



Independent School District of Boise City
Literary Elements
English 10-12

English 10

English 11

English 12

(Color code represents the year each term is introduced; therefore, juniors are expected to know terms in blue and green, and seniors are expected to know blue, green, and red).

Absurd logic: Something that is taken to its logical, but extreme, conclusion.

Absurd, Theatre of :

- The name is applied to a number of works in drama and fiction which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works that are themselves absurd.
- These works present life as absurd by using concrete stage images.
- In these works the traditional pattern of cause-effect relationships is abandoned or minimized.
- The plot structure tends to be circular rather than linear.
- Problems are seldom resolved.
- Characters tend to be archetypal.
- The audience is prevented from identifying with the main characters.
- Time and place of setting are generalized.
- Language is, for the most part, downgraded and devalued to show a breakdown in communication between human beings.
- The distinction of traditional forms disappears. For example, the tragic becomes comic, the comic becomes tragic.
- Despite the rejection of logic, absurdist plays are ultimately conceptual, for they seek to project intellectualized perceptions about the human condition, but always do so indirectly.

Active voice: In active voice, the grammatical subject in the sentence is the doer of the action.

Allegory: A form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in the narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself.

***Alliteration:** Repetition of initial consonant sounds.

***Allusion:** Reference to a historical or literary person, place, thing, or event with which the reader is assumed to be familiar.

Analogy: Comparison of two things alike in certain aspects; can be simile or metaphor.

Analysis: To separate a subject into its parts.

Anastrophe/inverted word order – The inversion or rearrangement of normal sentence elements.

***Antagonist:** Character or force against which the main character or protagonist is pitted; may be another character, something in nature or society, or even an internal force within the protagonist.

~**Antihero**: A type of recurrent protagonist in modern serious plays and prose fiction whose pettiness, ignominy, ineffectualness, or passivity signify his discrepancy from the heroes of traditional tragedies.

Antithesis: The argument presented in opposition of the thesis.

Aphorism: A brief, cleverly worded statement that makes a wise observation about life.

Apostrophe: A technique by which a writer addresses an inanimate object, an idea, or a person who is either dead or absent.

Archetype: An image, descriptive detail, plot pattern or a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore, and is therefore believed to evoke profound emotions because it touches the unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses. Northrup Frye defines it as a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole. (See supplemental materials packet).

***Aside**: A remark spoken in an undertone by one character either to the audience or to another character which the remaining characters supposedly do not hear.

***Assonance**: Repetition of a vowel sound within non-rhyming words.

***Blank Verse**: Unrhymed poetry written in iambic pentameter.

Body Paragraph: The middle paragraphs in an essay. Each one develops a point that supports the thesis. Each paragraph includes a topic sentence, concrete details, commentary, and a concluding sentence.

Catharsis: In tragedy, the release of strong emotions in the audience. The word comes from the Greek word meaning "cleanse." The philosopher Aristotle felt that it was good for people to watch a noble figure fall from power for daring to test Fate or the gods....Aristotle felt that such tragedies would "cleanse" members of the audience of their own urges to rebel against Fate or the gods as the tragic figure did. Such catharsis, then, would improve the stability of society. (Harcourt's *Adventures in Appreciation*).

***Characterization**: Techniques employed by writers to develop characters, [developed by one or more of] four basic methods: physical; speech, thoughts, feelings, or actions by the character; speech, thoughts, feelings, or actions by other characters; narrator's own direct comments.

Chivalry: The medieval system, principles, and customs of knighthood. The qualities idealized by knighthood, such as bravery, courtesy, honor, and gallantry toward women.

Chorus: In classical Greek drama, a group of actors who comment on the main events in the play and represent public opinion.

Colloquialism: The use of slang or informalities in speech or writing; not generally acceptable for formal writing; gives a work a conversational, familiar tone.

~**Comedy of manners**: Deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper class society, relying for comic effect in large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue, and, to a lesser degree on the violations of social conventions and decorum by stupid characters such as would-be wits, jealous husbands, and foppish dandies.

~**Commedia dell' arte**: A form of sixteenth century comic drama where the actors played stock characters and largely improvised the dialogue around a given scenario.

Commentary: The writer's opinion or comment about something; not concrete details. Synonyms include opinion, insight, analysis, interpretation, inference, personal response, feelings, evaluation, explications, and reflection.

