

AS and A Level English Literature



**Literary terms: A guide for
students**

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Introduction

The terminology below may be used support your reading and response to literature. It will also help you access any critical reading on your specified literary texts, alongside any specific glossaries that have been provided in Edexcel's support materials.

To produce high quality analytical writing you need the tools to do so and the ability to use them precisely. Skilled writers of literary analysis use subject-specific terminology to construct coherent, accurate arguments. The terms below should not be used as an exercise in 'feature spotting' in a literary text. 'The writer uses a metaphor', for example, offers no analysis of 'how' and 'why'. Good literary analysis should consider the writer's particular choices in constructing a literary text, and the precise effects of these, using appropriate terminology. The list below is by no means exhaustive; whole books have been written on the subject! However, these materials will give you a broad range of terms used to analyse English Literature and some general guidance about how to use them.

When writing about English Literature you are likely to be confronted by three different types of complexity in the vocabulary you use. The first is words which are difficult in themselves, or describe difficult concepts such as **alienation effect**. The second is words whose meaning has changed over time, such as **sentimental**. The third is words whose popular meaning differs significantly from their academic or root meaning. This guide mostly concerns the first two categories but begins with a list of frequently misused words.

Frequently misused words

Literary terms	Explanation
Incredible	Literally means 'cannot be believed'. You might use it academically to say that the events in Angela Carter's <i>The Magic Toyshop</i> (1967) 'range from the credible to the incredible'; you wouldn't use it as a word of praise: 'Angela Carter is incredible!'
Ironic	Often used to mean 'unfortunate' but should mean 'turning out against expectation' or, in the case of human expressions, sarcastic instead of sympathetic. An 'ironic smile' is mocking not friendly. Irony is the essence of poetic justice .
Figurative	Figurative language should introduce a comparison, such as a simile or metaphor .
Literal	Literal language has no metaphorical intent.
Massive	Only use this word about objects that have mass. A mountain range can be 'massive'; popular opinion cannot be. Words like 'extensive' or 'significant' or 'widespread' are often more accurate.
Pathetic	Used to mean 'useless' instead of 'inspiring pathos'. 'Pathos' means 'appealing to the emotions'.
Radical	Popular culture is used to this word being shouted by skateboarders or mutant turtles to mean 'great!' It is actually from the Latin word 'radix' (root). A 'Radical MP' in 19 th century Britain was one who wanted to make changes to fundamental aspects of society; in other words to go to the <i>root</i> of a problem.

General terms:

Literary terms	Explanation
Allegory	Allegory is a rhetorical device that creates a close, one-to-one comparison. An allegorical comparison of 21 st century Britain to a hive might point out that Britain and the hive have queens, workers and soldiers.
Burlesque	Satire that uses caricature.
Colloquial	Colloquial language is the informal language of conversation.
Denouement	The culmination or result of an action, plan or plot.
Diatribes	An impassioned rant or angry speech of denunciation.
Empiricism	As a philosophy empiricism means basing knowledge on direct, sensory perceptions of the world. Empirical means seeking out facts established by experience not theory.
Foreground	To emphasise or make prominent.
Form	The type of literary expression chosen by an author
Genre	A more precise definition of the different literary forms . There are <i>general</i> categories, such as poetry, drama, prose. There are <i>specific</i> categories within these larger divisions, so a sonnet is a <i>specific genre</i> within the larger genre of poetry.
Hype	Possibly derived from hyperbole but usually used to indicate an attempt to deceive the public by over-rating the value of a commodity or experience.
Hyperbole	The use of exaggeration for effect: 'The most daring, prodigious, death-defying feat attempted by man or woman in all human history!'
Intertextuality	A term describing the many ways in which texts can be interrelated, ranging from direct quotation or echoing, to parody .
Ludic	From the Latin word 'ludo', a game. A text that plays games with readers' expectations and/or the expectations aroused by the text itself. Tom Stoppard's <i>The Real Inspector Hound</i> (1968) is both a parody of Agatha Christie's murder-mystery play <i>The Mousetrap</i> (1952) and a ludic text that arouses audience expectations there will be a plot and a mystery to solve but provides no solution. Here the audience is first enticed, then teased and finally frustrated.

