

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

While there are hundreds of different writing styles, and hundreds of different literary terms, this worksheet offers many of the most common terms found in both prose and poetry.

TERM	GRADE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Acrostic		A poem where the first letter of each line spells out a hidden message or a message relating to theme.	B – big guy who O–overeats and B – bulges all over
Act		The major division of a play or film. The end of an act may see a significant change in plot, theme or character.	In <i>Julius Caesar</i> by Shakespeare, Act 3 sees the stabbing of Caesar by conspirators.
Allegory	10	A narrative story with a second or hidden meaning; deals with moral issues that may be too difficult to explain directly.	<i>1984</i> by Orwell deals with society’s ability to corrupt governments completely, for the “benefit” of all.
Alliteration	7	The repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words for effect.	Trees tumbled through the turbulent typhoon this past Tuesday.
Allusion	8	A reference to a person, place or event from another literary work. The reader must recognize the work for the allusion to be successful.	Calling a miserly person a “Scrooge” refers to <i>A Christmas Carol</i> by Dickens
Analogy	9	Explaining a complex idea or thought by using a simpler concept that is familiar to the reader.	The human brain is like a computer, so books would be the software programs
Anecdote	8	A short account of entertaining historical or personal fact.	
Antagonist	7	The force or character that opposes the main character. May or may not be the “villain” of the plot.	The antagonist in <i>Snow White</i> is her step-mother, the Queen.
Antecedent Action	7	The significant action that takes place before a story begins	
Anti-hero	10	A literary figure whose every action is the opposite of what is considered to be heroic.	
Antithesis	10	Opposition of thought or meaning or of passages, phrases, lines, and half-lines, as in “To err is human, to forgive divine.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

TERM	GRADE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Aside	10	Usually seen in stage directions, it is where a character talks to the audience but is not heard by the other characters.	In <i>Ferris Bueller</i> , Ferris talks with the audience to tell of his life, his ideas, or his thoughts about the other characters.
Assonance	8	The repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds in words that are placed closely together.	“Mad as a hatter” or “Free and easy”
Atmosphere	9	The overall mood or emotional effect created by the setting, imagery and dialogue	In a horror story, characters speak in short sentences to show nervousness.
Autobiography	10	The story of a person’s life, written by himself.	
Ballad	10	A poem that tells a story and is usually set to music with a chorus.	<i>Frosty the Snowman</i> is an example of a ballad.
Blank verse	7	A poem that has unrhymed lines but has a set flow and rhythm	If a poem only reads: “Roses are red, violets are blue.”

Cacophony	8	In poetry, a series of harsh, jarring sounds placed together for effect.	“Rats! They fought the dogs and killed the cats...” —Browning
Caricature		Writing that exaggerates a person’s appearance for effect.	Prince Charles boiled down to big ears and bad teeth.
Characterization	7	The process through which the author reveals to the reader the qualities of a character.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

TERM	GRADE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Character Types 		The main subject of a literary work. It can also refer to the subject's behaviour or beliefs or interactions.	Hermione Granger is the main female character in <i>Harry Potter</i> series.
a) Consistent/Static		A character that does not change without external motivation	Scrooge in <i>A Christmas Carol</i> .
b) Flat		A character with one or two traits.	
c) Foil		A character that serves to contrast another character in traits	Evil Sheriff of Nottingham versus generous Robin Hood.
d) Round		A character that is believable due to having complex traits; life-like	We know many things about Bart Simpson: no change.
e) Static		A character that is the same from the beginning to the end of the plot.	Antonio in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> remains the same.
f) Stereotype		A character that is recognizable due to its familiarity and predictability.	The absent minded professor or the old unmarried librarian
g) Stock		A character that is recognizable due to its repeated use in many works	Western movie has a bartender, a bandit and a sheriff

Chronology		The sequence of events that are found within the literary work.	In <i>The 3 Little Pigs</i> , the wolf attacks the houses in order.
Cliché	8	An over-used expression that should not be used in formal works	"Generation gap"; "cute as a button"; "ugly as sin"
Climax	7	The portion of the plot in which the central conflict is usually resolved	The climax of <i>Cinderella</i> is when she pulls out the slipper
Colloquialism	7	An expression used only in informal writing, a common word in use	Using "guys" for people or "phat" for excellent
Comedy	10	Any literary or dramatic composition whose ending is not tragic.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