Concluding paragraph (also called the conclusion): The last paragraph in the essay. It may summarize the writer's ideas, reflect on what he or she said in the essay, offer more commentary about the subject, or give a personal statement about the subject. The conclusion is all commentary and does not include concrete details. It often includes a detail, image or key idea from the introductory paragraph. This brings the essay full circle and gives a finished feeling to the whole essay.

Concluding sentence: The last sentence in a body paragraph. It is all commentary, does not repeat key words, and gives a finished feeling to the paragraph.

Concrete details: Specific details that form the backbone or core of the body paragraphs. Synonyms for concrete details include facts, specifics, examples, descriptions, illustrations, support, proof, evidence, quotations, paraphrases, or plot references.

***Conflict:** The struggle between opposing forces and the basis of plot in dramatic and narrative literature; may be external or internal.

****Connotation:** The associations and emotional overtones that have become attached to a word or phrase, in addition to its strict dictionary definition.

***Consonance:** The repetition of consonant sounds within and at the ends of words.

***Couplet:** Two consecutive rhyming lines of poetry.

Courtly Love: An attitude toward love and a corresponding code of behavior reflected in medieval lyric poetry and romances. A knight vows total obedience to his lady, usually a married woman whom he idolizes. His passion for an unattainable ideal throws the lover into emotional torments, which he transcends by noble deeds done in his lady's name (Quinn).

***Denotation:** A word's literal or dictionary meaning.

Dialect: A way of speaking that is characteristic of a certain social group or the inhabitants of a certain geographical area.

***Diction:** A writer's choice of words. Diction encompasses both vocabulary (individual words) and syntax (the order or arrangement of words).

Disproportion: Use of exaggerated language to describe something trivial or the use of trivial language to describe something of great importance."

Dramatic irony: Dramatic irony refers to the contrast between what a character knows and what the reader or audience knows.

Epic (poem): a long narrative poem that tells the deeds of a great person

Epic hero: a larger-than-life figure whose adventures are the focus of an epic poem. Epic heroes take part in dangerous adventures that are often of historical or cultural importance. Their deeds usually reflect the ideas and values of a people. They possess great courage and extraordinary strength; many are assisted by supernatural beings or possess supernatural abilities.

Epic simile: a simile that stretches over a number of lines (see definition of simile)

Epilogue: A concluding statement. Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, recites an epilogue that is characteristic of Renaissance plays in that it solicits the goodwill of the audience and courteous treatment by critics. As the use of epilogues became more general, respected poets were paid to contribute epilogues to plays, much as prefaces written by prominent authors are now sometimes paid for by publishers. They are now rare.

***Epiphany:** Sudden flash of insight or a revelation that a person has about himself or the world in general.

Epistle: A literary piece written in the form of a letter for publication.

Epithet: an identifying word or phrase used with (or in place of) the name of a person or thing in many epics

Essay: A piece of writing that gives your thoughts (commentary) about a subject. All essays that you write in this class will have an introduction, body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The body may vary in the number of paragraphs; however, the body need to be considerably longer than the introduction and conclusion paragraphs combined.

~**Farce:** A type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter. To do so, it commonly employs highly exaggerated or caricatured types of characters, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and makes free use of broad verbal humor and physical horseplay.

Feudalism: System of social and political organization that prevailed in much of Western Europe during the Medieval Period. Every landholder was merely the tenant of some great landlord. The barons or powerful prelates were the tenants of the king; the lesser lords, knights, and churchmen were tenants of the barons and prelates; and the serfs and “villeins” were tenants of the lesser nobles. As rent, the various groups paid to their immediate superiors “service” which might consist of visible property or military aid.

***Flashback:** An account of a conversation, an episode, or an event that happened before the beginning of a story.

***Foil:** A character that provides a striking contrast to another character. By using a foil, a writer calls attention to certain traits possessed by a main character or simply enhances a character by contrast.

***Foreshadowing:** A writer’s use of hints or clues to indicate events that will occur later in a narrative.

***Free Verse:** Poetry that does not contain regular patterns of rhyme and meter.

Globe Theatre: An Elizabethan playhouse in London that housed Shakespeare’s company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (later The King’s Men).

Heraldry: The art and science of creating and recording Coats of Arms, which were used to identify opponents in battle. A Coat of Arms consists of several parts: the shield, fields, charges, colors, crest, motto, and side figures (See supplemental materials packet).

***Hero:** A traditional hero possesses “good” qualities that enable him or her to triumph over an antagonist who is “bad.” The term cultural hero refers to a hero who represents the values of his or her culture. King Arthur, for example, represents the physical courage, moral leadership, and loyalty that were valued in Anglo-Saxon society.

