WHAT ARE LITERARY DEVICES?

Metaphors, similes, imagery, personification, allusion, alliteration. What do they have in common? They are all forms of comparison—a way of perceiving and interpreting the world by examining an object's relationship to other objects.

Metaphors and similes are the most obvious examples of comparison. A metaphor is a direct comparison of two things—"the tree is a giant," for example. A simile is an *in*direct comparison—"the tree is *like* a giant." In both instances, the tree is described as being something other than what it actually is—a tree.

What about those other devices, though? How is imagery a comparison, isn't that just a vivid description of something? And how is alliteration a comparison, when that just describes sounds?

Later in this article, we go in-depth in each of the common literary devices, including an analysis of how each device is a comparison. For now, think of literary devices as a way of connecting ideas to the world at large; a way of telling the reader *how* to read the piece.

Literary Devices List: 11 Common Literary Devices

In this article, we focus on literary devices that can be found in both poetry and prose.

There are *a lot* of literary devices to cover, each of which require their own examples and analysis. As such, we are only focusing on common literary devices for this article: literary devices that can be found in both poetry and prose. Let's get started!

Each section has literary devices examples, exercises, and an analysis of its role in literature.

1. Metaphor

Metaphors, also known as direct comparisons, are one of the most common literary devices. A metaphor is a statement in which two objects, often unrelated, are compared to each other.

Example of metaphor: This tree is the god of the forest.
Obviously, the tree is not a god—it is, in fact, a tree. However, by stating that the tree *is* the god, the reader is given the image of something strong, large, and

immovable. Additionally, using "god" to describe the tree, rather than a word like "giant" or "gargantuan," makes the tree feel like a spiritual center of the forest.

Metaphors allow the writer to pack multiple descriptions and images into one short sentence. The metaphor has much more weight and value than a direct description. If the writer chose to describe the tree as "the large, spiritual center of the forest," the reader won't understand the full importance of the tree's size and scope.

2. Simile

Similes, also known as indirect comparisons, are similar in construction to metaphors, but they imply a different meaning. Like metaphors, two unrelated objects are being compared to each other. Unlike a metaphor, the comparison relies on the words "like" or "as."

Example of simile: This tree is like the god of the forest.
OR: This tree acts as the god of the forest.
What is the difference between a simile and a metaphor?

The obvious difference between these two common literary devices is that a simile uses "like" or "as," whereas a metaphor never uses these comparison words.

Additionally, in reference to the above examples, the insertion of "like" or "as" creates a degree of separation between both elements of the device. In a simile, the reader understands that, although the tree is certainly large, it isn't large enough to be a god; the tree's "godhood" is simply a description, not a relevant piece of information to the poem or story.

Simply put, metaphors are better to use as a central device within the poem/story, encompassing the core of what you are trying to say. Similes are better as a supporting device.

Does that mean metaphors are better than similes? Absolutely not. Consider Louise Gluck's poem "The Past." Gluck uses both a simile and a metaphor to describe the sound of the wind: it is like shadows moving, but is her mother's voice. Both devices are equally haunting, and ending the poem on the mother's voice tells us the central emotion of the poem.

Simile and Metaphor Writing Exercise: Tenors and Vehicles

Most metaphors and similes have two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor refers to the subject being described, and the vehicle refers to the image that describes the tenor.

So, in the metaphor "the tree is a god of the forest," the tenor is the tree and the vehicle is "god of the forest."

To practice writing metaphors and similes, let's create some literary device lists. grab a sheet of paper and write down two lists. In the first list, write down "concept words"—words that cannot be physically touched. Love, hate, peace, war, happiness, and anger are all concepts because they can all be described but are not physical objects in themselves.

In the second list, write down *only* concrete objects—trees, clouds, the moon, Jupiter, New York brownstones, uncut sapphires, etc.

Your concepts are your tenors, and your concrete objects are your vehicles. Now, randomly draw a one between each tenor and each vehicle, then write an explanation for your metaphor/simile. You might write, say:

"Peace, like an uncut sapphire, gleams with labor."
Have fun, write interesting literary devices, and try to incorporate them into a future poem or story!

3. Imagery

Is imagery a literary device? Absolutely! Imagery can be both literal and figurative, and it relies on the interplay of language and sensation to create a sharper image in your brain.

Imagery is what it sounds like—the use of figurative language to describe something.

Imagery is what it sounds like—the use of figurative language to describe something. In fact, we've already seen imagery in action through the previous literary devices: by describing the tree as a "god", the tree looks large and sturdy in the reader's mind.

However, imagery doesn't *just* involve visual descriptions; the best writers use imagery to appeal to all five senses. By appealing to the reader's sense of sight,

sound, touch, taste, and smell, your writing will create a vibrant world for readers to live and breathe in.

