

Allegory: An allegory is a kind of extended metaphor (a metaphor that weaves throughout the poem) in which objects, persons, and actions stand for another meaning.

Alliteration: Alliteration happens when words that begin with the same sound are placed close to one another. For example, “the silly snake silently slinked by” is a form of alliteration. Try saying that ten times fast.

Allusion: An allusion happens when a speaker or character makes a brief and casual reference to a famous historical or literary figure or event.

Anaphora: Anaphora involves the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses or sections. Think of an annoying kid on a road trip: “Are we there yet? / Are we going to stop soon? / Are we having lunch soon?”. Not a poem we’d like to read in its entirety, but the repetition of the word “are” is anaphora.

Anthologize: To put in a poetry anthology, usually for teaching purposes, so that students have a broad selection of works to choose from. Usually, the word will come up in a context like this: “That’s one of her most famous poems. I’ve seen it anthologized a lot.” An anthology is a book that has samples of the work of a lot of different writers. It’s like a plate of appetizers so you can try out a bunch of stuff. You can also find anthologies for different periods, like Romantic, Modern, and Postmodern. The Norton, Columbia, and Best American anthologies are three of the most famous.

Apostrophe: Apostrophe is when an idea, person, object, or absent being is addressed as if it or they were present, alive, and kicking. John Donne uses apostrophe when he writes this: “Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful.”

Avant Garde: You’ll hear this word used to describe some of the craziest, most far-out, experimental poets. It was originally a French expression that refers to the soldiers who go explore a territory before the main army comes in. Avant garde artists are often people who break through boundaries and do what’s never been done before. Then again, sometimes there’s a good reason why something has been done before...

Ballad: A ballad is a song: think boy bands and chest-thumping emotion. But in poetry, a ballad is ancient form of storytelling. In the (very) old days, common people didn’t get their stories from books – they were sung as musical poems. Because they are meant to convey information, ballads usually have a simple rhythm and a consistent rhyme scheme. They often tell the story of everyday heroes, and some poets, like Bob Dylan, continue to set them to music.

Blank Verse: Thanks to Shakespeare and others, blank verse is one of the most common forms of English poetry. It’s verse that has no rhyme scheme but has a regular meter. Usually this meter is iambic pentameter (check out our definition below). Why is blank verse so common in English? Well, a lot of people think we speak in it in our everyday conversations. Kind of like we just did: “a LOT of PEO-ple THINK we SPEAK in IT.” That could be a blank verse line.

Cadence: Cadence refers to the rhythmic or musical elements of a poem. You can think of it as the thing that makes poetry sound like poetry. Whereas “meter” refers to the regular elements of rhythm – the beats or accents – “cadence” refers to the momentary variations in rhythm, like when a line speeds up or slows down. Poets often repeat or contrast certain cadences to create a more interesting sound than normal prose.

Caesura: A fancy word for a pause that occurs in the middle of a line of verse. Use this if you want to sound smart, but we think “pause” is just fine. You can create pauses in a lot of ways, but the most obvious is to use punctuation like a period, comma, or semicolon. Note that a pause at the end of a line is not a caesura.

Chiasmus: Chiasmus consists of two parallel phrases in which corresponding words or phrases are placed in the opposite order: “Fair is foul, foul is fair.”

Cliché: Clichés are phrases or expressions that are used so much in everyday life, that people roll their eyes when they hear them. For example, “dead as a doornail” is a cliché. In good poetry, clichés are never used with a straight face, so if you see one, consider why the speaker might be using it.

Concrete Poetry: Concrete poetry conveys meaning by how it looks on the page. It’s not a super-accurate term, and it can refer to a lot of different kinds of poems. One classic example is poems that look like they thing they describe. The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire wrote a poem about Paris in the shape of the Eiffel tower.

Connotation: The suggestive meaning of a word – the associations it brings up. The reason it’s not polite to call a mentally-handicapped person “retarded” is that the word has *anegative* connotation. Connotations depend a lot on the culture and experience of the person reading the word. For some people, the word “liberal” has a positive connotation. For others, it’s negative. Think of connotation as the murky haze hanging around the literal meaning of a word. Trying to figure out connotations of words can be one of the most confusing and fascinating aspects of reading poetry.

Contradiction: Two statements that don’t seem to agree with each other. “I get sober when I drink alcohol” is a contradiction. Some contradictions, like “paradox” (see our definition below), are only apparent, and they become true when you think about them in a certain way.

Denotation: The literal, straightforward meaning of a word. It’s “dictionary definition.” The word “cat” denotes an animal with four legs and a habit of coughing up furballs.