Meta	From the Greek meaning 'above or beyond'. 'Metaphysics' is 'above' or 'beyond' physics. 'Meta' is often used in compound words: metatext , metatheatre , etc. These words usually describe moments when a text goes beyond its own fictionality or makes readers/audience aware of the conventions of its fiction. An aside could be described as a 'metatheatrical' event. The audience offstage hear words the audience onstage cannot hear. Brecht's alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt) , where a character suddenly addresses the audience directly, breaking the convention that the characters on stage do not notice the audience during a play, is a metatheatrical effect.
Metaphor	A comparison that creates a direct correspondence 'society is a hive' unlike a simile .
Modernism	The name given to experiments carried out in poetry, prose, and art from around 1920-1939. The relationship of Modernism with tradition is frequently complex but the appearance of a Modernist work is usually aggressively different to that of an older text. Often spelt with a capital: ' Modernism ', ' Modernity ' to distinguish the word from 'modern' meaning 'up to date'.
Narrator/narrative voice	A narrator or a narrative voice conveys a story. Sometimes the narrator's presence is emphasised, as in the 'Dear Reader' convention employed by Charlotte Brontë's <i>Villette</i> (1853). This is called a first person narrative . Sometimes the story is told by an unseen author, as in George Orwell's <i>1984</i> (1949). This is called a third person narrative . Some stories are told by an unreliable narrator . In these tales readers are expected to work out that the person who tells the story is biased, partial or mistaken in the views they put forward. The narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>The Remains of the Day</i> (1989) is a narrator of this kind. By contrast the omniscient narrator maintains a god-like view of the story in order to provide shaping and commentary. This is the viewpoint usually adopted by George Eliot (1819-80) in her novels.
Oxymoron	Language device where two opposite words or meanings are used side by side e.g. 'sour sweet'.
Parody	The reducing of another text to ridicule by hostile imitation.
Pathetic Fallacy	The use of setting, scenery or weather to mirror the mood of a human activity. Two people having an argument whilst a storm breaks out is an example. The technique is used to make sure the feelings of readers or audience are moved. See pathetic .

Poetic Justice	A literary version of the saying 'hoist with his own petard'. The trapper is caught by the trap in an example of ironic but apt justice. Despite the word 'poetic', examples usually turn up in texts which are narrative and not necessarily poems.
Point of View/viewpoint	These words look as though they should be interchangeable but this is not always the case. A point of view is an opinion; a viewpoint can also be the foundation on which an opinion is based or, literally, a place from which a view can be enjoyed.
Postmodernism	A complex term. Postmodern texts tend to be aware of their own artifice, be filled with intertextual allusions, and ironic rather than sincere.
Reportage	Literally means reporting news but in literary criticism the word often means the inclusion of documentary material, or material which purports to be documentary, in a text. Mrs Gaskell's <i>Mary Barton</i> (1848) contains documentary details about life in the Manchester slums that Mrs Gaskell observed first hand.
Satire	A destructive reduction of an idea, image, concept or text. It can employ exaggeration, mimicry, irony or tone.
Semantics	The study of how words create meaning.
Semantic field	The area of language from which a text draws most of its tropes .
Signifier/Signified	According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) meaning is created by the partnership of signifier (the indicator) and signified (the indicated). Together they make up a sign. Later semanticists and Postmodernists have questioned if the sign is as simple as Saussure's ideas imply.
Simile	A comparison introduced with 'like' or 'as': 'society is like a hive'.
Stream of Consciousness	The removal of conventional sentence structures and grammar in an attempt to imitate the free flow of thoughts. Virginia Woolf's <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> (1925) and <i>To the Light House</i> (1927) are examples.
Symbol	A symbol is more independent than a metaphor and less specific than an allegory . Where both metaphors and allegories have precise meanings or are ways of explaining a complex concept, symbols are often elusive in their exact meaning. The lighthouse of Virginia Wolf's <i>To the Lighthouse</i> (1927) is frequently seen as symbolic but opinions differ as to what it might represent.
Symbolism	The process of creating or detecting symbols within a work. Sometimes critics will talk of a text symbolising a larger