Comic Relief	10	A humorous scene or incident in a serious story. It occurs most often in drama and is consciously introduced by the writer with the purpose of providing relief from tension, and, by contrast, intensifying the seriousness of the rest of the play.	After the killing of Macbeth a drunken porter tells knock, knock jokes.
Comparison		Using similar character traits to show contrast	<i>Gulliver's Travels</i> and <i>King Kong</i> have giants as threats
Conflict	7	The struggle between internal or external forces for a character or idea Internal Conflict: Man vs. Self External Conflict: Man vs. Man Man vs. Nature Man vs. Society	In <i>To Build a Fire</i> , the main character struggles against the cold and his own panic.
Connotation	8	The extended meaning of a word, its implied or suggested meanings	The word jerk could be a verb or a noun in meaning.
Consonance	7	The repetition of identical consonant sounds preceded by vowels	Dog and gig ; bold and mad
Context		Looking at an unknown word or idea and using surrounding words to determine its meaning	The taper was lit on the table, burning brightly in its holder between the dinner plates.
Contrast		Using the differences between characters or ideas for effect	Darth Vader and his son are dressed differently
Couplet	10	A pair of successive rhyming lines that have the same meter and flow.	My school work is not done, No wonder I am so dumb.
Criticism	10	The art of discussion and evaluation of literary and artistic work.	

Denotation	7	The literal or dictionary meaning of a word; stated in the text.	Lucid means "clear and easy to understand."
Deus ex Machina	10	"God from the machine," a stage device where the conclusion is not realistic or has no prior basis	In Greek plays, gods would interfere just when it seemed that the hero would die
Dialect		A writing style that mimics the speech patterns of a certain area	To show your character is from the South: "Hi y'all"
Dialogue	7	The spoken or written words between two or more characters	Bob: "Hello, Sally." Sally: "Go away, Bob."
Diction	9	The specific choice and use of words by a writer	Using "stupendous" instead of the word "great"

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

Dilemma	10	A situation in which a character must make a choice between two equal alternatives. Posing a dilemma is one method an author can use to generate conflict and suspense in a story.	
Dramatic Monologue		A poem in which the author speaks to the audience directly and reveals his own character as well	“The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe, we know what happens to his love because he says it
Ellipsis	8	In grammar – words omitted. In Writing – the three dots (...) indicating an omission of letters or words.	
Empathy	7	The identification of one’s own feelings with those of a fictional or poetic character in order to understand him better.	
Epic		A long narrative poem that has the hero fulfilling a quest successfully	“Beowulf” is the first English epic; it is really long
Epilogue		The events that happen when the plot line has finished; outside events	In <i>Ferris Bueller</i> , when Ferris tells the audience to go home.

Epiphany	10	Refers to a moment of significant realization and insight, often at the end of a story.	
Essay		A prose discussion of a topic that must be proven but is concise	“A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift
Euphemism	7	A less harsh expression that is used to lessen embarrassment or grief	“Passed away” instead of “dead” or “horribly squished”
Euphony	8	A soft, agreeable combination of sounds.	“sanitary landfill” instead of “garbage dump”.
Exposition	7	The opening scene of a work in which the character is introduced	Scout and Jem are introduced in the first scene of the novel
Fable	7	A short narrative with a moral lesson, usually with animal characters.	Aesop’s Fables.
Falling Action	7	The action immediately following the climax and lasting until the resolution.	
Fantasy	7	A writing style that discusses unexplainable or unfamiliar scenes	Most horror stories use a familiar setting with ghosts
Farce	9	Generally, a play abounding in ludicrous situations, clowning, practical jokes, coincidences, improbabilities and exaggerations.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

