

AP English Poetry Terms

Listed and defined below are literary terms that you will need to know in order to discuss and write about works of poetry. You are already familiar with many of these.

1. alliteration: the repetition of identical or similar consonant sounds, normally at the beginnings of words. "Gnus never know pneumonia" is an example of alliteration since, despite the spellings, all four words begin with the "n" sound.

2. allusion: a reference in a work of literature to something outside the work, especially to a well-known historical or literary event, person, or work. When T.S. Eliot writes, "To have squeezed the universe into a ball" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he is alluding to the lines "Let us roll our strength and all/ Our sweetness up into one ball" in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."

3. antithesis: a figure of speech characterized by strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas, as in "Man proposes; God disposes." Antithesis is a balancing of one term against another for emphasis or stylistic effectiveness. The second line of the following couplet by Alexander Pope is an example of antithesis:

The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jury-men may dine.

4. apostrophe: a figure of speech in which someone (usually, but not always absent), some abstract quality, or a nonexistent personage is directly addressed as though present. Following are two examples of apostrophe:

Papa Above!
Regard a Mouse.
-Emily Dickinson

Milton! Thou shouldst be living in this hour;
England hath need of thee . . .
-William Wordsworth

5. assonance: the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds. "A land laid waste with all its young men slain" repeats the same "a" sound in "laid," "waste," and "slain."

6. ballad meter: a four-line stanza rhymed *abcd* with four feet in lines one and three and three feet in lines two and four.

O mother, mother make my bed.
O make it soft and narrow.
Since my love died for me today,
I die for him tomorrow.

7. blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse is the meter of most of Shakespeare's plays, as well as that of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

8. cacophony: a harsh, unpleasant combination of sounds or tones. It may be an unconscious flaw in the poet's music, resulting in harshness of sound or difficulty of articulation, or it may be used consciously for effect, as Browning and Eliot often use it. See, for example, the following line from Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

9. caesura: a pause, usually near the middle of a line of verse, usually indicated by the sense of the line, and often greater than the normal pause. For example, one would naturally pause after "human" in the following line from Alexander Pope:

To err is human, to forgive divine.

10. conceit: an ingenious and fanciful notion or conception, usually expressed through an elaborate analogy, and pointing to a striking parallel between two seemingly dissimilar things. A conceit may be a **brief metaphor**, but it also may form the framework of an entire poem. A famous example of a conceit occurs in John Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which he compares his soul and his wife's to the legs of a mathematical compass.

11. consonance: the repetition of similar consonant sounds in a group of words. The term usually refers to words in which the ending consonants are the same but the vowels that precede them are different. Consonance is found in the following pairs of words: "add" and "read," "bill and ball," and "born" and "burn."

12. couplet: a two-line stanza, usually with end-rhymes the same.

13. devices of sound: the techniques of deploying the sound of words, especially in poetry. Among devices of sound are **rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia**. The devices are used for many reasons, including to create a general effect of pleasant or of discordant sound, to imitate another sound, or to reflect a meaning.

14. diction: the use of words in a literary work. Diction may be described as formal (the level of usage common in serious books and formal discourse), informal (the level of usage found in the relaxed but polite conversation of cultivated people), colloquial (the everyday usage of a group, possibly including terms and constructions accepted in that group but not universally acceptable), or slang (a group of newly coined words which are not acceptable for formal usage as yet).

15. didactic poem: a poem which is intended primarily to teach a lesson. The distinction between didactic poetry and non-didactic poetry is difficult to make and usually involves a subjective judgement of the author's purpose on the part of the critic or the reader. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is a good example of didactic poetry.

16. dramatic poem: a poem which employs a dramatic form or some element or elements of dramatic techniques as a means of achieving poetic ends. The **dramatic monologue** is an example.

17. elegy: a sustained and formal poem setting forth the poet's meditations upon death or another solemn theme. Examples include Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"; Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam*; and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

18. end-stopped: a line with a pause at the end. Lines that end with a period, a comma, a colon, a semicolon, an exclamation point, or a question mark are end-stopped lines.

True ease in writing comes from Art, not Chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.

19. enjambment: the continuation of the sense and grammatical construction from one line of poetry to the next. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is notable for its use of enjambment, as seen in the following lines:

. . . .Or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flow'd
Fast by the oracle of God,

20. extended metaphor: an implied analogy, or comparison, which is carried throughout a stanza or an entire poem. In "The Bait," John Donne compares a beautiful woman to fish bait and men to fish who want to be caught by the woman. Since he carries these comparisons all the way through the poem, these are considered "extended metaphors."

21. euphony: a style in which combinations of words pleasant to the ear predominate. Its opposite is **cacophony**. The following lines from John Keats' *Endymion* are euphonious:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

22. eye rhyme: rhyme that appears correct from spelling, but is half-rhyme or slant rhyme from the pronunciation. Examples include "watch" and "match," and "love" and "move."

23. feminine rhyme: a rhyme of two syllables, one stressed and one unstressed, as "waken" and "forsaken" and "audition" and "rendition." Feminine rhyme is sometimes called double rhyme.