The best writers use imagery to appeal to all five senses

Let's use imagery to describe that same tree. (I promise I can write about more than just trees, but it's a very convenient image for these literary devices, don't you think?)

Sight imagery: The tree spread its gigantic, sun-flecked shoulders.
Sound imagery: The forest was hushed, resounding with echoes of the tree's stoic silence.
Touch imagery: The tree felt smooth as sandstone.
Taste imagery: The tree's leaves tasted bitter, like unroasted coffee beans.
Smell imagery: As we approached the tree, the air around it smelled crisp and precise.
Notice how these literary device examples also used metaphors and similes? Literary devices often pile on top of each other, which is why so many great works of literature can be analyzed endlessly. Because imagery depends on the object's likeness to other objects, imagery upholds the idea that a literary device is synonymous with comparison.

Imagery Writing Exercise

Want to try your hand at imagery? You can practice this concept by describing an object in the same way that this article describes a tree! Choose something to write about—any object, image, or idea—and describe it using the five senses. ("This biscuit has the tidy roundness of a lady's antique hat." "The biscuit tastes of brand-new cardboard." and so on!)

Then, once you've written five (or more) lines of imagery, try combining these images until your object is sharp and clear in the reader's head.

4. Symbolism

Symbolism combines a lot of the ideas presented in metaphor and imagery. Essentially, a symbol is the use of an object to represent a concept—it's kind of like a metaphor, except more concise!

Symbols are everywhere in the English language, and we often use these common literary devices in speech and design without realizing it. The following are very common examples of symbolism:

A few very commonly used symbols include:

- "Peace" represented by a white dove
- "Love" represented by a red rose
- "Conformity" represented by sheep
- "Idea" represented by a light bulb switching on

The symbols above are *so* widely used that they would likely show up as clichés in your own writing. (Would you read a poem, written today, that started with "Let's release the white dove of peace"?) In that sense, they do their job "too well"—they're *such* a good symbol for what they symbolize that they've become ubiquitous, and you'll have to add something new in your own writing.

Symbols are often contextually specific as well. For example, a common practice in Welsh marriage is to give your significant other a lovespoon, which the man has designed and carved to signify the relationship's unique, everlasting bond. In many Western cultures, this same bond is represented by a diamond ring—which can also be unique and everlasting!

Symbolism makes the core ideas of your writing concrete.

Finally, notice how each of these examples are a concept represented by a concrete object. Symbolism makes the core ideas of your writing concrete, and also allows you to manipulate your ideas. If a rose represents love, what does a wilted rose or a rose on fire represent?

Symbolism Writing Exercise

Often, symbols are commonly understood images—but not always. You can invent your own symbols to capture the reader's imagination, too!

Try your hand at symbolism by writing a poem or story centered around a symbol. Choose a random object, and make that object represent something. For example, you could try to make a blanket represent the idea of loneliness.

When you've paired an object and a concept, write your piece with that symbol at the center:

The down blanket lay crumpled, unused, on the empty side of our bed.
The goal is to make it clear that you're associating the object with the concept. Make the reader feel the same way about your symbol as you do!

5. Personification

Personification, giving human attributes to nonhuman objects, is a powerful way to foster empathy in your readers.

Personification is exactly what it sounds like: giving human attributes to nonhuman objects. Also known as anthropomorphism, personification is a powerful way to foster empathy in your readers.

Think about personification as if it's a specific type of imagery. You can describe a nonhuman object through the five senses, and do so by giving it human descriptions. You can even impute thoughts and emotions—mental events—to a nonhuman or even nonliving thing. This time, we'll give human attributes to a car—see our personification examples below!

Personification (using sight): The car ran a marathon down the highway.

Personification (using sound): The car coughed, hacked, and spluttered.

Personification (using touch): The car was smooth as a baby's bottom.

Personification (using taste): The car tasted the bitter asphalt.

Personification (using smell): The car needed a cold shower.

Personification (using mental events): The car remembered its first owner fondly. Notice how we don't *directly* say the car is like a human—we merely describe it using human behaviors. Personification exists at a unique intersection of imagery and metaphor, making it a powerful literary device that fosters empathy and generates unique descriptions.

Personification Writing Exercise

Try writing personification yourself! In the above example, we chose a random object and personified it through the five senses. It's your turn to do the same thing: find a concrete noun and describe it like it's a human.

Here are two examples:

The ancient, threadbare rug was clearly tired of being stepped on.

My phone issued notifications with the grimly efficient extroversion of a sorority chapter president.
Now start writing your own! Your descriptions can be active or passive, but the goal is to foster empathy in the reader's mind by giving the object human traits.

6. Hyperbole

You know that one friend who describes things very dramatically? They're probably speaking in hyperboles. Hyperbole is just a dramatic word for being over-dramatic—sounds a little hyperbolic, don't you think?

