# Quick List of Common Literary Terms

*Terms most applicable to AP Literature are in bold.))*

**Abstract Language-**Language describing ideas and qualities rather than observable or specific things, people, or places. The observable or "physical" is usually described in concrete language.

**Ad homonym—**Latin for "against the man." When a writer personally attacks his or her opponents instead of their arguments

**Ad populum—**Latin for "to the crowd." A fallacy of logic in which the widespread occurrence of something is assumed to make it true.

**Allegory—**A narrative or description having a second meaning beneath the surface one. A story, fictional or nonfiction, in which characters, things, and events represent qualities or concepts. The interaction of these characters, things, events is meant to reveal an abstraction or a truth. These characters, etc. may be symbolic of the ideas referred to.

Alliteration—The repetition at close intervals of initial identical consonant sounds. Or, vowel sounds in successive words or syllables that repeat.

Allusion—An indirect reference to something (usually a literary text) with which the reader is expected to be familiar. Allusions are usually literary, historical, Biblical, or mythological.

Ambiguity—An event or situation that may be interpreted in more than one way. Also, the manner of expression of such an event or situation may be ambiguous. Artful language may be ambiguous. Unintentional ambiguity is usually vagueness.

Anachronism—Assignment of something to a time when it was not in existence, e.g. the watch Merlyn wore in The Once and Future King.

Analogy—An analogy is a comparison to a directly parallel case. When a writer uses an analogy, he or she argues that a claim reasonable for one case is reasonable for the analogous case.

Anaphora—Repetition of a word, phrase, or clause at the beginning of two or more sentences in a row. This device is a deliberate form of repetition and helps make the writer's point more coherent.

Anecdote—A brief recounting of a relevant episode. Anecdotes are often inserted into fictional or nonfiction texts as a way of developing a point or injecting humor.

Angst—A term used in existential criticism to describe both the individual and the collective anxiety-neurosis of the period following the Second World War. This feeling of anxiety, dread,

or anguish is notably present in the works of writers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

Annotation—Explanatory notes added to a text to explain, cite sources, or give bibliographic data (by the author or student).

Antithesis—A balancing of two opposite or contrasting words, phrases, or clauses.

Apostrophe—An address to the dead as if living; to the inanimate as if animate; to the absent as if present; to the unborn as if alive. Examples: "O Julius Caesar thou are mighty yet; thy spirit walks abroad," or "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll."

Archetype—A term borrowed by psychologist Carl Jung who described archetypes as "primordial images" formed by repeated experiences in the lives of our ancestors, inherited in the "collective unconscious" of the human race and expressed in myths, religion, dreams, fantasies, and literature. These "images" of character, plot pattern, symbols recur in literature and evoke profound emotional responses in the reader because they resonate with an image already existing in our unconscious mind, e.g. death, rebirth.

Argumentation—Exploring of a problem by investigating all sides of it; persuasion through reason. One of the four chief forms of discourse, the others being exposition, narration, and description. The purpose of argumentation is to convince by establishing the truth of falsity of a proposition.

Aside—A dramatic convention by which an actor directly addresses the audience but it is not supposed to be heard by the other actors on the stage.

Assonance—Repetition of a vowel sound within two or more words in close proximity. "Fake" and "lake" denote rhyme; "lake" and "fate" demonstrate assonance.

Asyndeton—A series of words separated by commas (with no conjunction), e.g. "I came, I saw, I conquered." The parts of the sentence are emphasized equally; in addition, the use of commas with no intervening conjunction speeds up the flow of the sentence.

Balance—Construction in which both halves of the sentence are about the same length and importance, sometimes used to emphasize contrast.

Bandwagon—Trying to establish that something is true because everyone believes it is true.

Catharsis—The process by which an unhealthy emotional state produced by an imbalance of feelings is corrected and emotional health is restored.

Causal Relationship (cause and effect)—In causal relationships, a writer assert that one thing results from another. To show how one thing produces or brings about another is often relevant in establishing a logical argument.

Characterization—The method an author uses to develop characters in a work. In direct charachterization, the author straightforwardly states the character’s traits. With indirect

characterization, those traits are implied through what the character says, does, how the character dresses, interacts with other characters, etc.

Chiasmus—Arrangement of repeated thoughts in the pattern of X Y Y X. Chiasmus is often short and summarizes a main idea, e.g., "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Chronological Ordering—Arrangement of ideas in the order in which things occur; may move from past to present or in reverse, from present to past.

Classification (as means of ordering)—Arrangement of objects according to class; e.g., media classified as print, television, radio.

