These are only some of the many varieties of literary theory and criticism. In addition, you might encounter eco-criticism, which focuses on the environment and human beings' relationship with the rest of nature; religious (for example, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist) criticism; comparative literature, which compares related works from different languages and/or cultures; various schools of critical inquiry based on race and ethnicity; and many, many more. There are even literary critics who perform textual analysis using sophisticated computer programs.

By now you may be wondering what sort of literary critic you are. You may feel that you have been a formalist one day and a psychological critic the next. This is not surprising, and it should cause you no worry, as virtually none of these schools are mutually exclusive. Indeed, most professional critics mix and match the various schools in whatever way best suits their immediate needs. The close-reading techniques of the New Critics, for instance, are frequently adopted by those who would fervently reject the New Critical stance that social and political context be excluded from consideration. If you wished to write about the social decline of Mme. Loisel in Guy de Maupassant's story "The Necklace," you might well find yourself in the position of a Marxist–feminist–New Historicist critic. That's fine. Writing with the knowledge that you are drawing from Marxism, feminism, and New Historicism, you will almost certainly write a better-organized, better-informed, and more thorough paper than you would have had you begun with no conscious basis in literary theory.

Take a look at the annotations and notes you have made on literary works, the notes you have taken in class, and any exams or papers you have written. Are there particular themes and issues to which you keep returning, particular genres or literary features that continue to attract or interest you? If so, you may have the beginning of an answer to the question: What sort of literary critic am I?

Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms

This glossary provides definitions for important literary terms. Words and phrases highlighted in boldface in individual entries are defined elsewhere in the glossary.

**Abstract language** Any language that employs intangible, nonspecific concepts. *Love, truth, and beauty* are abstractions. Abstract language is the opposite of *concrete language*. Both types have different effects and are important features of an author's style.

*Absurd, theater of* The theatrical style prominent in the mid-twentieth century that seeks to dramatize the absurdity of modern life. Conventions of the style include disjointed or elliptical plot lines, disaffected characters, non-naturalistic dialogue, and, often, black comedy. Proponents include Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.

*Accent* The stress, or greater emphasis, given to some syllables of words relative to that received by adjacent syllables.

*Accenthal meter* A metrical system in which the number of accented, or stressed, syllables per line is regular—all lines have the same number, or the corresponding lines of different stanzas have the same number—while the number of unstressed syllables in lines varies randomly. Accenthal meter consisting of two accented syllables in each half line linked by a system of alliteration was the hallmark of Old English poetry (up to the eleventh century), and some modern poets, such as W. H. Auden, have sought to revive it. Gerard Manley Hopkins developed a unique variety of accentual verse he called *sprung rhythm*.

*Accentual-syllabic verse* Verse whose meter takes into account both the number of syllables per line and the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables. The great majority of metrical poems in English are accentual-syllabic. Cf. *quantitative verse*.

*Act* One of the principal divisions of a full-length play. Plays of the Renaissance are commonly divided into five acts. Although four acts enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the nineteenth century, two or three acts are more typical of modern and contemporary dramas.

*Agon* The central conflict in a play. In Greek drama, the agon is a formal structural component, often a debate between two characters or parts of the chorus.

*Alexandrine* A poetic line with six iambic feet (iambic hexameter).

*Allegory* (1) An extended metaphor in which characters, events, objects, settings, and actions stand not only for themselves but also for abstract
concepts, such as death or knowledge. Allegorical plays, often religious, were popular in medieval times; a famous example is Everyman. (2) A form or manner; usually narrative, in which objects, persons, and actions make coherent sense on a literal level but also are equated in a sustained and obvious way with (usually) abstract meanings that lie outside the story. A classic example in prose is John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress; in narrative poetry, Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene.

Alliteration The repetition of identical consonant sounds in the stressed syllables of words relatively near to each other (in the same line or adjacent lines, usually). Alliteration is most common at the beginnings of words (“as the grass was green”) but can involve consonants within words (“green and carefree, famous among the barns”). Alliteration applies to sounds, not spelling; “And honoured among foxes and pheasants” is an example. (The examples are from Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill.”) Cf. consonance.

Allusion A figure of speech that echoes or makes brief reference to a literary or artistic work or a historical figure, event, or object, as, for example, the references to Lazarus and Hamlet in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (p. 102). It is usually a way of placing one’s poem within or alongside a context that is evoked in a very economical fashion. See also intertextuality.

Alternative theater Any theater—most often political or experimental—that sets itself up in opposition to the conventions of the mainstream theater of its time.