Basically, hyperbole refers to any sort of exaggerated description or statement. We use hyperbole all the time in the English language, and you've probably heard someone say things like:

- I've been waiting a billion years for this
- I'm so hungry I could eat a horse
- I feel like a million bucks
- You are the king of the kitchen

None of these examples should be interpreted literally: there are no kings in the kitchen, and I doubt anyone can eat an entire horse in one sitting. This common literary device allows us to compare our emotions to something extreme, giving the reader a sense of how intensely we feel something in the moment.

This is what makes hyperbole so fun! Coming up with crazy, exaggerated statements that convey the intensity of the speaker's emotions can add a personable element to your writing. After all, we all feel our emotions to a certain intensity, and hyperbole allows us to experience that intensity to its fullest.

Hyperbole Writing Exercise

To master the art of the hyperbole, try expressing your own emotions as extremely as possible. For example, if you're feeling thirsty, don't just write that you're thirsty, write that you could drink the entire ocean. Or, if you're feeling homesick, don't write that you're yearning for home, write that your homeland feels as far as Jupiter.

As a specific exercise, you can try writing a poem or short piece about something mundane, using more and more hyperbolic language with each line or sentence. Here's an example:

It was a brutally hot 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The April spring sun boiled blood and sent birds exploding. I'm sorry that I'm mowing my lawn on THE SURFACE OF THE SUN. (...and so on!)
A well-written hyperbole helps focus the reader's attention on your emotions and allows you to play with new images, making it a fun, chaos-inducing literary device.

7. Irony

Is irony a literary device? Yes—but it's often used incorrectly. People often describe something as being ironic, when really it's just a moment of dark humor. So, the colloquial use of the word irony is a bit off from its official definition as a literary device.

Irony is, first, when the writer describes something by using opposite language. As a real-life example, if someone is having a bad day, they might say they're doing "*greaaaaaat*", clearly implying that they're actually doing quite un-greatly. Or a story's narrator might write:

Like most bureaucrats, she felt a boundless love for her job, and was eager to share that good feeling with others.
In literature, irony can describe dialogue, but it also describes ironic *situations*: situations that proceed in ways that are elaborately contrary to what one would expect. A clear example of this is in *The Wizard of Oz*. All of the characters already have what they are looking for, so when they go to the wizard and discover that they all have brains, hearts, etc., their petition—making a long, dangerous journey to beg for what they already have—is deeply ironic.

Irony Writing Exercise

For verbal irony, try writing a sentence that gives something the exact opposite qualities that it actually has:

The triple bacon cheeseburger glistened with health and good choices.
For situational irony, try writing an imagined plot for a sitcom, starting with "Ben lost his car keys and can't find them anywhere." What would be the most ironic way for that situation to be resolved? (Are they sitting in plain view on Ben's desk... at the detective agency he runs?) Have fun with it!

8. Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition refers to the placement of contrasting ideas next to each other, often to produce an ironic or thought-provoking effect. Writers use juxtaposition in

both poetry and prose, though this common literary device looks slightly different within each realm of literature.

In poetry, juxtaposition is used to build tension or highlight an important contrast. Consider the poem "A Juxtaposition" by Kenneth Burke, which juxtaposes nation & individual, treble & bass, and loudness & silence. The result is a poem that, although short, condemns the paradox of a citizen trapped in their own nation.

Just a note: these juxtapositions are also examples of *antithesis*, which is when the writer juxtaposes two *completely opposite* ideas. Juxtaposition doesn't have to be completely contrarian, but in this poem, it is.

Juxtaposition accomplishes something similar in prose. A famous example comes from the opening *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of time." Dickens opens his novel by situating his characters into a world of contrasts, which is apt for the extreme wealth disparities pre-French Revolution.

Juxtaposition Writing Exercise

One great thing about juxtaposition is that it can dismantle something that appears to be a binary. For example, black and white are often assumed to be polar opposites, but when you put them next to each other, you'll probably get some gray in the middle.

To really master the art of juxtaposition, try finding two things that you think are polar opposites. They can be concepts, such as good & evil, or they can be people, places, objects, etc. Juxtapose your two selected items by starting your writing with both of them—for example:

Across the town from her wedding, the bank robbers were tying up the hostages.

I put the box of chocolates on the coffee table, next to the gas mask.
Then write a poem or short story that explores a "gray area," relationship, commonality, or resonance between these two objects or events—without stating as much directly. If you can accomplish what Dickens or Burke accomplishes with their juxtapositions, then you, too, are a master!

9. Allusion

If you haven't noticed, literary devices are often just fancy words for simple concepts. A metaphor is literally a comparison and hyperbole is just an over-exaggeration. In this same style, allusion is just a fancy word for a literary reference; when a writer alludes to something, they are either directly or indirectly referring to another, commonly-known piece of art or literature.