Comedy of Manners—Deals with the relations and intrigues of gentlemen and ladies living in a polished and sophisticated society; it evokes laughter mainly at the violations of social conventions and decorum and relies on the wit and humor of the dialogue for its effect.

Comic relief—Humorous speeches and incidents in the course of the serious action of a tragedy; frequently comic relief widens and enriches the tragic significance of the work.

Conceit—Unusual or surprising comparison between two very different things (a special kind of metaphor or complicated analogy.

Concrete Language—Language that describes specific, observable things, people or places, rather than ideas or qualities.

Connotation—Rather than the dictionary definition, the associations associated by a word. Implied meaning rather than literal meaning or denotation.

Consonance—Repetition of a consonant sound within two or more words in close proximity.

Conventional—Following certain conventions, or traditional techniques of writing. An over reliance on conventions may result in a lack of originality. The five-paragraph theme is considered conventional.

Cumulative—Sentence which begins with the main idea and then expands on that idea with a series of details or other particulars.

Deduction—A form of reasoning that begins with a generalization, then applies the generalization to a specific case or cases.

Diction—Word choice, particularly as an element of style. Different types and arrangements of words have significant effects on meaning. An essay written in academic diction, for example, would be much less colorful, but perhaps more precise, than street slang.

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

Digression—A temporary departure from the main subject in speaking or writing.

Dramatic Irony—When the reader is aware of an inconsistency between a fictional or nonfiction character's perception of a situation and the truth of that situation.

Elegy—A formal sustained poem lamenting the death of a particular person.

Elliptical—Sentence structure which leaves out something in the second half. Usually, there is a subject-verb-object combination in the first half of the sentence, and the second half of the sentence will repeat the structure but omit the verb and use a comma to indicate the ellipsed material.

Emotional Appeal—When a writer appeals to an audience's emotions (often through "pathos") to excite and involve tem in the argument.

Ennui—A persistent feeling of tiredness or weariness which often afflicts existential man, often manifesting as boredom.

Enthymeme—A syllogism in which one of the premises—often the major premise—is unstated, but meant to be understood, e.g. "Children should be seen and not heard. Be quiet, John." Here, the minor premise—that John is a child—is left to the ingenuity of the reader.

Epigraph—A quotation or aphorism at the beginning of a literary work suggestive of a theme. One found at the beginning of John Kennedy Toole's Confederacy of Dunces: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign; that all the dunces are in a confederacy against him." —Jonathan Swift.

Epiphany—A major character's moment of realization or awareness.

Epithet—a term used to characterize a person or thing, such as rosy-fingered in rosy-fingered dawn or the Great in Catherine the Great. Also a term used as a descriptive substitute for the name or title or a person, such as The Great Emancipator for Abraham Lincoln.

Ethical Appeal—When a writer tries to persuade the audience to respect and believe him or her based on a presentation of image of self through the text. Reputation is sometimes a factor in ethical appeals, but in all cases the aim is to gain the audience's confidence.

Euphemism—The use of a word or phrase that is less direct, but is also considered less distasteful or less offensive than another. E.g. "He is at rest" instead of "He is dead." Also consider "Technicolor yawn" for "vomiting."

Example—An individual instance taken to be representative of a general pattern. Arguing by example is considered reliable if examples are demonstrably true or factual as well as relevant.

Explication—The act of interpreting or discovering the meaning of a text. Explication usually involves close reading and special attention to figurative language.

Exposition—Background information provided by a writer to enhance a reader's understanding of the context of a fictional or nonfictional story.

False Analogy—When two cases are not sufficiently parallel to lead readers to accept a claim of connection between them.

Farce—A type of comedy in which one-dimensional characters are put into ludicrous situations; ordinary standards of probability and motivation are freely violated in order to evoke laughter.

Fiction—A product of a writer's imagination, usually made up of characters, plot, setting, point of view, and theme.

Figurative Language—A word or words that are inaccurate literally, but describe by calling to mind sensations or responses that the thing described evokes. Figurative language may be in the form of metaphors or similes, both non-literal comparison. Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" is an example of non-literal figurative language (metaphor specifically).

Figure of Speech—A form of expression in which words are used out of the usual sense in order to make the meaning more specific

Flat Character—A character constructed around a single idea or quality; a flat character is immediately recognizable.

Foil—A character whose traits are the opposite of another and who thus points up the strengths and weaknesses of the other character.

Freight-train—Sentence consisting of three or more very short independent clauses joined by conjunctions.

Generalization—When a writer bases a claim upon an isolated example or asserts that a claim is certain rather than probable. Sweeping generalizations occur when a writer asserts that a claim applies to all instances instead of one.

Genre—French, a literary form or type; classification. e.g. tragedy, comedy, novel, essay, poetry.

