

Creating insightful written work on your IB English A: Literature texts requires you to know and utilise correct literary terminology. As noted in our related article, [10 ways to develop good writing for IB English A: Literature](#), this is a crucial skill that students often overlook. Below you find our glossary of need to know literary terms for IB English A: Literature. Written by Elizabeth Stephan and extracted from her Peak IB study guide English A: Literature Standard and Higher Level, the glossary is provided here to help you develop your knowledge of literary terms. Feel free to bookmark the page for future reference and remember to check our English A resources page for more helpful articles.

Glossary of literary terms

This glossary contains a number of the commonly used terms in literary analysis. Try to become familiar with as many as you can, so as to achieve the awareness in your reading, and the precision in speaking and writing, on which your course hinges. The most important thing is to recognise and appreciate how the techniques 'shape meaning' in texts.

Allegory: A literary or visual form in which characters, events or images represent or symbolise ideas. It can be a story of some complexity corresponding to another situation on a deeper level. *Animal Farm* is about a community of animals, but reflects the Russian Revolution and satirises Communism.

Alliteration: Repetition of an identical consonant sound at the beginning of stressed words, usually close together. Alliteration can create different effects. Used in poetry and prose).

Allusion: An indirect reference to an event, person, place, another work of literature, etc. that gives additional layers of

Ambiguity: Where language, action, tone, character, etc. are (sometimes deliberately), unclear and may yield two or more interpretations or meanings. Gertrude's actions and character are ambiguous in the early acts of *Hamlet*.

Ambivalence: Simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings towards something or someone. A writer's attitude to a character or event may not be clear-cut, but may seem to hold at least two responses at the same time. Distinguish this from 'ambiguity'.

Anagnorisis: (a Greek term associated with tragedy but also used with fiction). A moment of recognition or discovery usually late in the plot where the protagonist discovers something about his or her true nature or behaviour or situation. Elizabeth Bennet, late in *Pride and Prejudice* dramatically realises her prejudice.

Antithesis: Expressing contrasting ideas by balancing words of opposite meaning and idea in a line or sentence, for rhetorical impact: "They promised opportunity and provided slavery".

Apostrophe: An exclamatory passage where the speaker or writer breaks off in the flow of a narrative or poem to address a dead



Atmosphere: It refers specifically to place – a setting, or surroundings.

Bathos: A sudden descent from the serious, to the ridiculous or trivial, for rhetorical effect. "His pride and his bicycle tyre were punctured in the first hour".

Bildungsroman: German term for a novel focusing on the development of a character from youth to maturity (Joyce: *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* is a famous example for a male; *Jane Eyre* for a female).

Blank verse: *Unrhymed* poetry, not broken into stanzas, keeping to a strict pattern in each line, usually in iambic pentameter. Used by Shakespeare.

Caesura: A break or pause *within a line* of poetry, created by a comma or full stop or unmarked pause needed by the sense. Used effectively for emphasis, or to change direction or pace.

Caricature: An exaggerated representation of a character, often emphasising physical or vocal features, usually for comic and satiric purposes. Jane Austen and Dickens frequently use this.

Colloquial: Everyday speech and language; as opposed to a literary or formal register. The inclusion of the odd colloquial word or phrase in an otherwise formal work can be striking.

Conceit: A witty thought or idea or image, a fanciful or deliberately far-fetched comparison, as found in Shakespeare and other 16th and 17th century English poetry. A famous example is John Donne's comparison of two lovers to the points of a mathematical compass.

struts and frets his hour upon the stage".

Context: (i) The circumstances, background or environment in which an event (or text) takes place, or an idea is set, and in terms of which it can be understood. (ii) The part of a text that surrounds a word or passage and determines or clarifies its meaning.

Contradiction: (Distinguish from 'paradox'). Stating or implying the opposite of what has been said or suggested.

Couplet (rhyming couplet): Two consecutive rhyming lines of verse. May clinch or emphasise an idea. ("*Nature's first green is gold,*

Her hardest hue to hold". Frost)

Defamiliarisation: The technique of making the familiar seem new and strange, of making us see more vividly, of awakening the mind. Although a specific term of literary theory, it is generally the aim of art and all good writing. It may be achieved, for example, through point of view, or perspective, as in *Gulliver's Travels*, or unusual chronology, or diction and imagery.