Ambiguity In expository prose, an undesirable doubtfulness or uncertainty of meaning or intention resulting from imprecision in the use of one’s words or the construction of one’s sentences. In poetry, the desirable condition of admitting more than one possible meaning resulting from the capacity of language to function on levels other than the literal. Related terms sometimes employed are ambivalence and polysemy.

Anagnorisis A significant recognition or discovery by a character, usually the protagonist, that moves the plot forward by changing the circumstances of a play.

Anapest A metrical foot consisting of three syllables, with two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one (---). In anapestic meter, anapests are the predominant foot in a line or poem. The following line from William Cowper’s “The Poplar Field” is in anapestic meter: “Aíd tīe wîis | þêrîng sîûnd | őf tîe cód | cólînămå.”

Anaphora Repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of two or more lines, clauses, or sentences. Walt Whitman employs anaphora extensively in “Song of Myself.”

Antagonist The character (or, less often, the force) that opposes the protagonist.

Anticlimax In drama, a disappointingly trivial occurrence where a climax would usually happen. An anticlimax can achieve comic effect or disrupt audience expectations of dramatic structure. In poetry, an anticlimax is an arrangement of details such that one of lesser importance follows one or ones of greater importance, where something of greater significance is expected. A well-known example is “Not louder shrieks to pitying heaven are cast, / When husbands die, or when lapdogs breathe their last” (Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock).

Antitheta, antithetorone A character playing a hero’s part but lacking the grandeur typically associated with a hero. Such a character may be comic or may exist to force the audience to reconsider its notions of heroism.

Antistrope The second part of a choral ode in Greek drama. The antistrope was traditionally sung as the chorus moved from stage left to stage right.

Antithesis A figure of speech in which contrasting words, sentences, or ideas are expressed in balanced, parallel grammatical structures; “She had some horses she loved / She had some horses she hated,” from Joy Harjo’s poem “She Had Some Horses,” illustrates antithesis.

Apostrophe A figure of speech in which an absent person, an abstract quality, or a nonhuman entity is addressed as though present. It is a particular type of personification. See, for example, Ben Jonson’s “On My First Son” (p. 15).

Approximate rhyme See slant rhyme.

Archetype An image, symbol, character type, or plot line that occurs frequently enough in literature, religion, myths, folktales, and fairy tales to be recognizable as an element of universal experience and that evokes a deep emotional response. In “Spring and Fall,” Gerard Manley Hopkins develops the archetypes in his title, those of spring (archetype for birth and youth) and fall (archetype for old age and the approach of death).

Aside A brief bit of dialogue spoken by a character to the audience or to him- or herself and assumed to be unheard by other characters on stage.

Assonance The repetition of identi cal or similar vowel sounds in words relatively near to one another (usually within a line or in adjacent lines) whose consonant sounds differ. It can be initial (“apple . . . and happy as”) or, more commonly, internal (“green and carefree,” “Time held me green and dying”). (Examples taken from Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill.”)

Aubade A dawn song, ordinarily expressing two lovers’ regret that day has come and they must separate.

Ballad A poem that tells a story and was meant to be recited or sung; originally, a folk art transmitted orally, from person to person and from generation to generation. Many of the popular ballads were not written down and published until the eighteenth century, though their origins may have been centuries earlier.

Ballad stanza A quatrains in iambic meter rhyming abcb with (usually) four feet i the first and third lines, three in the second and fourth. See, for example, Robert Burns’s “A Red, Red Rose.”

Black comedy A type of comedy in which the traditional material of
tragedy (that is, suffering, or even death) is staged to provoke laughter.

Blank verse Lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse is the most widely used verse form of poetry in English because it is closest to the natural rhythms of English speech. Shakespeare's plays, as well as Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, and countless other long poems were composed in blank verse because it is well suited to narrative, dialogue, and reflection.

Blocking The process of determining the stage positions, movement, and groupings of actors. Blocking generally is proposed in rehearsal by the director and may be negotiated and reworked by the actors themselves.

Brainstorming An information-gathering process in which a group or an individual writes down any and all ideas that come to mind regarding the topic of a given paper or project. The list is later fine-tuned during the organizing stage of the project.

Cacophony A harsh or unpleasant combination of sounds, as in Alexander Pope's poem "An Essay on Criticism": "But when loud surges lash the sounding shore, / The hoarse, rough veer verse should like the torrent roar." Cf. euphony.

Caesura A pause or break within a line of verse, usually signaled by a mark of punctuation.

Canon The group of literary works that form the backbone of a cultural tradition.