Hubris—Overwhelming pride or insolence that results in the misfortune of the protagonist of a tragedy. It is the particular form of tragic flaw that results from excessive pride, ambition, or overconfidence. The excessive pride of Macbeth is a standard example of hubris in English drama. Also spelled hybris

Hyperbole—Conscious exaggeration used to heighten effect. Not intended literally, hyperbole is often humorous. Example: "And fired the shot heard round the world."

Image—A word or group of words, either figurative or literal, used to describe a sensory experience or an object perceived by the senses. An image is always a concrete representation.

Imagery—The use of images, especially in a pattern of related images, often figurative, to create a strong unified sensory impression.

Induction—A form or reasoning which works from a body of facts to the formulation of a

generalization; frequently used in science and history.

Inversion—Variation of the normal word order (subject first, then verb, then complement) which puts a modifier or the verb as first in the sentence. The element that appears first is emphasized more than the subject.

Irony—When a reader is aware of a reality that differs from a character's perception of reality (dramatic irony)/ The literal meaning of a writer's words may be verbal irony. Generally speaking, a discrepancy between expectation and reality.

Litotes—Opposite of hyperbole; litotes intensifies an idea understatement by stating through the opposite. E.g. saying "It wasn't my best day" instead of "It was my worst day."

Logical Appeal—Relies on the audience's logical faculties; logical appeal moves from evidence to conclusion.

Metaphor—A comparison of two things, often unrelated. A figurative verbal equation results where both "parts" illuminate one another. Metaphors may occur: in a single sentence —"Talent is a cistern; genius is a fountain;" as a controlling image of an entire work —"Pilgrim at Sea by Par F. Lagerkvist; as obvious ("His fist was a knotty hammer.") or implied (But O beware the middle mind that purrs and never shows a tooth.").

•Dead Metaphor—So overused that its original impact has been lost.

•Extended Metaphor—One developed at length and involves several points of comparison.

•Mixed Metaphor—When two metaphors are jumbled together, often illogically.

Metonymy—Designation of one thing with something closely associated with it. E.g. calling the head of a committee a CHAIR, the king the CROWN, a newspaper the PRESS, or old people the GRAY HAIRS.

Mood—An atmosphere created by a writer's word choice (diction) and the details selected. Syntax is also a determiner of mood because sentence strength, length, and complexity affect pacing.

Moral—The lesson drawn from a fictional or nonfictional story. A heavily didactic story.

Motif—A frequently recurrent character, incident, or concept in literature.

Negative-Positive—Sentence that begins by stating what is not true, but ending by stating what is true.

Non-sequiter—Latin for "it does not follow." When one comment isn't logically related to another.

Novel—An extended piece of prose fiction. Some examples include:

•sociological novel —emphasizes the influence of economic and social conditions on characters and events and often embodies an implicit thesis for social reform.

•historical novel —takes its setting and a number of its characters and events from history.

•regional novel —emphasizes setting and mores of a particular locality as these affect character and action (local color); e.g. Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole.

•novel of ideas

•epistolary novel—tells narrative through letters (beginning of Frankenstein by Mary Shelly).

Onomatopoeia—The use of a word whose pronunciation suggests its meaning. "Buzz," "hiss," "slam," and "pop" are commonly used examples.

Oxymoron—A rhetorical antithesis. Juxtaposing two contradictory terms, like "wise fool" or "deafening silence."

Parable—A short story from which a lesson may be drawn.

Paradox—A seemingly contradictory statement or situation which is actually true. This rhetorical device is often used for emphasis or simply to attract attention.

Parallelism—Sentence construction which places in close proximity two or more equal grammatical constructions. Parallel structure may be as simple as listing two or three modifiers in a row to describe the same noun or verb; it may take the form of two or more of the same type of phrases (prepositional, participial, gerund, appositive) that modify the same noun or verb; it may also take the form of two or more subordinate clauses that modify the same noun or verb. Or, parallel structure may be a complex blend of single-word, phrase, and clause parallelism all in the same sentence.

Parody—An exaggerated imitation of a usually more serious work for humorous purposes. The writer of a parody uses the quirks of style of the imitated piece in extreme or ridiculous ways.

Pathos—Qualities of a fictional or nonfictional work that evoke sorrow or pity. Over-emotionalism can be the result of an excess of pathos.

Periodic Sentence—Sentence that places the main idea or central complete thought at the end of the sentence, after all introductory elements—e.g. "Across the stream, beyond the clearing, from behind a fallen a tree, the lion emerged."

Peripety—Reversal in the hero's fortunes.