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	concept or idea, irrespective of the author's intention. Many critics have interpreted T .S. Elliot's <i>The Waste Land</i> (1922) as symbolising post-WWI Britain, though Elliot always discouraged such an interpretation.
Text	A Postmodernist concept designed to eradicate distinction between literary genres. Some forms of Postmodernism collapse all types of human experience, including history, into text .
Transgressive	The crossing of a boundary of culture or taste, usually with a subversive intention. Vladimir Nabakov's <i>Lolita</i> (1955) can be described as a transgressive text that challenges assumptions about sex, love, the age of consent and morality
Trope	Any of the devices (metaphors , similes , rhyme etc.) whereby art language differentiates itself from functional language.
Valorise	To invest with value.
Writing Back	A term which describes the appropriation of a text or genre and a rewriting in response. This is a technique frequently employed by Post-colonial writers or feminist writers. Rastafarianism reinterprets the Bible as text of black liberation; Margaret Atwood's <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1985) rewrites the Bible to expose its anti-feminist implications.

Poetry

Poetry and song may well be the oldest form of human literary activity. The **epic** poems of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were regarded as the foundational works of Western culture by the Romans and the Western civilisations that followed the Romans.

Genres

Literary terms	Explanation
Ballad	A word that has changed in meaning. Now it signifies an emotive song that usually involves large production and projection. In the literary world, to folklorists a 'ballad' is a song that tells a story, whereas to poets the ballad verse-form is a simple AB,AB, rhyme structure with simple rhythms. It was associated with oral culture and carried little cultural prestige. Wordsworth and Coleridges' <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> (1798) contains both types of literary ballad.
Classical, or Neo-classical	Movements that believe all writing or art should imitate precedents and genres created by the writers or artists of the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome. In Britain the late 17 th to early 18 th century, from Dryden to Johnson and Pope, was dominated by this belief.
Effusion	A word meaning a spontaneous expression. It was a concept valued by the Romantic poets. Wordsworth uses the word in his 'Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg' (1835).
Elegy	A poem lamenting a dead person or persons. The term elegiac meaning 'mournful' or 'conveying loss' derives from this genre.
Epic	A long poem concerned with large events of conflict. An epic is frequently seen as displaying and testing the values of the civilisation that produced it. Consequently it has high cultural prestige. Virgil's <i>Aeneid</i> (19 BC) consciously tries to define what is distinctive and significant about Rome and its civilisation. Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i> (1674) is the most famous English example, though this moves beyond England to discuss the relationship between god and man.
Epithalamium	A poem celebrating a wedding.
Mock-epic	A poem employing the devices of an epic to create a parody of the epic's grandeur. Alexander Pope's <i>The Rape of the Lock</i> (1712) is a powerful 18 th century example.
Ode	A lyric address, originally sung to music. See http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-ode

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Pastoral	An idealised depiction of rural life, sometimes set in 'Arcadia'; an Eden-like land. A concept strongly active in the visual arts as well.
Romantic	An almost impossible to define word, applied to movements from the late 18 th century onwards who valued feelings above thought and originality above derivation.
Sonnet	<p>Generally refers to a 14 line poem with a strict rhyme scheme. Petrarchan sonnets (post 1374) usually have the rhyme scheme a-b-b-a, a-b-b-a, and either c-d-e-c-d-e , c-d-c-c-d-c, or c-d-c-d-c-d. Shakespearean sonnets (post 1600) end with a couplet: a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g.</p> <p>As it was introduced into Britain through court circles in the early 16th century, the 14 line form had high cultural prestige. As the word derives from the same root that gives the word 'song' (Latin <i>sonus</i>), it was sometimes applied to lyric poems in the 16th century that are more than 14 lines long.</p>
Lyric	Most narrowly 'lyric' refers to words designed to be sung; more generally a 'lyric poem' can be one in which the song-like characteristics of poetry predominate.

