

kennings

A **kenning** is a literary device in which a poetic phrase substitutes for a noun. In the best kennings, one element of the phrase will create a striking, unexpected comparison. Often used in Anglo-Saxon poetry and especially in *Beowulf*, a kenning provides powerful imagery that would help the audience focus on the words of the *scop* or poet telling the story. A kenning also allows the *scop* some variety, so words don't become overused. Finally, Anglo-Saxon poetry depended heavily on alliteration, and some kennings provided additional alliteration. Here are examples:

sky-candle (the sun)
swan-road (the sea)
stout-hearted (brave)
battle sweat (blood)
light-of-battle (sword)

helmet bearers (warriors)
giver of gold (king)
earth-hall (burial mound, barrow)
dwelling place (home)
storm of swords (battle)

When we translate these kennings from Anglo-Saxon, they lose some of their poetic quality because the sound changes. For example, the alliteration may disappear.

Listed below are some modern kennings. Can you find examples of striking imagery, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, and assonance among them? Can you identify the concept each kenning represents?

1. gas guzzler
2. headhunter
3. muffin top
4. rug rat
5. land line

6. eye candy
7. cancer stick
8. boob tube
9. couch potato
10. tramp stamp

Can you create at least 5 kennings of your own? Be sure to include poetic qualities.

Kenning

Answer Key

1. gas guzzler – a vehicle that has poor gas mileage (alliteration, striking imagery)
2. headhunter – a person who finds executive positions for job seekers (consonance with the “h” sound, striking imagery)
3. muffin top – extra skin at the top of a pair of too-tight jeans (striking imagery)
4. rug rat – a mischievous child (alliteration, striking imagery)
5. land line – a traditional telephone (alliteration)
6. eye candy – a person or thing with visual appeal but little substance (striking imagery)
7. cancer stick – a cigarette (striking imagery)
8. boob tube – television (rhyme, striking imagery)
9. couch potato – a person who gets little exercise (assonance and striking imagery)
10. tramp stamp – a tattoo on the lower back (rhyme, striking imagery)