Persona—A writer often adopts a fictional voice to tell a story. Persona or voice is usually determined by a combination of subject matter and audience.

Personification—Figurative Language in which inanimate objects, animals, ideas, or abstractions are endowed with human traits or human form—e.g. "When Duty whispers…"

Plot—System of actions represented in a dramatic or narrative work.

Point of View—The perspective from which a fictional or nonfictional story is told. First-person, third-person, or third-person omniscient points of view are commonly used.

Polysyndeton—Sentence which uses and or another conjunction, with no commas, to separate the items in a series, usually appearing in the form X and Y and Z, stressing equally each member of the series. It makes the sentence slower and the items more emphatic than in the asyndeton.

Post hoc Fallacy—Latin for "after this, therefore because of this." When a writer implies that because one thing follows another, the first caused the second. Establishes an unjustified link between cause and effect.

Protagonist—Chief character in a dramatic or narrative work, usually trying to accomplish some objective or working toward some goal.

Pun—A play on words that are identical or similar in sound but have sharply diverse meanings.

Red Herring—Device through which a writer raises an irrelevant issue to draw attention away from the real issue.

Refutation—Occurs when a writer musters relevant opposing arguments.

Repetition—Word or phrase used two or more times in close proximity.

Rhetoric—The art of effective communication, especially persuasive discourse. Rhetoric focuses on the interrelationship of invention, arrangement, and style in order to create felicitous and appropriate discourse.

Rhetorical Criticism—Emphasizes communication between the author and reader. Analyzes the elements employed in a literary work to impose on the reader the author's view of the meaning, both denotative and connotative, of the work.

Rhetorical Question—A question asked for rhetorical effect to emphasize a point; no answer is expected.

Round Character—A character drawn with sufficient complexity to be able to surprise the reader without losing credibility.

Satire—A work that reveals a critical attitude toward some element of human behavior by portraying it in an extreme way. Satire doesn't simply abuse (as with invective) or get personal (as with sarcasm). Satire usually targets groups or large concepts rather than individuals; its purpose is customarily to inspire change.

Sarcasm—A type of verbal irony in which, under the guise of praise, a caustic and bitter expression of strong and personal disapproval is given. Sarcasm is personal, jeering, and intended to hurt.

Setting—Locale and period in which the action takes place.

Simile—A figurative comparison of two things, often dissimilar, using the connecting words: "like," "as," or "then." E.g. "More rapid than eagles his coursers they came."

Situational Irony—Applies to works which contain elaborate expressions of the ironic spirit. Also, irony applies to both Hamlet's situation and to his famous soliloquy, "To be or nor to be."

Soliloquy—When a character in a play speaks his thoughts aloud —usually by him or herself.

Stock Character—Conventional character types that recur repeatedly in various literary genres. E.g. the wicked stepmother or Prince Charming or the rascal.

Stream of Consciousness—Technique of writing that undertakes to reproduce the raw flow of consciousness, with the perceptions, thoughts, judgments, feelings, associations, and memories presented just as they occur without being tidied into grammatical sentences or given logical and narrative order.

Style—The choices in diction, tone, and syntax that a writer makes. In combination they create a work's manner of expression. Style is thought to be conscious and unconscious and may be altered to suit specific occasions. Style is often habitual and evolves over time.

Syllogism—A form of reasoning in which two statements or premises are made and a logical conclusion is drawn from them (a form of deductive reasoning).

Symbol—A thing, event, or person that represents or stands for some idea or event. Symbols also simultaneously retain their own literal meanings. A figure of speech in which a concrete object is used to stand for an abstract idea —e.g. the cross for Christianity.

Synecdoche—Part of something is used to stand for the whole —e.g. "threads" for clothes; "wheels" for cars.

Syntax—In grammar, the arrangement of words as elements in a sentence to show their relationship.

Theme—A central idea of a work of fiction or nonfiction, revealed and developed in the course of a story or explored through argument.

Tone—A writer's attitude toward his or her subject matter revealed through diction, figurative language, and organization of the sentence and global levels.

Tragedy—Representations of serious actions which turn out disastrously.

Tragic Flaw—Tragic error in judgment; a mistaken act which changes the fortune of the tragic hero from happiness to misery; also known as hamartia.

Understatement-Deliberately representing something as much less than it really is —e.g. "Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her appearance." —Jonathan Swift

Unity—A work of fiction or nonfiction is said to be unified is all the parts are related to one central idea or organizing principle. Thus, unity is dependent upon coherence.

Verbal Irony—When the reader is aware of a discrepancy between the real meaning of a

situation and the literal meaning of the writer's words.

Zeugma—The writer uses one word to govern several successive words are clauses —e.g. She discovered New York and her world.