Analytic vocabulary

Literary terms	Explanation
Alliteration	The repeating of the initial letter for aesthetic effect: 'the bright, broad, blade'.
Assonance	The repeating of vowel sounds for aesthetic effect: 'low, close, clouds'.
Chorus	In songs a few lines that are repeated at the end of each stanza. In Greek drama a group of people on stage who act as a communal character and recite verses.
Enjambment	<p>The flowing on of a line of poetry so there is no pause at the end of the line:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sir Thomas Wyatt: 'They flee from me':</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek, 2 That now are wild and do not remember 3 That sometime they put themself in danger 4 To take bread at my hand; and now they range,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174858</p> <p>Here lines 1 and 4 pause at the end of the line; lines 2 and 3 do not; they flow on.</p>
Refrain	The repeating of a single line in a poem, often the last line of a stanza.
Repetend	A recurring word or phrase, not necessarily as formally arranged as a refrain .
Sibilance	The aesthetic use of the hissing 's' sound; 'So many slights, so many sighs, so many sneers'
Stanza	The divisions of a poem.
Verse	The word is sometimes used to refer to poetry in general as in 'written in verse, not prose' but can be used to mean the same as stanza .

Drama

In ancient Greece drama was closely connected with religious ritual and may have evolved from religious celebrations. There has remained a powerful link between drama and religion throughout human culture, from the performances of a shaman to the ceremony of the Catholic High Mass.

Genres

Literary terms	Explanation
Absurdist theatre/Theatre of the Absurd	A genre of plays in which apparently impossible or ridiculous events make a statement about the strangeness and irrationality of existence. The term is used to classify the plays of writers like Albee, Beckett and Ionesco.
Agit-prop (AGITation-PROPaganda)	A piece of drama that exists to make a political point. Often performed in the street.
Brechtian Drama	A drama designed to confront its audience directly through devices like the alienation effect , to put forward a political point of view. In Brecht's case this was used to advance left-wing politics. Sometimes this type of play is called ' Epic theatre ', especially when created by other playwrights, such as Ernst Toller.
Classical Drama	Drama observing the rules of Classical Greek and Roman drama, following the critic Aristotle's codification of three unities': Unity of time (action takes place within 24 hours), unity of place (only one scene throughout), unity of plot (no sub-plots) (322BC).
Epic theatre	See ' Brechtian Drama '
Farce	A comedy featuring exaggerated situations and physical humour, usually based around the attempt to preserve respectability. The adjective 'farcical' is less specific, usually referring to some event that becomes absurd.
Happening	A spontaneous or semi-spontaneous event in a public space that combined theatre and art. The so called Pop Artist of the 1960s, such as Robert Rauschenberg, pioneered such experiences.
Masque	16th/17th form of court entertainment with music, dancing, and dialogue but emphasising spectacle, costume and theatrical effects rather than plot.
Realistic Drama	An attempt to represent life on stage with the minimum interference from convention. The defining metaphor is that viewing a realistic play should be like looking into a room with one wall missing.

Shakespearean Drama	The name conveniently given to British drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period that ignored the rules of classical drama to use large time-spans, sub-plots and many scenes.
Theatre of the Absurd	See ' Absurdist theatre '.

