

Poetic Devices (Definitions with Examples) and Rhyme

Poetic Devices (Definitions with Examples)

Allegory: a story in which the characters, settings, and events stand for abstract or moral concepts.

Example: The morality play “Everyman” deals with the death of a character that represents himself and every human being.

Example: **Pilgrim’s Progress:** Garth telling Bellicent the tale of a youth who wanted to climb a tree to get a golden egg laid by a royal eagle (a story told in symbols).

Alliteration: the repetition of initial consonant sounds.

Example: “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past” (Shakespeare, “Sonnet 30”).

Allusion: reference to a statement, person, place, event, or thing that is known from literature, history, religion, mythology, politics, sports, science, or popular culture.

Example: He had the patience of Job.

Apostrophe: a figure of speech in which the speaker directly addresses an absent or dead person, an abstract quality, or something nonhuman as if it were present and capable of responding.

Example: “And chiefly Thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer / Before all temples th’ upright heart and pure / Instruct me...” (Milton, Paradise Lost).

Assonance: the repetition of similar vowel sounds followed by different consonant sounds in words that are close together.

Example: “My words like silent raindrops fell...” (Paul Simon, “Sounds of Silence”).

Example: “Thou foster child of silence and slow time” (John Keats, “Ode to a Grecian Urn”).

Conceit: a fanciful and elaborate figure of speech that makes a surprising connection between two seemingly dissimilar things.

Example: John Donne’s comparison of separated lovers to the legs of a compass.

Consonance: the repetition of consonant sounds. This repetition is not limited to initial consonant sounds.

Example: “...and high school girls with clear skin smiles...” (Janis Ian, “At 17”).

Dissonance (cacophony): a harsh, discordant combination of sounds. It is usually created by the repetition of harsh consonant sounds.

Example: “...sheer plod makes plough down sillion / Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion” (Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Windhover”).

Epigram: short, condensed, polished, pointed phrases often ending in surprising or witty turns of thought.

Example: “Swans sing before they die – t’were no bad thing / Should certain people die before they sing” (Coleridge, “On a Volunteer Singer”).

Clichéd example: “A stitch in time saves nine.” Clichés are worn out and overused, and should be avoided.

Euphemism: a pleasant way of stating an unpleasant truth (usually to be avoided). The euphemism is vague and less direct especially when used in reference to death, irreligious references to God, and discreet references to body parts and functions.

Example: “Comfort station,” “to pass away,” “Gosh darn!” (Poets will avoid these!).

Irony: a contrast or discrepancy between expectation and reality – between what is said and what is really meant, between what is expected and what really happens, or between what appears to be true and what is really true.

Example: “Brutus is an honorable man” (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar).

Special Types of Irony

Antithesis: a contrasting of ideas made sharp by the use of words of opposite meaning in contiguous clauses or phrases (next to one another) with grammatically parallel structure. Aristotle praised antithesis in his Rhetoric “...because ...it is by putting opposing conclusions side by side that you refute one of them.”

Example: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country (John F. Kennedy).

Example: “Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike” (Pope).

Example: “Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasure” (Samuel Johnson).

Hyperbole: a great exaggeration.

Example: She wept oceans of tears.

Oxymoron: a paradoxical utterance that combines two terms that in ordinary usage are contraries, especially frequent in Petrarchan and Elizabethan love poetry (1590’s). Also found in devotional prose or religious poetry as a way of expressing the Christian mysteries.

Example: “Pleasing pains”; “loving hate”; “I burn and freeze” (Petrarchan and Elizabethan love poetry).

Paradox: a statement which seems untrue but proves valid upon close inspection.

Example: “When my love swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her, though I know that she lies” (Shakespeare, Sonnet 138).

Example: “I was much older then; I’m younger than that now” (Bob Dylan).

Example: “Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear” (Milton, Paradise Lost).

Understatement: deliberately representing something as less important than it really is.

Example: Twain’s apprentice riverboat pilot discovered asleep by the captain remarks that the captain stands behind him, “commenting.”

