

Multiple-Choice Question Terms

Allegory

A story in which people, things, and events have another meaning. Examples of allegory are Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, and Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Ambiguity

Multiple meanings a literary work may communicate, especially two meanings that are incompatible.

*****Apostrophe**

Direct address, usually to someone or something that is not present. Keat's "Bright star! Would I were steadfast" is an apostrophe to a star, and "To Autumn" is an apostrophe to a personified season.

Connotation

The implications of a word or phrase, as opposed to its exact meaning (denotation). Both China and Cathay denote a region in Asia, but to a modern reader, the associations of the two words are different.

*****Convention**

A device of style or subject matter so often used that it becomes a recognized means of expression. For example, a lover observing the literary love conventions cannot eat or sleep and grows pale and lean. Romeo, at the beginning of the play is a conventional lover, while an overweight lover in Chaucer is consciously mocking the convention.

*****Denotation**

The dictionary meaning of a word, as opposed to connotation.

Didactic

Explicitly instructive. A didactic poem or novel may be good or bad. Pope's "Essay on Man" is didactic; so are the novels of Ayn Rand.

Digression

The use of material unrelated to the subject of a work. The interpolated narrations in the novels of Cervantes or Fielding may be called digressions, and *Trustram Shandy* includes a digression on digressions.

Epigram

A pithy saying often using contrast. The epigram is also a verse form, usually brief and pointed.

Euphemism

A figure of speech using indirection to avoid offensive bluntness, such as *deceased* for *dead* or *remains* for *corpse*.

Grotesque

Characterized by distortions or incongruities. The fiction of Poe or Flannery O'Connor is often described as grotesque.

*****Hyperbole**

Deliberate exaggeration, over-statement. As a rule, hyperbole is self-conscious, without mention of being accepted literally. "The strongest man in the world" and "a diamond as big as the Ritz" are hyperbolic.

Jargon

The special language of a profession or group. The term jargon usually has pejorative associations, with the implication that jargon is evasive, tedious, and unintelligible to outsiders. The writings of the lawyer and the literary critic are both susceptible to jargon.

*****Literal**

Not figurative; accurate to the letter; matter of fact or concrete.

Lyrical

Songlike; characterized by emotion, subjectivity, and imagination.

*****Oxymoron**

A combination of opposites; the union of contradictory terms. Romeo's line "feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health" has four examples of the device.

Parable

A story designed to suggest a principle, illustrate a moral, or answer a question, Parables are allegorical stories.

*****Paradox**

A statement that seems to be self-contradicting but, in fact, is true. The figure in Donne's holy sonnet that concludes I never shall be "chaste except you ravish me" is a good example of the device.

Parody

A composition that imitates the style of another composition normally for comic effect. Fielding's *Shamela* is a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*. A contest for parodies of Hemingway draws hundreds of entries each year.

*****Personification**

A figurative use of language that endows the nonhuman (ideas, inanimate objects, animals, abstractions) with human characteristics. Keats personifies the nightingale, the Grecian urn, and autumn in his major poems.

*****Reliability**

A quality of some fictional narrators whose word the reader can trust. There are both reliable and unreliable narrators, that is, tellers of a story who should or should not be trusted. Most narrators are reliable (Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, Conrad's Marlow), but some are clearly not to be trusted (Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," several novels by Nabokov). And there are some about whom readers have been unable to decide (James's governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Ford's *The Good Soldier*).

*****Rhetorical question**

A question asked for effect, not in expectation of a reply. No reply is expected because the question presupposes only one possible answer. The lover of Suckling's "Shall I wasting in despair/Die because a lady's fair?" has already decided the answer is no.

Rhetorical techniques

The devices used in effective or persuasive language. The number of rhetorical techniques, like that of the resources of languages, is long and runs from apostrophe to zeugma. The more common examples include devices like contrast, repetitions, paradox, understatement, sarcasm, and rhetorical question.

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. A classical form, satire is found in the verse of Alexander Pope or Samuel Johnson, the plays of Ben Jonson or Bernard Shaw, and the novels of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, or Joseph Heller.

Setting

The background to a story; the physical location of a play, story, or novel. The setting of a narrative will normally involve both time and place. The setting of *A Tale of Two Cities* is London and Paris at the time of the French revolution, but the setting of *Waiting for Godot* is impossible to pin down specifically.

