHOULD NOT write in your thesis, "The author uses diction...". This is essentially saying, "The author uses words to write." (Duh.) Instead, describe the *type* of diction (for example, formal or informal, ornate or plain). You should be able to discuss the ways in which diction complements the author's purpose. Diction, combined with syntax, figurative language, literary devices, ect., creates an author's style.

Colloquial - Ordinary or familiar type of conversation. A "**colloquialism**" is a common or familiar type of saying, similar to an **adage** or an **aphorism**.

Conceit – A fanciful expression, usually in the form of an extended metaphor or surprising analogy between seemingly dissimilar objects. A conceit displays intellectual cleverness as a result of the unusual comparison being made. "two lovers with the two legs of a draftsman's compass."

Connotation - Rather than the dictionary definition (denotation), the associations suggested by a word. Implied meaning rather than literal meaning. (For example, "policeman," "cop," and "The Man" all denote the same literal meaning of police officer, but each has a different connotation.)

Denotation - The literal, explicit meaning of a word, without its connotations.

Jargon – The diction used by a group which practices a similar profession or activity. Lawyers speak using particular jargon, as do soccer players.

Vernacular - 1. Language or dialect of a particular country. 2. Language or dialect of a regional clan or group. 3. Everyday speech

Didactic - A term used to describe fiction, nonfiction or poetry that teaches a specific lesson or moral or provides a model of correct behavior or thinking.

Ellipsis - The deliberate omission of a word or phrase from prose done for effect by the author. *“The whole day, rain, torrents of rain.”* The term ellipsis is related to **ellipsis**, which is the three periods used to show omitted text in a quotation.

Epiphany - a moment of sudden revelation or insight when a character has suddenly realized that they have been deceived.

Euphemism - A more agreeable or less offensive substitute for generally unpleasant words or concepts. Sometimes they are used for political correctness. *“Physically challenged,” in place of “crippled.”* Sometimes a euphemism is used to exaggerate correctness to add humor. *“Vertically challenged” in place of “short.”*

Figurative Language - “Figurative Language” is the opposite of “Literal Language.” Literal language is writing that makes complete sense when you take it at face value. “Figurative Language” is the opposite: writing that is *not* meant to be taken literally.

-**Analogy** - a comparison of one pair of variables to a parallel set of variables. When a writer uses an analogy, he or she argues that the relationship between the first pair of variables is the same as the relationship between the second pair of variables.

“America is to the world as the hippo is to the jungle.” Similes and metaphors are sometimes also analogies.

-**Hyperbole**: Exaggeration. *“My mother will kill me if I am late.”*

-**Idiom**: A common, often used expression that doesn’t make sense if you take it literally. *“I got chewed out by my coach.”*

-**Metaphor** - Making an *implied* comparison, not using “like,” “as,” or other such words. *“My feet are popsicles.”* An **extended metaphor** is when the metaphor is continued later in the written work. If I continued to call my feet “my popsicles” in later paragraphs, that would be an extended metaphor. A particularly elaborate extended metaphor is called using **conceit**.

-**Metonymy (met)** - Replacing an actual word or idea, with a related word or concept. *“Relations between London and Washington have been strained,”* does not literally mean relations between the two cities, but between the leaders of The United States and England. Metonymy is often used with body parts: *“I could not understand his tongue,”* means his language or his speech.

-**Synecdoche** - A kind of metonymy when a whole is represented by naming one of its parts, or vice versa. *“The cattle rancher owned 500 head.”* *“Check out my new wheels.”*

-**Simile**: Using words such as “like” or “as” to make a *direct* comparison between two very different things. *“My feet are so cold they feel like popsicles.”*

-**Synesthesia** - a description involving a “crossing of the senses.” *Examples: “A purplish scent filled the room.” “I was deafened by his brightly-colored clothing.”*

-**Personification**: Giving human-like qualities to something that is not human. *“The tired old truck groaned as it inched up the hill.”*

Figure of Speech - a device used to produce figurative language. Usually these examples compare dissimilar things to express a point. Examples include: apostrophe, hyperboly, irony, metaphor, oxymoron, paradox, personification, simile, synecdoche, and understatement

Generic Conventions - This term describes traditions for each genre. These conventions help to define each genre; for example, they differentiate an essay and journalistic writing or an autobiography and political writing. On the AP language exam, try to distinguish the unique features of a writer’s work from those dictated by convention.

Genre - The major category into which a literary work fits. The basic divisions of literature are prose, poetry, and drama. However, genre is a flexible term; within these broad boundaries exist many subdivisions that are often called genres themselves. For example, prose can be divided into fiction (novels and short stories) or nonfiction (essays, biographies, autobiographies, etc.). Poetry can be divided into lyric, dramatic, narrative, epic, etc. Drama can be divided into tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce, etc. On the AP language exam, expect the majority of the passages to be from the following genres: autobiography, biography, diaries, criticism, essays, and journalistic, political, scientific, and nature writing. There may be fiction or poetry.

Homily - This term literally means “sermon,” but more informally, it can include any serious talk, speech, or lecture involving moral or spiritual advice.

Hyperbole - A figure of speech using deliberate exaggeration or overstatement. (The literal Greek meaning is “overshoot.”) Hyperboles often have a comic effect; however, a serious effect is also possible. Often, hyperbole produces irony. The opposite of hyperbole is understatement.

Imagery - The sensory details or figurative language used to describe, arouse emotion, or represent abstractions. On a physical level, imagery uses terms related to the five senses: visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory. On a broader and deeper level, however, one image can represent more than one thing. For example, a rose may present visual imagery while also representing the color in a woman’s cheeks and/or symbolizing some degree of perfection. An author may use complex imagery while simultaneously employing other figures of speech, especially metaphor and simile. In addition, this term can apply to the total of all the images in a work. On the AP language exam, pay attention to how an author creates imagery and to the effect of this imagery.

Inference/Infer - To draw a reasonable conclusion from the information presented. When a multiple choice question asks for an inference to be drawn from a passage, the most direct, most reasonable inference is the safest answer choice. If an inference is implausible, it’s unlikely to be the correct answer. Note that if the answer choice is directly stated, it is not inferred and it is wrong. You must be careful to note the connotation - negative or positive - of the choices.

Invective - an emotionally violent, verbal denunciation or attack using strong, abusive language. (For example, in Henry IV, Part I, Prince Hal calls the large character of Falstaff “this sanguine coward, this bedpresser, this horseback breaker, this huge hill of flesh.”)