Carpe diem A Latin phrase from an ode by Horace meaning "seize the day." It became the label for a theme common in literature, especially in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English love poetry, that life is short and fleeting and that therefore one must make the most of present pleasures.

Catastrophe The final movement of a tragedy, which brings about the fall or death of the protagonist. In plays other than classical tragedy, a denouement takes the place of a catastrophe.

Catharsis A purging of the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle argued in Poetics that catharsis is the natural, and beneficial, outcome of viewing a tragedy.

Characters, characterization Broadly speaking, characters are usually the people of a work of literature—although characters may be animals or some other beings. In fiction, characterization means the development of a character or characters throughout a story. Characterization includes the narrator's description of what characters look like and what they think, say, and do (these are sometimes very dissimilar). Their own actions and views of themselves, and other characters' views of and behavior toward them, are also means of characterization. Characters may be minor, like Goody Cloyse, or major, like Goodman Brown, both of Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown." Depending on the depth of characterization, a character may be simple or complex, flat or round. Character is one of the six elements of drama identified by Aristotle, and characterization is the process by which writers and actors make a character distinct and believable to an audience.

Chaucerian stanza A seven-line iambic stanza rhyming ababbc, sometimes having an alexandrine (hexameter) closing line. See, for example, Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem "They flee from me."

Chorus In classical Greek theater, a group of actors who perform in the orchestra and whose functions might include providing exposition, confronting or questioning the protagonist, and commenting on the action of the play. Much of the spectacle of Greek drama lay in the chorus's singing and dancing. In theater of other times and places, particularly that of the Renaissance, the functions of the Greek chorus are sometimes given to a single character identified as "Chorus."

Climax In drama, the turning point at which a play switches from rising action to falling action. In fiction, the moment of greatest intensity and conflict in the action of a story. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," events reach their climax when Brown and his wife stand together in the forest, at the point of conversion.

Closed form Any structural pattern or repetition of meter, rhyme, or stanza. Cf. open form.

Closet drama A play intended to be read rather than performed.

Comedy Originally, any play that ended with the characters in a better condition than when the play began, though the term is now used more frequently to describe a play intended to be funny. Traditional comedy is generally distinguished by low or ordinary characters (as opposed to the great men and women of tragedy), a humble style, a series of events or role reversals that create chaos and upheaval, and a conclusion or denouement that marks a return to normalcy and often a reintegration into society (such as with a wedding or other formal celebration).

Comic relief A funny scene or character appearing in an otherwise serious play, intended to provide the audience with a momentary break from the heavier themes of tragedy.

Commedia dell'arte Semi-improvised comedy relying heavily on stock characters and stage business, performed originally by traveling Italian players in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Complication One of the traditional elements of plot. Complication occurs when someone or something opposes the protagonist.

Compression The dropping of a syllable to make a line fit the meter, sometimes marked with an apostrophe (e.g., William Shakespeare, Sonnet 73, line 13: "This thou perceiv'st"). Another common device is elision, the dropping of a vowel at the beginning or end of a word (e.g., in lines 7 and 28 of John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning": "'Twere profanation of our joys" and "To move, but doth, if th' other do").

Conceit A figure of speech that establishes a striking or far-fetched analogy between seemingly very dissimilar things, either the exaggerated, unrealistic comparisons found in love poems (such as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18) or the complex analogies of metaphysical wit (as in John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning").
Concrete language Any specific, physical language that appeals to one or more of the senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, or touch. Stones, chairs, and hands are concrete words. Concrete language is the opposite of abstract language. Both types are important features of an author’s style.

Concrete poem A poem shaped in the form of the object the poem describes or discusses. See, for example, George Herbert’s “Easter-wings.”

Confessional poetry Poetry about personal, private issues in which a poet usually speaks directly, without the use of a persona. See, for example, Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” and Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.”

Confidant A character, major or minor, to whom another character confides secrets so that the audience can “overhear” the transaction and be apprised of unseen events.

Conflict Antagonism between characters, ideas, or lines of action; between a character and the outside world; or between different aspects of a character’s nature. Conflict is essential in a traditional plot, as in the conflict between Montresor and Fortunato in Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Cask of Amontillado.” Shakespeare’s play Hamlet is in conflict both with his stepfather Claudius for killing his father and with himself as he tries to decide a course of action.

Connotation The range of emotional implications and associations a word may carry outside of its dictionary definitions. Cf. denotation.

