

Poetic Devices

Alliteration: Repeated consonant sounds at the beginning of words placed near each other, usually on the same or adjacent lines. A somewhat looser definition is that it is the use of the same consonant in any part of adjacent words.

Example: fast and furious

Example: Peter and Andrew patted the pony at Ascot

Assonance: Repeated vowel sounds in words placed near each other, usually on the same or adjacent lines.

These should be in sounds that are accented, or stressed, rather than in vowel sounds that are unaccented.

Example: He's a bruisin' loser

Consonance: Repeated consonant sounds at the ending of words placed near each other, usually on the same or adjacent lines. These should be in sounds that are accented, or stressed, rather than in vowel sounds that are unaccented. This produces a pleasing kind of near-rhyme.

Example: boats into the past

Example: cool soul

Cacophony A discordant series of harsh, unpleasant sounds helps to convey disorder. This is often furthered by the combined effect of the meaning and the difficulty of pronunciation.

Example: My stick fingers click with a snicker

And, chuckling, they knuckle the keys;

Light-footed, my steel feelers flicker

And pluck from these keys melodies.

—“Player Piano,” *John Updike*

Euphony: A series of musically pleasant sounds, conveying a sense of harmony and beauty to the language.

Example: Than Oars divide the Ocean,

Too silver for a seam—

Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon

Leap, plashless as they swim.

— “A Bird Came Down the Walk,” *Emily Dickenson* (last stanza)

Onomatopoeia: Words that sound like their meanings. In *Hear the steady tick of the old hall clock*, the word tick sounds like the action of the clock, If assonance or alliteration can be onomatopoeic, as the sound ‘ck’ is repeated in tick and clock, so much the better. At least sounds should suit the tone – heavy sounds for weightiness, light for the delicate. *Tick* is a light word, but transpose the light *T* to its heavier counterpart, *D*; and transpose the light *CK* to its heavier counterpart *G*, and *tick* becomes the much more solid and down to earth *dig*.

Example: boom, buzz, crackle, gurgle, hiss, pop, sizzle, snap, swoosh, whir, zip

Repetition: The purposeful re-use of words and phrases for an effect. Sometimes, especially with longer phrases that contain a different key word each time, this is called **parallelism**. It has been a central part of poetry in many cultures. Many of the Psalms use this device as one of their unifying elements.

Example: I was glad; so very, very glad.

Example: Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward...

...

Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

Cannon in front of them

Volley’d and thunder’d...

Rhyme: This is the one device most commonly associated with poetry by the general public. Words that have different beginning sounds but whose endings sound alike, including the final vowel sound and everything following it, are said to *rhyme*.

Example: time, slime, mime

Double rhymes include the final two syllables. *Example:* revival, arrival, survival

Triple rhymes include the final three syllables. *Example:* greenery, machinery, scenery

Another variation which is occasionally used is called near rhyme. If the final vowel sounds are the same, but the final consonant sounds are slightly different, then the rhyme is called a *near rhyme*.

Example: fine, rhyme; poem, goin'

Rhythm: Although the general public is seldom directly conscious of it, nearly everyone responds on some level to the organization of speech rhythms (verbal stresses) into a regular pattern of accented syllables separated by unaccented syllables. *Rhythm* helps to distinguish poetry from prose.

Example: i THOUGHT i SAW a PUSsyCAT.

Such patterns are sometimes referred to as *meter*. Meter is the organization of voice patterns, in terms of both the arrangement of stresses and their frequency of repetition per line of verse.

Poetry is organized by the division of each line into "feet," metric units which each consist of a particular arrangement of strong and weak stresses. The most common metric unit is the iambic, in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one (as in the words *reverse* and *compose*).