The most frequently-alluded to work is probably the Bible. Many colloquial phrases and ideas stem from it, since many themes and images from the Bible present themselves in popular works and Western culture. Any of the following ideas, for example, are Biblical allusions:

- Referring to a kind stranger as a Good Samaritan
- Describing an ideal place as Edenic, or the Garden of Eden
- Saying someone "turned the other cheek" when they were passive in the face of adversity
- When something is described as lasting "40 days and 40 nights," in reference to the flood of Noah's Ark

Of course, allusion literary devices aren't just Biblical. You might describe a woman as being as beautiful as the Mona Lisa, or you might call a man as stoic as Hemingway.

Why write allusions? Allusions appeal to common experiences: they are metaphors in their own right, as we understand what it means to describe an ideal place as Edenic.

Like the other common literary devices, allusions are often metaphors, images, and/or hyperboles. And, like other literary devices, allusions also have their own sub-categories.

Allusion Writing Exercise

See how densely you can allude to other works and experiences in writing about something simple. Go completely outside of good taste and name-drop like crazy:

Allusions (way too much version): I wanted Nikes, not Adidas, because I want to be like Mike. But still, "a rose by any other name"—they're just shoes, and "if the shoe fits, wear it."
From this schizophrenic style of writing, trim back to something more tasteful:

Allusions (more tasteful version): I had wanted Nikes, not Adidas—but "if the shoe fits, wear it."

10. Allegory

An allegory is a story whose sole purpose is to represent an abstract concept or idea. As such, allegories are *sometimes* extended allusions.

For example, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is an allegory for the deterioration of Communism during the early establishment of the U.S.S.R. The farm was founded on a shared goal of overthrowing the farming elite and establishing an equitable society, but this society soon declines. *Animal Farm* mirrors the Bolshevik Revolution, the overthrow of the Russian aristocracy, Lenin's death, Stalin's execution of Trotsky, and the nation's dissolution into a moralless, authoritarian police state. Thus, *Animal Farm* is an allegory/allusion to the U.S.S.R.:

Allusion (excerpt from *Animal Farm*):

"There were times when it seemed to the animals that they worked longer hours and fed no better than they had done in [Farmer] Jones's day."
However, allegories are not always allusions. Consider Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," which represents the idea of enlightenment. By representing a complex idea, this allegory could actually be closer to an extended symbol rather than an extended allusion.

Allegory Writing Exercise

Pick a major trend going on in the world. In this example, let's pick the growing reach of social media as our "major trend."

Next, what are the primary properties of that major trend? Try to list them out:

- More connectedness
- A loss of privacy
- People carefully massaging their image and sharing that image widely

Next, is there something happening at—or that *could* happen at—a much smaller scale that has some or all of those primary properties? This is where your creativity comes into play.

Well... what if elementary school children not only started sharing their private diaries, but were now *expected* to share their diaries? Let's try writing from inside that reality:

I know Jennifer McMahon made up her diary entry about how much she misses her grandma. The tear smudges were way too neat and perfect. Anyway, everyone loved it. They photocopied it all over the bulletin boards and they even read it over the PA, and Jennifer got two extra brownies at lunch.
Try your own! You may find that you've just written your own *Black Mirror* episode.

11. Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis refers to a poem or story that is directly inspired by another piece of art. Ekphrastic literature often describes another piece of art, such as the classic "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."
Ekphrasis can be considered a direct allusion because it borrows language and images from other artwork. For a great example of ekphrasis—as well as a submission opportunity for writers!—check out the monthly ekphrastic challenge that Rattle Poetry runs.

Ekphrasis writing exercise

Try your hand at ekphrasis by picking a piece of art you really enjoy and writing a poem or story based off of it. For example, you could write a story about Mona Lisa having a really bad day, or you could write a black-out poem created from the lyrics of your favorite song.

Or, try *Rattle*'s monthly ekphrastic challenge! All art inspires other art, and by letting ekphrasis guide your next poem or story, you're directly participating in a greater artistic and literary conversation.

12–23. Devices in Poetry

The following 12 devices apply to both poetry and prose writers, but they appear most often in verse. Learn more about:

12. Anaphora
13. Conceit
14. Apostrophe
15. Metonymy/Synecdoche
16. Enjambment
17. Zeugma
18. Repetition
19. Rhyme
20. Alliteration
21. Consonance/Assonance
22. Euphony/Cacophony
23. Meter

24–33. Devices in Prose

The following 10 devices show up in verse, but are far more prevalent in prose. Learn more about:

24. Parallelism
25. Foil
26. Diction
27. Mood
28. Foreshadowing
29. In Media Res
30. Dramatic Irony
31. Vignette
32. Flashback
33. Soliloquy