Consonance The repetition of consonant sounds in words whose vowels are different. In perfect consonance, all consonants are the same—live, love; chatter, chatter; reader, rider; words in which all consonants following the main vowels are identical also are considered consonant—dive, love; swatter, chatter; sound, bond; gate, mat; set, pit.

Convention An unstated rule, code, practice, or characteristic established by usage. In drama, tacit acceptance of theatrical conventions prevents the audience from being distracted by unrealistic features that are necessarily part of any theater experience. Greek audiences, for instance, accepted the convention of the chorus, while today’s audiences readily accept the convention of the fourth wall in realistic drama and of songs in musical comedy.

Couplet Two consecutive lines of poetry with the same end-rhyme. English (Shakespearean) sonnets end with a couplet; for an entire poem in tetrameter couplets, see Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” See also heroic couplets.

Cruelty, theater of Term coined by Antonin Artaud in the early twentieth century to describe a type of theater using light, sound, spectacle, and other primarily nonverbal forms of communication to create images of cruelty and destruction intended to shock audiences out of complacency.

Cultural context The milieu that gives rise to a work of literature.

Cultural studies A general name given to a wide variety of critical practices that examine and challenge why certain texts are privileged in our society while others are dismissed or derided. Rather than focusing on traditional literary objects, cultural studies critics might choose to study movies, television shows, advertisements, graffiti, or comic books, often in conjunction with canonical works of literature.

Dactyl A metrical foot consisting of three syllables, an accent placed on the second syllable, followed by two unaccented ones (...). In dactylic meter, dactyls are the predominant foot of a line or a poem. The following lines from Thomas Hardy’s “The Voice” are in dactylic meter: “Wóman múch | missed, hów yôu | căll for me | căll for me.”

Deconstruction A variety of poststructuralism, deconstruction derives from the efforts of Jacques Derrida to undermine the foundations of Western philosophy, but as a literary critical practice it often emerges as a kind of close-reading that reveals irreconcilable linguistic contradictions in a text that prevents the text from having a single stable meaning or message.

Denotation The basic meaning of a word; its dictionary definition(s).

Denouement Literally, “unknotting.” The end of a play or other literary work, in which all elements of the plot are brought to their conclusion.

Description Language that presents specific features of a character, object, or setting; or the details of an action or event. The first paragraph of Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” describes Gregor’s startling new appearance.

Deus ex machina Literally, “god out of the machine,” referring to the mechanized system used to lower an actor playing a god onto the stage in classical Greek drama. Today the term is generally used disparagingly to indicate careless plotting and an unbelievable resolution in a play.

Dialogue Words spoken by characters, often in the form of a conversation between two or more characters. In stories and other forms of prose, dialogue is commonly enclosed between quotation marks. Dialogue is an important element in characterization and plot: much of the characterization and action in Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” is presented through its characters’ dialogue.

Diction A writer’s selection of words; the kind of words, phrases, and figurative language used to make up a work of literature. In fiction, particular patterns or arrangements of words in sentences and paragraphs constitute prose style. Hemingway’s diction is said to be precise, concrete, and economical. Aristotle identified diction as one of the six elements of drama. See also poetic diction.

Dimeter A line of verse consisting of two metrical feet.

Double rhyme A rhyme in which an accented, rhyming syllable is followed by one or more identical, unaccented syllables: thrilling and killing, marry and tarry. Formerly known as “feminine rhyme.”

Downstage The part of the stage closest to the audience.

Dramatic irony A situation in which a reader or an audience knows more than the speakers or characters, about either the outcome of events or a discrepancy between a meaning intended by a speaker or character and
that recognized by the reader or audience.

Dramatic monologue A poem with only one speaker, overheard in a dramatic moment (usually addressing another character or characters who do not speak), whose words reveal what is going on in the scene and expose significant depths of the speaker's temperament, attitudes, and values. See Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (p. 60) and T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (p. 102).

Elements of poetry Verbal, aural, and structural features of poetry, including diction, tone, images, figures of speech, symbols, rhythm, rhyme, and poetic form, which are combined to create poems.

Ellision See compression.

Empathy The ability of the audience to relate to, even experience, the emotions of characters onstage or in a text.

End-rhyme Rhyme occurring at the ends of lines in a poem.

End-stopped line A line of poetry whose grammatical structure and thought reach completion by its end. Cf. run-on line.

English sonnet A sonnet consisting of three quatrains (three four-line units, typically rhyming abab cdcd efef) and a couplet (two rhyming lines). Usually, the subject is introduced in the first quatrain, expanded in the second, and expanded still further in the third; the couplet adds a logical, pithy conclusion or introduces a surprising twist. Also called the Shakespearean sonnet. Cf. Spenserian sonnet.

