

15 Literary Tricks

The Basic Literary Devices

There are a lot of the “tricks of the trade” whether you are talking about magic tricks, plumbing, painting, or writing. These are the simple things writers do to capture the imaginations of their readers. It does not matter whether you are writing Poetry or a Sermon, a Newspaper Article, Analytical Essay for Government Class, or a Short Story, these tricks will come in handy. Not all of them are equally important, but all are worth knowing. And there’s more where these came from. You can check out the additional 40 Special Effects – more Literary Devices for you to use.



1. ALLITERATION Repetition of the same or similar consonant sounds in words that are close together.

- “When the two youths turned with the flag they saw that much of the regiment had crumbled away, and the dejected remnant was coming slowly back.”

—Stephen Crane, *Red Badge of Courage*

- “Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, worse.”

—J K Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

2. ALLUSION Reference to someone or something that is known from history, literature, religion, politics, sports, science, or another branch of culture. An indirect reference to something (usually from literature).

- “When she lost her job, she acted like a Scrooge, and refused to buy anything that wasn’t necessary.” Scrooge was an extremely stingy character

- “Chocolate was her Achilles’ heel.” This means that her weakness was her love of chocolate. Achilles is a character in Greek mythology who was invincible. His mother dipped him in magical water when he was a baby, and she held him by the heel. The magic protected him all over, except for his heel.

3. ANTITHESIS Anti = Against and Thesis = Idea, so opposite ideas placed near each other in a text. When the ideas are placed right next to one another this may be called **Juxtaposition**.

- *"That's one small step for a man – one giant leap for mankind." -- Neil Armstrong*
- *"The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did." -- Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address*

4. HYPERBOLE A figure of speech that uses an incredible exaggeration or overstatement, for effect.

- *"If I've told you once, I've told you a million times...." -- My Dad*
- *"Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around ..." -- JK Rowling, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
- *"Boys only want love if it's torture." -- Taylor Swift, Blank Space*

5. IMAGERY The use of language to evoke a picture or a concrete sensation of a person, a thing, a place, or an experience. Imagery uses images, words that appeal to senses: taste, sight, touch, smell, hearing.

- *"Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer's morning, when the Riddle House had still been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead." -- JK Rowling, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
- *"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort." -- JRR Tolkien, The Hobbit*
- *"I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom, for me and you
And I think to myself, "What a wonderful world."
I see skies of blue, and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself, "What a wonderful world." -- Louis Armstrong*

6. IRONY When what appears to be true on the surface is not the case.

- Dramatic Irony – When the audience knows something to be true the actors on stage do not know. Romeo does not know Juliet is alive in the tomb.
- Verbal Irony – Sarcasm, saying something opposite to what you mean.
- Situational Irony – An incongruous situation, one that does not make sense

See additional Worksheet “3 Types of Irony” for more detail and examples

7. METAPHOR A figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things without the use of such specific words like or as.

- *“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!”* -- Shakespeare, “Romeo and Juliet”

NOTE: Romeo compares Juliet to the bright, beautiful sun which rises in the east daily.

- *“The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore.”*

-- JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

NOTE: Picked over is a metaphor for looking closely, as when someone picks over their chicken bones to eat every last bit of meat; embroidered refers to the art of adding needlework to cloth in patterns or pictures, and so refers to adding things to what is already there.

8. SIMILE A figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things, so – the same as a metaphor, except in a simile, the author uses the words “like” or “as.”

- *“He sat as still as a mouse, in the futile hope that whoever it was might go away after a single attempt. But no, the knocking was repeated. The worst thing of all would be to delay. His heart was thumping like a drum, but his face, from long habit, was probably expressionless.”* -- Orwell, 1984

9. MOTIF A recurring image, word, phrase, action, idea, object, or situation used throughout a work (or in several works by one author), unifying the work by tying the current situation to previous ones, or new ideas to the theme.

- Kurt Vonnegut uses *"So it goes"* throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* to remind the reader of the senselessness of death.
- Every Star Wars movie has someone say, *"I have a bad feeling about this."*

10. PARALLELISM The repetition of phrases that have similar grammatical structures.

- *"And forgive us this day our trespasses, as we forgive the trespasses of others."*
-- The Bible
- *"I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality in this day; with this faith I will go out and carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair, with this faith I will go out with you and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows ..."*
-- Dr. M L King, Jr., *"I Have a Dream"*

11. PERSONIFICATION A figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human feelings or thoughts.

- *"The wind whistled through the trees."* The wind does not whistle, people do.
- *"The Riddle House stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face."*
-- JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

12. REPETITION The repeating of a phrase or word for emphasis. There are many kinds of Repetition – whether repeating sounds in words (Alliteration, Assonance, Consonance, Rhyme) or larger themes and ideas (Motifs). Here we are referring to the repetition of a word or image to emphasize that idea.

- *"I have a dream"* gets repeated over and over throughout the famous speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

See additional Worksheet **"5 Tips for Repetition"** for more detail and examples

13. RHETORICAL QUESTION A question asked for an effect, not requiring an answer.

- *"What kind of an idiot do you think I am?"* -- Mr. S.
- *"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet!"* -- Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet"

14. SYMBOLISM When an image or phrase is used to represent something else.

- *"The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night ..."* And this pub is in the town of *"Little Hangleton."* Notice the symbolism of death in both names, as Rowling begins the story of the death of the Riddle family members.
- *"If she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed, with a word she can get what she came for ... And she's buying a stairway to heaven."* This song by Led Zeppelin describes how gold cannot buy happiness through these symbols, and the song title.

15. TRICOLON The pattern of using three examples or any group of three expressions, in a row, for effect. Studies show that people respond better to three than to four or two.

- *"Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied."*
-- JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
- *"The maid had run screaming down the hill ... 'Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!'"*
-- JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
- *"And when the night grows dark, when injustice weighs heavy on our hearts, when our best-laid plans seem beyond our reach, let us think of Madiba and the words that brought him comfort within the four walls of his cell ..."*
-- Barak Obama at Nelson Mandela's funeral