There are five basic rhythms:

Pattern Name Example

– / Iamb/Iambic invite

/ – Trochee/Trochaic deadline

– – / Anapest/Anapestic to the beach

/ – – Dactyl/Dactylic frequently

/ / Spondee/Spondaic true blue

The most common line lengths are:

monometer: one foot tetrameter: four feet heptameter: seven feet

dimeter: two feet pentameter: five feet octameter: eight feet

trimeter: three feet hexameter: six feet

Allegory: A representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning. Sometimes it can be a single word or phrase, such as the name of a character or place. Often, it is a symbolic narrative that has not only a literal meaning, but a larger one understood only after reading the entire story or poem

Allusion: A brief reference to some person, historical event, work of art, or Biblical or mythological

situation or character.

Ambiguity: A word or phrase that can mean more than one thing, even in its context. Poets often search out such words to add richness to their work. Often, one meaning seems quite readily apparent, but other, deeper and darker meanings, await those who contemplate the poem.

Example: Robert Frost's 'The Subverted Flower'

Analogy: A comparison, usually something unfamiliar with something familiar.

Example: The plumbing took a maze of turns where even water got lost.

Apostrophe: Speaking directly to a real or imagined listener or inanimate object; addressing that person or thing by name.

Example: O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done...

Cliché: Any figure of speech that was once clever and original but through overuse has become outdated. If you've heard more than two or three other people say it more than two or three times, chances are the phrase is too timeworn to be useful in your writing.

Example: busy as a bee

Connotation: The emotional, psychological or social overtones of a word; its implications and associations apart from its literal meaning. Often, this is what distinguishes the *precisely correct* word from one that is merely acceptable.

Contrast: Closely arranged things with strikingly different characteristics.

Example: He was dark, sinister, and cruel; she was radiant, pleasant, and kind.

Euphemism: An understatement, used to lessen the effect of a statement; substituting something innocuous for something that might be offensive or hurtful.

Example: She is at rest. (meaning, she's dead)

Hyperbole: An outrageous exaggeration used for effect.

Example: He weighs a ton.

Irony: A contradictory statement or situation to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true.

Example: Wow, thanks for expensive gift...let's see: did it come with a Fun Meal or the Burger King equivalent?

Metaphor: A direct comparison between two unlike things, stating that one *is* the other or *does the action of* the other.

Example: He's a zero. *Example:* Her fingers danced across the keyboard.

Metonymy: A figure of speech in which a person, place, or thing is referred to by something closely associated with it.

Example: The White House stated today that... *Example:* The Crown reported today that...

Oxymoron: A combination of two words that appear to contradict each other.

Example: a pointless point of view; bittersweet

Paradox: A statement in which a seeming contradiction may reveal an unexpected truth.

Example: The hurrier I go the behinder I get.

Personification: Attributing human characteristics to an inanimate object, animal, or abstract idea.

Example: The days crept by slowly, sorrowfully.

Pun: Word play in which words with totally different meanings have similar or identical sounds.

Example: Like a firefly in the rain, I'm de-lighted.

Simile: A direct comparison of two unlike things using "like" or "as."

Example: He's as dumb as an ox.

Example: Her eyes are like comets.

Symbol: An ordinary object, event, animal, or person to which we have attached extraordinary meaning and significance – a flag to represent a country, a lion to represent courage, a wall to symbolize separation.

Example: A small cross by the dangerous curve on the road reminded all of Johnny's death.

Synecdoche: Indicating a person, object, etc. by letting only a certain part represent the whole.

Example: All hands on deck.

Point of View: The author's point of view concentrates on the vantage point of the speaker, or "teller" of the story or poem. This may be considered the poem's "voice" — the pervasive presence behind the overall work. This is also sometimes referred to as the *persona*.

- 1st Person: the speaker is a character in the story or poem and tells it from his/her perspective (uses “I”).
- 3rd Person limited: the speaker is not part of the story, but tells about the other characters through the limited perceptions of one other person.
- 3rd Person omniscient: the speaker is not part of the story, but is able to “know” and describe what all characters are thinking.

Line: The line is fundamental to the perception of poetry, marking an important visual distinction from prose. Poetry is arranged into a series of units that do not necessarily correspond to sentences, but rather to a series of metrical feet. Generally, but not always, the line is printed as one single line on the page. If it occupies more than one line, its remainder is usually indented to indicate that it is a continuation.