Figurative Language		Adding figures of speech to go beyond literal meanings; complexity is added to the sentences	<i>The house is red</i> is literal; <i>the house is as red as fire</i> is figurative language
Flashback	7	A reference to an event which took place prior to the start of a story	In <i>Memento</i> , the film begins with the last event
Foil	8	A character whose behavior and qualities set off, or enhance by contrast, those of another figure.	Obi Wan Kenobi is a foil for Darth Vader.
Foreshadowing	8	An early hint or suggestion in the text of a future event or occurrence	In <i>The Lottery</i> , children find stones that will be used later
Free Verse	7	Poetry based on an irregular rhythm and lack of rhyme.	
Genre		A literary type or form. Drama is a genre of literature, then comedy.	The Harry Potter series is in the genre of fantasy
Haiku		A style of Japanese poetry where the poems lines are divided into 3 lines with 17 syllables; natural	The red dog ate meat, but the blue dog eats cookies. He is so bulbous.
Hero (or heroine)	10	A character of a story who possesses heroic qualities. The terms <i>hero</i> and <i>heroine</i> are not interchangeable with the more general term <i>protagonist</i> .	
Homonym		Two words that sound alike but have different meanings	Week: seven days Weak: not strong
Humour		Any element, device or technique that causes laughter or amusement	A blonde walked into a bar: Ouch!
Hyperbole	7	A purposeful overstatement or exaggeration for effect or emphasis	Last night I ate a twenty kilogram hamburger with fries.
Iamb		Most common rhythm, one unstressed syllable then one stressed	love LY, hun GRY
Imagery	7	Using descriptive language to appeal to the reader's senses; creating mind pictures	Cedar and jagged fir uplift sharp barbs against the gray... - Smith
Indeterminate Ending	10	A story ending in which there is no clear outcome or result.	
Inversion		Reverse the normal word order for emphasis or effect.	"Never will I yield!" instead of "I will never yield."
Initial Incident	7	The event that initiates the conflict.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

TERM	GRADE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Irony Types ↓	8	A figure of speech that involves contrast and placement.	
a) Dramatic		This occurs when a character knows less about his or her circumstances than the audience knows.	When a character doesn't know when another character loves them yet the audience hears and sees it.
c) Verbal		This happens when what is said is the opposite of what is meant.	When the teacher says: "I love marking essays."
Jargon	9	Vocabulary that is used in a specialized line of work or play	Computer technicians use bytes, LAN or USB a lot
Juxtaposition	10	The placing side by side of elements that would not be associated for effect.	"A summer cold" or "organized chaos"
Legend	7	A story handed down through the generations, based on fact but that has become exaggerated over time.	
Limerick		A humorous poem of five lines with the rhyme pattern of AABBA.	"There once was a duck, ..."
Literal Meaning		Facts and information stated directly without interpretation required.	This dog is brown and large.
Lyrical	10	This style of poem does not tell a story but uses emotion or imagery to convey the message.	"Loveliest of Trees" by Housman
Melodrama	9	Sensational drama, often violent, physical action or extravagant emotion, in which the conflicting forces are the obviously good and obviously evil.	
Metaphor	7	An equal comparison between seemingly unlike objects.	The moon was a ghostly galleon sailing across the sky
Monologue	9	A speech given by one character	<i>I Have a Dream</i> – M.L. King
Mood	7/8	The feeling or emotional state created in the reader through the texts descriptive detail	The rain clouds descended upon us as thick folds of cold gray gravy, oozing all around
Motivation	8	What causes a character to do what she does and the character's aim or goal in taking that action. Characters must have sufficient and plausible motivation in order for a reader to find the story effective.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

TERM	GRADE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Motif		A reoccurring subject, idea or theme found in many different texts	<i>Rags to riches</i> is a common theme in American literature
Narrative	7	The telling of the story by the Narrator	The story of the Princess and her true love, Wesley.
Narrator		The teller of the story, sometimes the author, sometime first person	<i>Princess Bride</i> is told by the grandfather to the grandson
Nemesis		The character that is seen as directly challenging the protagonist, sometimes seen as evil or a foil	Sherlock Holmes's nemesis was the evil professor, Dr. Moriarty
Nursery Rhyme		Brief verses that are created to teach children a moral lesson	<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> to teach a fear of strangers
Ode		A poem that praises a single subject and has a strict format	"Ode to a Grecian Urn" by Keats
Omniscient	10	All Knowing; an author knows and sees everything as the God of the universe sees and knows everything (3 rd person)	
Onomatopoeia	7	Words that are written to imitate a sound	"pop"; "fizz"; "bang"
Oxymoron	7	A combination of words that appear to be contradictory	"Bittersweet"; "jumbo shrimp"
Paradox	10	A statement that seems contradictory or absurd but does have a clear message	She is a poor, little rich girl
Paraphrase	7	A restating of a text to highlight the important aspects; usually shorter	The Bible can be restated into "Love one another."
Parody	8	Recreating a literary work that uses humour to critique the original.	<i>Space Balls</i> is a critique of <i>Star Wars</i> using humour

Persona		The author takes on a presumed identity in the literary work for effect or a character shows a different mask than their true nature.	Mark Twain put on the persona of Huckleberry Finn to tell the story through the character's eyes.
Personification	7	Giving animals, objects or ideas human characteristics or emotions	The tree's limbs scraped the sky with green fingernails.
Plagiarism		The copying of an author's work by another author without credit	He looked over her shoulder to plagiarize her essay.