Dramatic Monologue: You can think of a dramatic monologue in poetry as a speech taken from a play that was never written. Okay, maybe that’s confusing. It’s a poem written in the voice of a fictional character and delivered to a fictional listener, instead of in the voice of a poet to his or her readers. The British poet Robert Browning is one of the most famous writers of

dramatic monologues. They are “dramatic” because they can be acted out, just like a play, and they are monologues because they consist of just one person speaking to another person, just as a “dialogue” consists of two people speaking. (The prefix “mono” means “one,” whereas “di” means “two”).

Elegy: An elegy is a poem about a dead person or thing. Whenever you see a poem with the title, “In Memory of . . .”, for example, you’re talking about an elegy. Kind of like that two-line poem you wrote for your pet rabbit Bubbles when you were five years old. Poor, poor Bubbles.

Ellipsis: You see ellipses all the time, usually in the form of “...”. An ellipsis involves leaving out or suppressing words. It’s like . . . well, you get the idea.

Enjambment: When a phrase carries over a line-break without a major pause. In French, the word means, “straddling,” which we think is a perfect way to envision an enjambed line. Here’s an example of enjambment from a poem by Joyce Kilmer: ‘I think that I shall never see / A poem as lovely as a tree.’ The sentence continues right over the break with only a slight pause.

Extended metaphor: A central metaphor that acts like an “umbrella” to connect other metaphors or comparisons within it. It can span several lines or an entire poem. When one of Shakespeare’s characters delivers an entire speech about how all the world is a stage and people are just actors, that’s extended metaphor, with the idea of “theater” being the umbrella connecting everything.

Foot: The most basic unit of a poem’s meter, a foot is a combination of long and short syllables. There are all kinds of different feet, such as “LONG-short” and “short-short-LONG.” The first three words of the famous holiday poem, “’Twas the Night before Christmas,” are one metrical foot (short-short-LONG). By far the most important foot to know is the iamb: short-LONG. An iamb is like one heartbeat: ba-DUM.

Free Verse: “Free bird! Play free bird!” Oops, we meant “Free verse! Define free verse!” Free verse is a poetic style that lacks a regular meter or rhyme scheme. This may sound like free verse has no style at all, but usually there is some recognizable consistency to the writer’s use of rhythm. Walt Whitman was one of the pioneers of free verse, and nobody ever had trouble identifying a Whitman poem.

Haiku: A poetic form invented by the Japanese. In English, the haiku has three sections with five syllables, seven syllables, and five syllables respectively. They often describe natural imagery and include a word that reveals the season in which the poem is set. Aside from its three sections, the haiku also traditionally features a sharp contrast between two ideas or images.

Heroic Couplet: Heroic couplets are rhyming pairs of verse in iambic pentameter. What on earth did this “couplets” do to become “heroic”? Did they pull a cat out of a tree or save an old lady from a burning building? In fact, no. They are called “heroic” because in the old days of

English poetry they were used to talk about the trials and adventures of heroes. Although heroic couplets totally ruled the poetry scene for a long time, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, nowadays they can sound kind of old-fashioned.

Hyperbole: A hyperbole is a gross exaggeration. For example, “tons of money” is a hyperbole.

Iambic Pentameter: Here it is, folks. Probably the single most useful technical term in poetry. Let’s break it down: an “iamb” is an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. “Penta” means “five,” and “meter” refers to a regular rhythmic pattern. So “iambic pentameter” is a kind of *rhythmic pattern* that consist of *five iambs* per line. It’s the most common rhythm in English poetry and sounds like five heartbeats: ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM. Let’s try it out on the first line of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*: “In fair Verona, where we lay our scene.” Every second syllable is accented, so this is classic iambic pentameter.

Imagery: Imagery is intense, descriptive language in a poem that helps to trigger our senses and our memories when we read it.

Irony: Irony involves saying one thing while really meaning another, contradictory thing.

Metaphor: A metaphor happens when one thing is described as being another thing. “You’re a toad!” is a metaphor – although not a very nice one. And metaphor is different from simile because it leaves out the words “like” or “as.” For example, a simile would be, “You’re *like* a toad.”

Metonymy: Metonymy happens when some attribute of what is being described is used to indicate some other attribute. When talking about the power of a king, for example, one may instead say “the crown”-- that is, the physical attribute that is usually identified with royalty and power.

Ode: A poem written in praise or celebration of a person, thing, or event. Odes have been written about everything from famous battles and lofty emotions to family pets and household appliances. What would you write an ode about?

Onomatopoeia: Besides being a really fun word to say aloud, onomatopoeia refers either to words that resemble in sound what they represent. For example, do you hear the hissing noise when you say the word “hiss” aloud? And the old Batman television show *loved* onomatopoeia: “Bam! Pow! Kaplow!”