There is a natural tendency when reading poetry to pause at the end of a line, but the careful reader will follow the punctuation to find where natural pauses should occur.

Verse: One single line of a poem arranged in a metrical pattern. Also, a piece of poetry or a particular form of poetry such as *free verse*, *blank verse*, etc., or the art or work of a poet.

The popular use of the word *verse* for a stanza or associated group of metrical lines is not in accordance with the best usage. A stanza is a *group* of verses.

Stanza: A division of a poem created by arranging the lines into a unit, often repeated in the same pattern of meter and rhyme throughout the poem; a unit of poetic lines (a “paragraph” within the poem). The stanzas within a poem are separated by blank lines.

Stanzas in modern poetry, such as *free verse*, often do not have lines that are all of the same length and meter, nor even the same number of lines in each stanza. Stanzas created by such irregular line groupings are often dictated by meaning, as in paragraphs of prose.

Stanza Forms: The names given to describe the number of lines in a stanzaic unit, such as: *couplet* (2), *tercet* (3), *quatrain* (4), *quintet* (5), *sestet* (6), *septet* (7), and *octave* (8).

Rhetorical Question: A question solely for effect, which does not require an answer. By the implication the answer is obvious, it is a means of achieving an emphasis stronger than a direct statement.

Example: Could I but guess the reason for that look?

Example: O, Wind,

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Rhyme Scheme: The pattern established by the arrangement of rhymes in a stanza or poem, generally described by using letters of the alphabet to denote the recurrence of rhyming lines, such as the *ababbcc* of the *Rhyme Royal* stanza form.

Enjambment: The continuation of the logical sense — and therefore the grammatical construction beyond the end of a line of poetry. This is sometimes done with the title, which in effect becomes the first line of the poem.

Form: The arrangement or method used to convey the content, such as *free verse*, *ballad*, *haiku*, etc. In other words, the “way-it-is-said.” A variably interpreted term, however, it sometimes applies to details within the composition of a text, but is probably used most often in reference to the structural characteristics of a work as it compares to (or differs from) established modes of conventionalized arrangements.

- **Open:** poetic form free from regularity and consistency in elements such as rhyme, line length, and metrical form
- **Closed:** poetic form subject to a fixed structure and pattern
- **Blank Verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameter (much of the plays of Shakespeare are written in this form)
- **Free Verse:** lines with no prescribed pattern or structure — the poet determines all the variables as seems appropriate for each poem

Imagery: The use of vivid language to generate ideas and/or evoke mental images, not only of the visual sense, but of sensation and emotion as well. While most commonly used in reference to figurative language, imagery can apply to any component of a poem that evoke sensory experience and emotional response, and also applies to the concrete things so brought to mind.

Examples:

- **Sight:** Smoke mysteriously puffed out from the clown’s ears.
- **Sound:** Tom placed his ear tightly against the wall; he could hear a faint but distinct thump thump thump.
- **Touch:** The burlap wall covering scraped against the little boy’s cheek.

- **Taste:** A salty tear ran across onto her lips.
- **Smell:** Cinnamon! That's what wafted into his nostrils.

Synesthesia: An attempt to fuse different senses by describing one kind of sense impression in words normally used to describe another.

Example: The sound of her voice was sweet.

Example: a loud aroma, a velvety smile

Tone, Mood: The means by which a poet reveals attitudes and feelings, in the style of language or expression of thought used to develop the subject. Certain tones include not only irony and satire, but may be loving, condescending, bitter, pitying, fanciful, solemn, and a host of other emotions and attitudes. Tone can also refer to the overall mood of the poem itself, in the sense of a pervading atmosphere intended to influence the readers' emotional response and foster expectations of the conclusion. Another use of tone is in reference to pitch or to the demeanor of a speaker as interpreted through inflections of the voice; in poetry, this is conveyed through the use of connotation, diction, figures of speech, rhythm and other elements of poetic construction.