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

Plot	7	The series of incidents that creates the fictional storyline. Divided into:	
a) exposition		The initial dialogue and setting to create the situation or give clues as to what occurred previously	In <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , we are told she is going to visit her grandmother.
b) initial incident		The first action of the central conflict; introduces the problem	In <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , she meets the wolf.
c) rising action		The events, conflicts or complications that will lead to the climax.	In <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , the actions of the wolf.
d) climax		The point where the conflict is or is not resolved; most intense point	In <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , when the wolf is ready to eat her and she yells.
e) falling action		The events that discuss the results of the climax	In <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , the woodsman rescues her.
f) resolution aka denouement		When all the problems are resolved at the end of the storyline and the story concludes.	In <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , the woodsman slices open wolf to find Grandma and they lived happily ever after.
Point of View	7	The perspective from which the plot is told.	
a) Subjective	7	First person narrator; plot told through the eyes of ONE character.	
b) Objective	7	Camera POV; narrator external to the events, no internal emotions, thinking; events or actions only	
c) Limited Omniscient	7	Narration told through the eyes of ONE character and know his/her thoughts	
d) Omniscient	7	God POV; narration of outside events but can see into the hearts minds of 2 or more characters.	
Predicament	10	A difficult problem or unpleasant situation.	
Protagonist	7	The primary character of the plot usually responsible for resolving the central conflict.	Brutus in <i>Julius Caesar</i> .
Purpose	7	The main effect the author hopes to achieve, for example entertainment, thought, enlightenment, or action. Purpose may include theme but should not simply be equated with the story's main idea.	
Prologue		An introduction to a literary work, given before the plot starts to help establish mood or setting.	Most Shakespearean plays use this to help the audience understand what will happen

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

Prose		Any literary work that does not have rhyme scheme, rhythm, meter	Novels, short stories and essays are the most common types of pros
Quatrain	10	A stanza of four lines, variously rhymed, generally used as a unit of a longer verse form	
Quest	10	A long journey taken to test a characters worthiness.	
Resolution	7	The results of the climax.	
Rhyme	7	Repetition of the same sound in two or more lines.	
Rhythm	7	The Repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables within a line. There are various meters of poetic rhythm: -iamb (short syllable/long syllable – (x /) or da DUM -trochee (reverse of an iamb) -anapest (three syllables: short short long – sounds like a gallop) -dactyl (long syllable followed by two shorts- sounds like a waltz)	

Rising Action	7	The Incidents in a plot that follow the initial incident and precede the climax. During this stage of the plot, characters are developed, conflicts are introduced, and suspense is built up. There may even be a moment of crisis.	
Satire	10	A literary work in which human flaws are held up to ridicule; its purpose is to improve human behavior through criticism.	
Setting	7	The time, place, and mood of a narrative. Setting may affect the plot, conflict, characters, and theme, or it may be of great significance and the main fiction element.	
Simile	7	A figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, often dissimilar thing through the use of words such as “like”, “as” and “than”	
Soliloquy	10	Lines in a literary work in which a character speaks to himself to debate a matter; the audience or reader is the only “outsider” who is aware of the speech.	

English Language Arts Literary Terms Worksheet

Shakespearean Sonnet	10	A fourteen line poem in iambic pentameter divided into three quatrains and a couplet, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg.	
Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet	10	A fourteen line, iambic pentameter poem divided into two section, the octave (or octet) lines 1-8, rhyming abba, and the sestet, lines 9-14, rhyming cde, cde. There are slight variations in the sestet rhyme scheme in the work of some poets.	
Speaker	7	The intended voice of a literary work.	
Style	8	An author's manner, his distinct and unique way of expression, design, execution, and construction.	

Suspense	8	The feeling of anxiety and uncertainty experienced by the reader, and possibly characters about the outcome of events or the fate of the characters.	
Symbolism	8	A symbol is an object or behavior that has a range of meaning beyond the literal.	
Tone	10	The author's attitude towards his subject and his audience.	
Theme	7	The central idea about the story ; usually implied rather than directly stated. It is a story's observation about life or human nature, and should never be confused with the moral. The theme is a message that can be applied universally to life	
Thesis	8	A proposition to be maintained or defended in an argument.	
Verisimilitude	10	The use of real names, dates, places to add believability to a fictional work.	

Catharsis – an outpouring of emotion (usually pity) towards the main character of a text