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; my love is as dead as a doornail. The plural of *simile* is *similes* not *similies*.

***Soliloquy

A speech in which a character who is alone speaks his or her thoughts aloud. A monologue also has a single speaker, but the monologist speaks to others who do not interrupt. Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" and "O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I" are soliloquies. Browning's "My Last Duchess" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" are monologues, but the hypocritical monk of his "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" cannot reveal his thoughts to others.

***Stereotype

A conventional pattern, expression, character, or idea. In literature, a stereotype could apply to the unvarying plot and characters of some works of fiction (those of Barbara Cartland, for example) or to the stock characters and plots of many of the greatest stage comedies.

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. For example, Shakespeare's sonnet 29, "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," spends the first nine lines describing the speaker's discontent, then three describing the happiness the thought of the loved-one brings, all in a single sentence. The effect of this contrast is to intensify the feelings of relief and joy in lines 10-12. The rhetorical strategy of most love poems is deployed to convince the loved-one to return the speaker's love. By appealing to the loved-one's sympathy ("If you don't return my love, my heart will break.") or by flattery ("How could I not love someone as beautiful as you?"), or by threat ("When you're old, you'll be sorry you refused me."), the lover attempts to persuade the loved-one to love in return.

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 principles of structure are series (A, B, C, D, E), contrast (A v B, C v D, E v A), and repetition (AA, BB). The most common units of structure are—play: scene, act; novel: chapter, poem: line, stanza.

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. Notice that there are several phrases used in the essay questions that invite you to choose among several possible topics: "devices of style," "narrative techniques," "rhetorical techniques," "stylistic techniques," and "resources of language" are all phrases that call for a consideration of more than one technique but do not specify what techniques you must discuss. Usually one of the two essay questions on a set passage will use one of these phrases, while the other question will specify the tasks by asking for "diction, imagery, and syntax" or a similar three or four topics.

Syllogism

A form of reasoning in which two statements are made and a conclusion is drawn from them. A syllogism begins with a major premise ("All tragedies end unhappily") followed by a minor premise ("Hamlet is a tragedy") and a conclusion (Therefore, "Hamlet ends unhappily.")

Symbol

Something that is simultaneously itself and a sign of something else. Winter, darkness, and cold are real things, but in literature they are also likely to be used as symbols of death. A paper lantern and a light bulb are real things: in *A Street Car Named Desire*, they are also symbols for Blanche's attempt to escape from reality and reality itself. Yorick's skull is a symbol of human mortality, and Melville's white whale is certainly a symbol, but exactly what it symbolizes has yet to be agreed upon.

Syntax

The structure of a sentence: the arrangement of words in a sentence. A discussion of syntax in your essay could include such considerations as the length or brevity of the sentences, the kinds of sentences (questions, exclamations, declarative sentences, rhetorical questions—or periodic or loose; simple, complex, or compound). Syntax is often an issue on the English language exam. It has also been used frequently in recent essay question on the AP literature exams, because it is clear that many students are not prepared to write about syntax. Until this defect has been repaired, syntax questions will continue to appear regularly in both the multiple-choice and essay sections of the test.

Theme

The main thought expressed by a work. Essay questions may ask for discussion of the theme or themes of a work or may use the words *meaning* or *meanings*. The open question frequently asks you to relate a discussion on one subject to a "meaning of the work as a whole." When preparing the novels and plays you might use on the open question, be sure to consider what theme or themes you would write about if you are asked to talk about a "meaning of the work." The question is much harder to answer for some works than others. I'm not sure what I would say is the meaning of *Hamlet*, *Wuthering Heights*, or *Waiting for Godot*, but I have much less trouble defining a theme in works like *Brave New World* or *Animal Farm*.

Thesis

The theme, meaning, or position that a writer undertakes to prove or support.

Tone

The manner in which an author expresses his or her attitude; the intonation of the voice that expresses meaning. Tone is described by adjectives, and the possibilities are nearly endless. Often a single adjective will not be enough, and tone may change from chapter to chapter or even line to line. Tone is the result of allusion, diction, figurative language, imagery, irony, symbol, syntax, and style to cite only the relevant words on the list. In the Wordsworth passage on the 1992 exam, the tone moves from quiet to apprehensive to confident to exuberant to terrified to panicked to uncertain to restive in only twenty-five lines.