24. figurative language: writing that uses figures of speech (as opposed to literal language or that which is actual or specifically denoted) such as **metaphor, irony, and simile**. Figurative language uses words to mean something other than their literal meaning. "The black bat night has flown" is figurative, with the **metaphor** comparing night and bat. "Night is over" says the same thing without figurative language.

25. free verse: poetry which is not written in a traditional meter but is still rhythmical. The poetry of Walt Whitman is perhaps the best-known example of free verse.

26. heroic couplet: two end-stopped iambic pentameter lines rhymed aa, bb, cc with the thought usually completed in the two-line unit. See the following example from Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*:

But when to mischief mortals bend their will,
How soon they find fit instruments of ill!

27. hyperbole: a deliberate, extravagant, and often outrageous exaggeration. It may be used for either serious or comic effect. Macbeth is using hyperbole in the following lines:

. . . No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

28. imagery: the images of a literary work; the sensory details of a work; the figurative language of a work. Imagery has several definitions, but the two that are paramount are the visual auditory, or tactile images evoked by the words of a literary work or the images that figurative language evokes. **When an AP question asks you to discuss imagery, you should look especially carefully at the sensory details and the metaphors and similes of a passage. Some diction is also imagery, but not all diction evokes sensory responses.**

29. irony: the contrast between actual meaning and the suggestion of another meaning. **Verbal irony** is a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words which carry the opposite meaning. Irony is likely to be confused with **sarcasm**, but it differs from sarcasm in that it is usually lighter, less harsh in its wording though in effect probably more cutting because of its indirectness. The ability to recognize irony is one of the surer tests of intelligence and sophistication. Among the devices by which irony is achieved are hyperbole and understatement.

30. internal rhyme: rhyme that occurs within a line, rather than at the end. The following lines contain internal rhyme:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping. . . suddenly there came a tapping. . . .

31. lyric poem: any short poem that presents a single speaker who expresses thoughts and feelings. Love lyrics are common, but lyric poems have also been written on subjects as different as religion and reading. **Sonnets and odes** are lyric poems.

32. masculine rhyme: rhyme that falls on the stressed and concluding syllables of the rhyme-words. Examples include "keep" and "sleep," "glow" and "no," and "spell" and "impel."

33. metaphor: a figurative use of language in which a comparison is expressed without the use of a comparative term like "as," "like," or "than." A **simile** would say, "night is like a black bat"; a metaphor would say, "the black bat night."

34. meter: the repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in a line of poetry. The meter of a poem emphasizes the musical quality of the language and often relates directly to the subject matter of the poem. Each unit of meter is known as a foot.

35. metonymy: a figure of speech which is characterized by the substitution of a term naming an object closely associated with the word in mind for the word itself. In this way we commonly speak of the king as the “crown,” an object closely associated with kingship.

36. mixed metaphors: the mingling of one metaphor with another immediately following with which the first is incongruous. Lloyd George is reported to have said, “I smell a rat. I see it floating in the air. I shall nip it in the bud.”

37. narrative poem: a non-dramatic poem which tells a story or presents a narrative, whether simple or complex, long or short. **Epics and ballads** are examples of narrative poems.

38. octave: an eight-line stanza. Most commonly, octave refers to the first division of an Italian sonnet.

39. onomatopoeia: the use of words whose sound suggests their meaning. Examples are “buzz,” “hiss,” or “honk.”

40. oxymoron: a form of paradox that combines a pair of contrary terms into a single expression. This combination usually serves the purpose of shocking the reader into awareness. Examples include “wise fool,” “sad joy,” and “eloquent silence.”

41. paradox: a situation or action or feeling that appears to be contradictory but on inspection turns out to be true or at least to make sense. The following lines from one of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* include paradoxes:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

42. parallelism: a similar grammatical structure within a line or lines of poetry. Parallelism is characteristic of Asian poetry, being notably present in the Psalms, and it seems to be the controlling principle of the poetry of Walt Whitman, as in the following lines:

. . . .Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them.
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

43. paraphrase: a restatement of an idea in such a way as to retain the meaning while changing the diction and form. A paraphrase is often an amplification of the original for the purpose of clarity.

44. personification: a kind of **metaphor** that gives inanimate objects or abstract ideas human characteristics.

45. poetic foot: a group of syllables in verse usually consisting of one accented syllable and one or two unaccented syllables associated with it. The most common type of feet are as follows:

iambic u /
trochaic / u
anapestic u u /
dactylic / u u
pyrrhic u u
spondaic //

The following poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge illustrates all of these feet except the pyrrhic foot:

Trochee trips from long to short.
From long to long in solemn sort
Slow Spondee stalks; strong foot! yet ill able
Ever to come up with Dactyl trisyllable.
Iambics march from short to long;
With a leap and a bound the swift Anapests throng.

46. pun: a play on words that are identical or similar in sound but have sharply diverse meanings. Puns can have serious as well as humorous uses. An example is Thomas Hood's: "They went and told the sexton and the sexton tolled the bell."