Hubris: Overweening pride or insolence that results in the misfortune of the protagonist in a tragedy. Hubris leads the protagonist to break a moral law, attempt vainly to transcend normal limitations, or ignore a divine warning with calamitous results.

***Hyperbole:** A figure of speech in which the truth is exaggerated for emphasis or for humorous effect.

***Iambic Pentameter:** The most common form of meter, employing a five-foot line of iambs (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable).

***Imagery:** Describes words or phrases that recreate vivid sensory experiences for the reader.

Incongruity: That which seems out of place, out time, or out of character

In medias res: Latin for “in the middle of things,” the technique of beginning a narrative in the middle of the action

Introduction (also called the introductory paragraph): The first paragraph in an essay. It includes the thesis, most often at the end.

Invocation of the muse: an epic convention in which a poem begins with a direct request for help in writing, made to a divine or supernatural entity.

***Irony:** A contrast between what is expected and what actually exists or happens.

***Legend:** A story handed down from the past, especially one that is popularly believed to be based on historical events.

Malapropism: An inappropriateness of speech resulting from the use of one word for another that resembles it.

***Metaphor:** A form of figurative language that makes a comparison between two things that have something in common. Unlike a simile, a metaphor does not use the word like or as; instead the comparison is suggested rather than directly expressed.

***Meter:** Repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in a line of poetry.

Middle Ages: Holman uses the term “Middle English Period.” The period in English literature between the replacement of French by Middle English as the language of court and the early appearances of definitely Modern English writings, roughly between 1350 and 1500. In prose it was the period of Wycliffe’s sermons and his translation of the Bible, of Mandeville’s *Travels*, of [Holinshed’s] medieval Chronicles, of prose Romances, and supremely, of Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. Romances, both prose and metrical, continued to be popular, with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the finest example.

~Mock-epic: Imitates the elaborate form and ceremonious style of the epic genre but applies it to a commonplace or trivial subject matter.

Mock-serious tone: Simulated seriousness; treating something with scorn or contempt while pretending to be in a serious mood.

***Monologue:** See soliloquy.

***Mood:** The feeling, or atmosphere, that a writer creates for the reader. The writer’s use of connotation, imagery, and figurative language, as well as sound and rhythm, develops the mood of a selection.

Motif: In literature, recurrent images, words, objects, phrases, or actions that tend to unify the work.

Motivation: The reasons for a character’s behavior

***Myth:** A traditional story, usually concerning some superhuman being or unlikely event, that was once widely believed to be true.

***Narrative:** Any type of writing that is primarily concerned with relating an event or a series of events.

Ode: A single, unified strain of exalted lyrical verse, directed to a single purpose, and dealing with one theme.

***Onomatopoeia:** Literally means “name-making.” It is the process of creating or using words that imitate sounds.

Oxymoron: A self-contradictory combination of words or smaller verbal units. “Oxymoron” itself is an oxymoron, from the Greek meaning “sharp-dull.” Others are “bittersweet,” “jumbo shrimp,” “guest house,” “pianoforte,” and “chiaroscuro.”

Paen: A song of praise or joy.

Paradox: A statement that although seemingly contradictory or absurd, is actually well founded or true.

Parallelism: The repetition of words or phrases that have similar grammatical structures.

~Parody: Imitates the serious materials and manner of a particular literary work, or the characteristic style of a particular author, or the stylistic and other features of a serious literary form, and applies them to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject.

+Passive voice: In the passive voice, the grammatical subject is the receiver of the action that the verb describes.

***Persona/speaker of the poem:** A fictional self created by an author - a self through whom the narrative of a poem or story is told.

***Personification:** A figure of speech in which human qualities are attributed to an object, animal, or idea.

***Plot:** The chain of related events that take place in a story.

***Point of View:** The narrative method used in a short story, novel, or nonfiction selection. The two basic points of view are first-person and third-person. (First, third, third omniscient, third person limited).

Prologue: An introduction most frequently associated with drama and especially common in England in the plays of the Restoration and the eighteenth century. In the plays of ancient Greece a speaker announced, before the beginning of the play proper, such salient facts as the audience should know to understand the play itself. Prologues were frequently written by the author of a play and delivered by one of the chief actors.

Prose: In its broadest sense the term is applied to all forms of written or spoken expression not having a regular rhythmic pattern.