Oxymoron: An oxymoron is the combination of two terms ordinarily seen as opposites. For example, “terribly good” is an oxymoron.

Paradox: A statement that contradicts itself and nonetheless seems true. It’s a paradox when John Donne writes, “Death, thou shalt die,” because he’s using “death” in two different senses. A more everyday example might be, “Nobody goes to the restaurant because it’s too crowded.”

Parallelism: Parallelism happens a lot in poetry. It is the similarity of structure in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses. Julius Caesar's famous words, "I came, I saw, I conquered," are an example of parallelism. Each clause begins with "I" and ends with a verb.

Pastoral: A poem about nature or simple, country life. If the poem you're reading features babbling brooks, gently swaying trees, hidden valleys, rustic haystacks, and sweetly singing maidens, you're probably dealing with a pastoral. The oldest English pastoral poems were written about the English countryside, but there are plenty of pastorals about the American landscape, too.

Personification: Personification involves giving human traits (qualities, feelings, action, or characteristics) to non-living objects (things, colors, qualities, or ideas).

Pun: A pun is a play on words. Puns show us the multiple meanings of a word by replacing that word with another that is similar in sound but has a very different meaning. For example, "when Shmoop went trick-or-treating in a Batman costume, he got lots of snickers." Hehe.

Quatrain: A stanza with four lines. Quatrains are the most common stanza form.

Refrain: A refrain is a regularly recurring phrase or verse especially at the end of each stanza or division of a poem or song. For example in T.S. Eliot's *Love Song for J. Alfred Prufrock*, the line, "in the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" is a refrain.

Rhetorical Question: Rhetorical questions involve asking a question for a purpose other than obtaining the information requested. For example, when we ask, "Shmoop, are you nuts?", we are mainly expressing our belief that Shmoop is crazy. In this case, we don't really expect Shmoop to tell us whether or not they are nuts.

Rhyming Couplet: A rhyming couplet is a pair of verses that rhyme. It's the simplest and most common rhyme scheme, but it can have more complicated variations (see "Heroic Couplet" for one example).

Simile: Similes compare one thing directly to another. For example, "My love is like a burning flame" is a simile. You can quickly identify similes when you see the words "like" or "as" used, as in "x is like y." Similes are different from metaphors – for example, a metaphor would refer to "the burning flame of my love."

Slam: A form of contemporary poetry that is meant to be performed at informal competitions rather than read. Slam readings are often very political in nature and draw heavily from the rhythms and energy of hip-hop music.

Slant Rhyme: A rhyme that isn't quite a rhyme. The words "dear" and "door" form a slant rhyme. The words sound similar, but they aren't close enough to make a full rhyme.

Sonnet: A well-known poetic form. Two of the most famous examples are the sonnets of William Shakespeare and John Donne. A traditional sonnet has fourteen lines in iambic pentameter and a regular rhyme scheme. Sonnets also feature a “turn” somewhere in the middle, where the poem takes a new direction or changes its argument in some way. This change can be subtle or really obvious. Although we English-speaking folks would love to take credit for this amazing form, it was actually developed by the Italians and didn’t arrive in England until the 16th century.

Speaker: The speaker is the voice *behind* the poem – the person we imagine to be speaking. It’s important to note that the speaker is *not* the poet. Even if the poem is biographical, you should treat the speaker as a fictional creation, because the writer is choosing what to say about himself. Besides, even poets don’t speak in poetry in their everyday lives – although it would be cool if they did.

Stanza: A division within a poem where a group of lines are formed into a unit. The word “stanza” comes from the Italian word for “room.” Just like a room, a poetic stanza is set apart on a page by four “walls” of blank, white space.

Symbol: Generally speaking, a symbol is a sign representing something other than itself.

Synecdoche: In synecdoche a part of something represents the whole. For example: “One does not live by bread alone.” The statement assumes that bread is representative of all categories of food.

Syntax: In technical terms, syntax is the study of how to put sentences together. In poetry, “syntax” refers to the way words and phrases relate to each other. Some poems have a syntax similar to everyday prose of spoken English (like the sentences you’re reading right now). Other poems have a crazier syntax, where it’s hard to see how things fit together at all. It can refer to the order of words in a sentence, like Yoda’s wild syntax from the *Star Wars* movies: “A very important concept in poetry, syntax is!” Or, more figuratively, it can refer to the organization of ideas or topics in a poem: “Why did the poet go from talking about his mother to a description of an ostrich?”

Understatement: An understatement seeks to express a thought or impression by underemphasizing the extent to which a statement may be true. Understatement is the opposite of hyperbole and is frequently used for its comedic value in articles, speeches, etc. when issues of great importance are being discussed. Ex: “There’s just one, tiny, little problem with that plan – it’ll get us all killed!”