47. quatrain: a four-line stanza with any combination of rhymes.

48. refrain: a group of words forming a phrase or sentence and consisting of one or more lines repeated at intervals in a poem, usually at the end of a stanza.

49. rhyme: close similarity or identity of sound between accented syllables occupying corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse. For a true rhyme, the vowels in the accented syllables must be preceded by different consonants, such as "fan" and "ran."

50. rhyme royal: a seven-line stanza of iambic pentameter rhymed *ababbcc*, used by Chaucer and other medieval poets.

51. rhythm: the recurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables. The presence of rhythmic patterns lends both pleasure and heightened emotional response to the listener or reader.

52. sarcasm: a type of verbal irony in which a person appears to be praising something but is actually insulting it. Its purpose is to injure or to hurt.

53. satire: writing that seeks to arouse a reader's disapproval of an object by ridicule. Satire is usually comedy that exposes errors with an eye to correct vice and folly. Satire is often found in the poetry of Alexander Pope.

54. scansion: a system for describing the meter of a poem by identifying the number and the type(s) of feet per line. Following are the most common types of meter:

monometer	one foot per line
dimeter	two feet per line
trimeter	three feet per line
tetrameter	four feet per line
pentameter	five feet per line
hexameter	six feet per line
heptameter	seven feet per line
octameter	eight feet per line

Using these terms, then, a line consisting of five iambic feet is called “iambic pentameter,” while a line consisting of four anapestic feet is called “anapestic tetrameter.”

In order to determine the meter of a poem, the lines are “scanned,” or marked to indicate stressed and unstressed syllables which are then divided into feet. The following line has been scanned:

u / u / u / u / u /
And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep

55. sestet: a six-line stanza. Most commonly, sestet refers to the second division of an Italian sonnet.

56. simile: a directly expressed comparison; a figure of speech comparing two objects, usually with “like,” “as,” or “than.” It is easier to recognize a **simile** than a **metaphor** because the comparison is explicit: my love is like a fever; my love is deeper than a well. (The plural of “simile” is “similes” not “similies.”)

57. sonnet: normally a fourteen-line iambic pentameter poem. The conventional Italian, or Petrarchan sonnet is rhymed *abba, abba, cde, cde*; the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet is rhymed *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*.

58. stanza: usually a repeated grouping of three or more lines with the same meter and rhyme scheme.

59. strategy (or rhetorical strategy): the management of language for a specific effect. The strategy or rhetorical strategy of a poem is the planned placing of elements to achieve an effect. The rhetorical strategy of most love poems is deployed to convince the loved one to return to the speaker’s love. By appealing to the loved one’s sympathy, or by flattery, or by threat, the lover attempts to persuade the loved one to love in return.

60. structure: the arrangement of materials within a work; the relationship of the parts of a work to the whole; the logical divisions of a work. The most common units of structure in a poem are the line and stanza.

61. style: the mode of expression in language; the characteristic manner of expression of an author. Many elements contribute to style, and **if a question calls for a discussion of style or of “stylistic techniques,” you can discuss diction, syntax, figurative language, imagery, selection of detail, sound effects, and tone, using the ones that are appropriate.**

62. symbol: something that is simultaneously itself and a sign of something else. For example, winter, darkness, and cold are real things, but in literature they are also likely to be used as symbols of death.

63. synecdoche: a form of metaphor which in mentioning a part signifies the whole. For example, we refer to “foot soldiers” for infantry and “field hands” for manual laborers who work in agriculture.

64. syntax: the ordering of words into patterns or sentences. If a poet shifts words from the usual word order, you know you are dealing with an older style of poetry or a poet who wants to shift emphasis onto a particular word.

65. tercet: a stanza of three lines in which each line ends with the same rhyme.

66. terza rima: a three-line stanza rhymed *aba, bcb, cdc*, etc. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is written in terza rima.

67. theme: the main thought expressed by a work. In poetry, it is the abstract concept, which is made concrete through its representation in person, action, and image in the work.

68. tone: the manner in which an author expresses his or her attitude; the intonation of the voice that expresses meaning. (Remember that the “voice” need not be that of the poet.) Tone is described by adjectives, and the possibilities are nearly endless. Often a single adjective will be enough, and tone may change from stanza to stanza or even line to line. Tone is the result of **allusions, diction, figurative language, imagery, irony, symbols, syntax, and style.**

69. understatement: the opposite of hyperbole. It is a kind of irony that deliberately represents something as being much less than it really is. For example, Macbeth, having been nearly hysterical after killing Duncan, tells Lenox, “Twas a rough night.”

70. villanelle: a nineteen-line poem divided into five tercets and a final quatrain. The villanelle uses only two rhymes which are repeated as follows: *aba, aba, aba, aba, aba, abaa*. Line 1 is repeated entirely to form lines 6, 12, and 18, and line 3 is repeated entirely to form lines 9, 15, and 19; thus, eight of the nineteen lines are refrain. Dylan Thomas’s poem “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is an example of a villanelle.