***Protagonist:** The central character in a story or play.

Pun: A play on words based on the similarity of sound between two words with different meanings.

***Quatrain:** A four-line stanza, or unit of poetry.

Regionalism: Literature that emphasizes a specific geographical setting and that reproduces the speech, behavior, and attitudes of the people who live in that region.

Renaissance: This word, meaning "rebirth," is commonly applied to the period of transition from the medieval to the modern world in Western Europe (see Holman).

Rhetorical Question: A question asked for an effect, not actually requiring an answer.

***Rhyme:** Words rhyme when the sound of their accented vowels and all succeeding sounds are identical. (Types: true, end, off, internal).

***Rhythm:** A pattern or beat of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry.

***Romance:** A romance refers to any imaginative story concerned with noble heroes, chivalric codes of honor, passionate love, daring deeds, and supernatural events. Qualities include idealized heroes and eras and kings, knights, and ladies who are motivated by love, religious faith, or simply a desire for adventure.

Satire: A type of writing that ridicules the shortcomings of people or institutions in an attempt to bring about change.

Scapegoat: A figure who suffers for the crimes or sins of others. The tragic hero can be seen as a scapegoat figure. (Quinn)

***Setting:** Time and place of the action of a story.

***Simile:** A stated comparison between two things that are actually unlike but that have something in common. A simile expresses the comparison clearly by the use of the word like or as.

***Situational irony:** An event occurs that directly contradicts the expectations of the characters, the reader, or the audience.

***Soliloquy:** In a dramatic work, soliloquy is a speech in which a character speaks his or her private thoughts aloud. The character is almost always on stage alone and generally appears to be unaware of the presence of an audience.

***Sonnet:** A lyric poem of 14 lines, commonly written in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean, or English, sonnet is sometimes also called the Elizabethan sonnet. It consists of three quatrains, or four-line units, and a final couplet, or two-line unit, which reflect the logical organization of the poem. [The Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet consists of one octave followed by a sestet.]

***Stanza:** A group of lines that form a unit of poetry.

***Stereotype:** In literature, simplified or stock characters that conform to a fixed pattern or are defined by a single trait. Such characters do not usually demonstrate the complexities of real people.

Stream of Consciousness: A style of writing that portrays the inner and often chaotic workings of a character's mind.

***Symbol:** A person, place, or object that represents something beyond itself.

Syntax: Sentence structure or what the author does internally with word order, sentence variety, and rhythm.

****Theme:** The insight about human life that is revealed in a literary work. Themes are rarely stated directly in literature. Most often, a reader has to infer the theme of a work after considerable thought. Theme is different from subject. A story's subject might be stated as "growing up," "love," "heroism," or "fear." The theme is the statement the writer wants to make about that subject: "For most young people, growing up is a process that involves the pain of achieving self-knowledge." Theme must be stated in at least one sentence; most themes are complex enough to require several sentences, or even an essay.

Thesis: A sentence with a key word or idea that controls the focus of the essay. This comes somewhere in the introductory paragraph and most often at the end.

***Tone:** The attitude a writer takes toward a subject of a work, the characters in it, or the audience. The language and details a writer chooses help to create the tone, which might be playful, serious, bitter, angry, or detached, among other possibilities. Unlike mood, which refers to the emotional response of the reader to a work, tone reflects the feelings of the writer.

***Tragedy:** In broad terms tragedy is literature, especially drama, in which actions and events turn out disastrously for the main character or characters. Tragic heroes evoke both pity and fear in readers or viewers—pity because they feel sorry for the characters and fear because they realize that the problems and struggles faced by the characters are perhaps a necessary part of human life.

Tragic Flaw: The theory that there is a flaw in the tragic hero that causes his or her downfall. *The Language of Literature* states, "This flaw may be poor judgment, pride, weakness, or an excess of an admirable quality. The tragic hero, noted Aristotle, recognizes his or her flaw and its consequences, but only after it is too late to change the course of events" (937).

Transitions: A smooth movement from one topic to the next, usually marked with transitional words or phrases such as "next" or "on the other hand."

***Understatement:** The literary technique of saying less than is actually meant, generally in an ironic way.

***Verbal irony:** Words are used to suggest the opposite of their usual meaning.

Vernacular: The linguistic idiosyncrasies of spoken language by the people of a particular region or locality.

^Voice: The personality and distinct writing style that allows a reader to "hear" a unique human personality in a piece of writing.

Weaving: Blending concrete details and commentary in a body paragraph. The writer can do this after she masters the format

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