Denouement: From the French, literally 'unknotting'. How the ending of a novel or play turns out, how the plot is unravelled or revealed.

Diction: The writer's choice and arrangement of words or distinctive vocabulary (its effectiveness and precision).

Didactic: Describes text where there is an intention to preach a (usually) moral, political or religious point it usually has a negative connotation.

Elegy: A mournful lament for times past or the dead. It is a specific poetic *form*, but the term can be used more generally. "Elegiac" describes a meditative mood in prose or verse, reflecting on the past.

End-stopped line: A line of poetry where the meaning pauses or stops at the end of the line. The full stop allows a statement or idea to stand out clearly, and provides a pause for the reader's reflection.

Enjambement: The opposite of the above. The sense flows over from one line to another, or through a series of lines, or to the next stanza. This can reflect a build-up of emotion or some other effect. From the French for "leg".

Epigram: A concise, pointed, witty statement. 'Epigrammatic' *style* means those qualities in prose or poetry. Oscar Wilde is a master of epigram. "The truth is rarely pure and never simple".

Epiphany: From the Greek "manifestation", it means a sudden realisation or moment of awakening in which something is seen in a new light, or its essential nature is perceived – which could be a moment of radiance or devastation. Used to effect in some short stories, as well as other fiction and poetry.

Form: The physical structure or shape of a work, the arrangement of its parts, the patterns, divisions and structures used. In poetry there are specific traditional, metrical and rhyming 'forms' (ode, ballad, sonnet, etc.), and modern, non-metrical forms.

Free indirect discourse or speech: Is where the third person or omniscient narrator takes on (for a short while) the voice, speech characteristics of a character, taking us into the mind and thoughts of the character without indicating this directly. It can be used sympathetically or ironically. Jane Austen uses it to great effect.

Free verse: Verse written without any fixed or traditional structure in metre or rhyme. Commonly used since the early 20th

so an hour", he emphasises how very brief the life of precious things seems.

Iambic: The 'iamb' is a metrical measure, or foot, in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable ("To be, or not to be"). Iambic *pentameter* (five iambs in a line) is the commonest metrical pattern in English poetry, and notably Shakespeare. (Macbeth: "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown". Sound it out to find those five stresses. There are other kinds of iambic line such as the four-iamb line, called *tetrameter*.)

Idyll/Idyllic: Refers to the innocent simple life in an idealised rural setting. It is a specific form of poetry, but the adjective is generally used to denote an experience that has those untroubled, and simple qualities, for example a childhood or a time in a rural setting.

Imagery: The mental pictures created by language (both metaphorical and literal) that appeal to the senses.

Interior monologue: Where the narrator depicts the thoughts pouring randomly from a character's mind, so that the reader experiences these as if overhearing them, unfiltered by comments from the narrator or adjusted grammatically.

Internal rhyme: Rhymes *within* a line of poetry.

Intertextuality: The shaping of some part of a text's meaning by another text, which can take the form, for example, of quotation, allusion, parody or re-working of an idea or story.

Irony: A gap or mismatch between what is said and what is intended. For example, between what a character or group might see or think, and what the author wishes us to see or think. A powerful tool for a writer to expose hypocrisies and lack of awareness.



Metafiction: Fiction that draws attention to the fact that it is fiction or construct of the author, and to the writing process itself. The author may break the reader out of the fictional frame and comment on what s/he is doing or concerned about in the act of writing, or offer the reader a choice of endings, etc.

Metaphor: A comparison between two unlike things that are seen as alike in some aspect, without the use of 'like' or 'as'. It can facilitate understanding of an abstract concept (for example, life as a journey) or open up the imagination by creating a striking visual and sensual link between things not normally associated.

Metre: The organisation of lines of verse into regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllabues, to achieve a rhythmic effect. "Iambic" and "trochaic" metres are useful to know.