Metaphor: a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two seemingly unlike things without using the connective words *like, as, than, or resembles.*” Aristotle said that the greatest thing by far [in speech or writing] is to be master of the metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others, and it is also a sign of genius since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the dissimilar (Poetics). Metaphor points out many resemblances: “He is a pig” (appearances – eating, habits, size, etc.). Simile refers to only one characteristic that two things have in common: “He eats like a pig.”

Types of Metaphor

Dead metaphor (to be avoided): common usage makes you forget that the two items being compared are really separate items.

Example: "...leg of the table." "...heart of the matter."

Extended metaphor: this type of metaphor is developed over several lines of writing or even throughout an entire poem.

Example: The morality play "Everyman" is a metaphor for each person's life.

Implied metaphor (implicit metaphor): doesn't use a linking verb, so one term of the comparison is implied.

Example: Ordinary metaphor – "Hatred is an infection of the mind.

Implied metaphor – "Hatred infects the mind." "The sun sheds its rays."
"Bright character explodes the dawn." "It's raining pitchforks." "O my love has red petals and sharp thorns." "O, I placed my love into a long stem vase and bandaged my bleeding thumb."

Kenning: in Anglo-Saxon poetry, a metaphorical phrase or compound word used to name a person, place, thing, or event indirectly.

Example: "whale-road" for the sea and "Shepherd of evil" for Grendel (Beowulf).

Mixed metaphor (to be avoided): combines two or more diverse metaphors that do not fit together logically.

Example: "To get ahead, a man should keep his nose to the grindstone, his shoulder to the wheel, his ear to the ground, and his eyes on the ball." "Playing with fire can get a person in deep water." "Her plans to paint the town red were nipped in the bud." "Money doesn't grow on trees, but it does go down the drain quick."

Metonymy: a closely associated idea used for the idea itself. The major effect is to communicate through abstract, intangible terms the concrete and tangible.

Example: Calling the judiciary "the bench" or the king "the crown."

Onomatopoeia: the use of a word whose sound imitates or suggests its meaning.

Example: The sparrow's chirrup on the roof, / The slow clock ticking, and the sound / Which to the wooing wind aloof / The poplar made, did all confound / Her sense... (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Mariana").

Personification: gives life to inanimate objects or makes animals human.

Example: Death stands above me whispering low.

Pun: a play on the multiple meanings of a word, or two different words that sound alike but have different meanings.

Example: Cleopatra was the queen of denial as opposed to the Queen of the Nile.

Synecdoche: a figure of speech in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Example: "...lend a hand."

Simile: an expressed comparison between two distinctly different things, especially using like or as.

Example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Synaesthesia: the deliberate mixing of the senses.

Example: “I hear it in the deep heart’s core” (Yeats).

Example: “The listening eyes of the tall knights” (Tennyson).

Rhyme

Rhyme: the repetition of accented vowel sounds and all sounds following them in words that are close together in a poem.

Example: The cat in the hat.

Approximate Rhyme (half rhymes, slant rhymes, or imperfect rhymes): words sound similar but do not rhyme exactly. A **slant rhyme** calls attention to itself in a way that may occasionally help the poet say something meaningful.

Example: “He who the ox to wrath has moved / Shall never be by woman loved” (Blake).

End rhyme (the most common form of rhyme): occurs at the ends of lines

Example:

Internal rhyme: occurs within lines.

Example: “The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea” (Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner).

Masculine rhyme:

Example: “mail / quail”; “compare / affair.”

Rhythm: the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in language. In speech, it is the natural rise and fall of the language.

Meter: a generally regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry.

Verse: metrical language. All verse is not poetry; all poetry is not verse.

Blank verse: poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter (five metrical feet per line, each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable).

Free verse: poetry that has no regular meter or rhyme scheme.

Foot: the basic metrical unit which consists of one accented syllable plus one or two unaccented syllables.

Kinds of feet: Iambic, Trochaic, Anapestic, Dactylic, and Spondaic.