Analytic Terms

Literary terms	Explanation
Catharsis	Classical scholars argue about the original meaning intended by the ancient Greeks, but has come to mean an emotional release engendered by an intense experience.
<i>Dramatis personae</i>	Latin term for the list of characters in a play.
Hamartia	Classical scholars argue about the shades of meaning the word has in the original Greek but has come to mean a fatal moral flaw in a protagonist of a tragedy.
Hubris	Now usually used to designate overweening pride in a protagonist of a tragedy; some Classical scholars argue that the original word is more complex.
Alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt)	The use of devices that disrupt the illusion of realistic theatre, such as the cast speaking or singing directly to the audience, or holding up signs or slogans.
Aside	A remark to the audience which other characters on stage do not hear. In effect a device used to make a character's inner feelings evident.
Exeunt	Used to indicate several people leave the stage.
Exit	Used to indicate one person leaves the stage
Monologue	A play that consists of the speech of one character with no other cast. Alan Bennett has written many monologues interpreted by famous actors such as 'A Cream Cracker Under the Settee' (1988) for Thora Hird.
Soliloquy	A solo speech by a character, usually taking place when s/he is alone on stage. Like an aside , it is a way of allowing a character's thoughts to be overheard.
Verfremdungseffekt	Original German term for 'alienation effect'.

Prose

It is tempting to think of any prose piece as being 'a novel'. The term comes into being relatively late, as is testified by the name: 'novel' as in 'novelty': 'something new'. The prose of the middle ages to the Eighteenth Century is best classified as **chronicle** or **Romance**. During the eighteenth century the modern novel developed in various genres such as the **Gothic** novel, the **epistolary** novel, the **picaresque** novel and the **sentimental** novel.

Genres

Literary terms	Explanation
Chronicle	A list of events. Some chronicles may be in verse. The emphasis tends to be on action not inner life. Some chronicles are factual, some are not. Geoffrey of Monmouth's <i>History of the Kings of Britain</i> is a text written in the 12 th century that looks like a historical chronicle but is a mixture of legend and imagination.
Epistolary	A novel written in the form of an exchange of letters (epistles).
Gothic	At its simplest the use of medieval and/or supernatural elements to create a horror story. Nowadays the word is often used to describe any story with antique horrors within it.
Magic-realism	A novel written in a realistic style which incorporates impossible or unlikely events. Films may be described as magic-realist as well. Behn Zeitlin's 2012 film <i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i> combines realism in the depiction of a flood in bayou country with fantasy, showing the rampaging mythical aurochs that the child Hushpuppy fears have been released by the flood.
Picaresque	A novel where the protagonist's travels and encounters are more important than the protagonist's character. Famous examples include Henry Fielding's <i>Tom Jones</i> , (1749) which incorporates elements of mock-Epic , parodying Homer. Can be seen as heir to the inter-leaved Medieval romances.
Romance	A medieval prose or poetry text that tells a story in which barely possible and supernatural events are an essential feature of the action. One of the most sophisticated examples in <i>Gawain and the Green Knight</i> , a mid- late 14 th century poem. Simon Armitage did a translation in 2007.
Sentimental	Originally a person who was sentimental was in touch with their feelings, the sentimental novel is a literary genre of the late 18 th century. One such example being Oliver

	Goldsmith's <i>The Vicar of Wakefield</i> (1766) in which a family's love is tested by disaster after disaster.
Realistic/Naturalistic	<p>A confusing distinction in so far the two terms are sometimes used as if synonymous but are sometimes used to differentiate stories that are factual in style and intention from those which are factual in style but symbolic in intention. There is disagreement about which term signifies which type of writing.</p> <p>In the 19th century Stephen Crane and Zola were regarded as naturalistic writers, whose stories made critical points about society, whereas writers like William Dean Howells was regarded as a realist, whose stories simply documented contemporary American life with little controversy.</p> <p>The Marxist Georg Lukács (1885–1971) inverted the meaning of the two words. For Lukács a realistic story selects a typical incident in order to reveal the nature of the reality behind a political or cultural system, whereas a naturalistic story uses fact to present a neutral or subjective world view. The terms can be used to describe <i>genres</i> of writing or <i>styles</i> of writing.</p>

Analytic Terms

Many of the analytic terms used for prose have already been covered above.

Literary terms	Explanation
Interleaving	The telling of several stories in one text; the stories are interwoven with each other. Edmund Spenser's poem <i>The Faerie Queene</i> (1590/1596) used this narrative technique.

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