Mood: Describes an emotional state of *mind*. It can also describe the emotional response created in the mind of the reader or audience by elements in literature. Distinguish from 'atmosphere', which is to do with *place*.

Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Omniscient: "third person" narrator: An "all-knowing" narrator who can see into the minds of any character and see any event, place, time, from the 'outside'. It is the most common and flexible narrative method. A variation on the third person narrator, the "omniscient/limited" narrator, knows everything about one character and is limited to that character. Omniscient and first person modes can be mixed in a work.

Onomatopoeia: The use of words that imitate or suggest the sounds associated with them, such as "murmur" or "buzz".

Oxymoron: Where *two words*, seemingly contradictory or incongruous are joined, often suggesting something complex, as in *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet says that "parting is such sweet sorrow".

Paradox: An apparently contradictory *statement*, which on investigation is found to contain a truth. (For example Frost's title "Nothing gold can stay"). Distinguish from the compressed paradox of 'oxymoron'.

Parody: A comic imitation of another work, for deliberately comic, ridiculous or satiric effect. It is actively critical or attacking.

Pastiche: Imitation of the style of another work (content and manner) sometimes mildly ridiculing, but often in homage to the original (distinguish from 'parody') and creating a new work.

Persona: The identity or character assumed by the writer in a work (for example, T.S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath assume another character in some of their poetry, as in "Prufrock" and "Lady Lazarus").

Personification: Where human feelings or sensations are attributed to an inanimate object.

Protagonist: Main character in a work.

Quatrain: Stanza or group of *four* lines in a poem. They can have different rhyme schemes. Shakespeare's sonnets often contain three quatrains and a couplet.

Refrain: Repetition of a phrase or lines in a work of literature, often at the end of a stanza.

Rhythm: The succession of strong and weak (or stressed and unstressed) syllables to create a *patterned recurrence of sound*. Distinguish this from metre, which has to do with the *technical, identifiable* organisation of lines into units of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Satire: Exposing and ridiculing of human follies in a society, sometimes with the aim to reform, sometimes predominantly to deflate. May be gentle, comic, biting or bitter, or a combination. Chaucer, Swift, Jane Austen and Dickens use this tool memorably.

Setting: Context and location in which a work of literature takes place: it involves the physical place, time, and social environment.

Simile: Where a comparison is made explicit with 'as' or 'like' (distinguish from metaphor). Can make descriptions vivid and unusual. Dickens is a master of the simile.

Skaz: (From the Russian). A technique of narration that mirrors oral narration with its hesitations, corrections, grammatical mistakes, interactions, etc. *Catcher in the Rye* uses this, but also *Huckleberry Finn*, amongst others.

on the type of sonnet (for example, Shakespearian), but often set out as a block of 8 lines (octave) and six lines (sestet).

Stanza: The blocks of lines into which a poem is organised. In traditional forms of poetry each stanza follows a scheme governing metre, lines and rhymes.

Story: (Distinguish this from plot). The events of a narrative in the chronological order in which they actually happened, not deliberately patterned and arranged as in plot.

Stream of consciousness: The representation of a character's (or first person narrator's) thought processes—feelings, sensations, memories, etc. as a random stream of thoughts.

Style: The distinctive linguistic traits in an author's work, but also involves the writer's quality of vision and subject matter. It concerns theme, diction (emotional, abstract, poetic), sentence construction, imagery, sound, etc.

Subtext: Ideas, feelings, thoughts, not dealt with directly in the text (drama especially), but existing underneath. Characters don't always express their real thoughts.

Symbol: Objects that represent or evoke an idea or concept of wider, abstract significance, as roses represent love, walls divisions.

Syntax: The grammatical structure of words in a sentence. The normal order of words or grammatical structures can be slightly displaced to create a particular effect, without losing the sense. A powerful tool in poetry, especially.

Theme: Central ideas or issues in a work, often abstract (for example racial injustice). Can also refer to an argument raised or pursued in a text, like a thesis.

Trochee/trochaic: A metrical foot in poetry that has a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (the opposite of iambic, and much less common). For example, in Blake's "Tyger, tyger, burning bright". Often there is a mixture of trochaic and iambic metre in a poem, where the sense invites the switch.

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