Enjambment See run-on line.

Elegy In Greek and Roman literature, a serious, meditative poetic written in "elegiac meter" (alternating hexameter and pentameter lines); since about 1600, a sustained and formal poem lamenting the death of a particular person, usually ending with a consolation, or one setting forth meditations on death or another solemn theme. See Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." The adjective elegiac is also used to describe a general tone of sadness or a worldview that emphasizes suffering and loss. It is most often applied to Anglo-Saxon poems like Beowulf or The Seafarer but can also be used for modern poems, such as A. E. Housman's in A Shropshire Lad.

Elements of drama The six features identified by Aristotle in Poetics as descriptive of and necessary to drama. They are, in order of the importance assigned to them by Aristotle, plot, characterization, theme, diction, melody, and spectacle.

Elements of fiction Major elements of fiction are plot, characters, setting, point of view, style, and theme. Skillful employment of these entities is essential in effective novels and stories. From beginning to end, each element is active and relates to the others dynamically.

Style Examples include Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, and John Milton's Paradise Lost.

Epic theater The name given by Bertolt Brecht to a theatrical style emphasizing the relationship between form and ideology. It is characterized by brief scenes, narrative breaks, political and historical themes, an analytical (rather than emotional) tone, and characters with whom it is difficult to feel empathy. Though considered alternative theater when it was new, many of its conventions have since been adopted by mainstream dramatists.

Epigram Originally, an inscription, especially an epitaph; in modern usage, a short poem, usually polished and witty with a surprising twist at the end. (Its other dictionary definition, "any terse, witty, pointed statement," generally does not apply in poetry.)

Epigraph In literature, a quotation at the beginning of a poem or at the title page or the beginning of a chapter in a book. See the epigraph from Dante's Inferno at the beginning of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (p. 102).

Epilogue A final speech or scene occurring after the main action of the play has ended. An epilogue generally sums up or comments on the meaning of the play.

Epiphany An appearance or manifestation, especially of a divine being: in literature, since James Joyce adapted the term to secular use in 1944, a sudden sense of radiance and revelation one may feel while perceiving a commonplace object; a moment or event in which the essential nature of a person, a situation, or an object is suddenly perceived, as at the end of Joyce's story "Araby."

Episode In Greek drama, the scenes of dialogue that occur between the choral odes. Now the term is used to mean any small unit of drama that has its own completeness and internal unity.

Euphony Language that strikes the ear as smooth, musical, and agreeable. An example can be found in Alexander Pope's poem "An Essay on Criticism," lines: "Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows; / And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows." Cf. cacophony.

Exact rhyme Rhyme in which all sounds following the vowel sound are the same: spite and night, art and heart, ache and fake, card and barred.

Exaggeration See hyperbole.

Explication The process of making clear that which is implicit or subtle in a work of literature. This is achieved by performing a close-reading—reading a piece of literature with an eye toward such sentence-level elements as sentence structure, style, imagery, word choice, and figurative language—and then explaining the larger purpose and effect of those elements.

Exposition A means of filling in the audience on events that occurred off-stage or before the play's beginning. Chunks handled exposition, in which characters talk at length about things they normally would not, is characteristic of much bad drama.

Expressionism Nonrealistic playmaking style using exaggerated or
otherwise unreal gestures, light, and sound. Expressionistic techniques are often used to convey a sense of memory, dream, or fantasy.

**Extension** Pronunciation that adds a syllable for the sake of the meter. See, for example, the third line of the fifth stanza in John Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning": "Interassured of the mind."

**Falling action** The action after the climax in a traditionally structured play whereby the tension lessens and the play moves toward the catastrophe or denouement.

**Falling meter** Meter using a foot (usually a trochee or a dactyl) in which the first syllable is accented and those that follow are unaccented, giving a sense of stepping down. Cf. rising meter.

**Farce** Comedy that relies on exaggerated characters, extreme situations, fast and accelerating pacing, and, often, sexual innuendo.

**Feminine rhyme** See double rhyme.

**Feminist criticism** A school of literary criticism that examines the roles of women in literature and culture as well as the relationships between men and women. Contemporary feminist criticism rose to prominence in the 1970s, when the modern feminist movement began to explore the patriarchal structures in which many women felt trapped. Some feminist critics seek to show the ways in which literary texts demonstrate the repression and powerlessness of women—or, alternately, to show how female literary characters could overcome sexist power structures. Still others seek to rediscover and promote writing by women whose works have been excluded from the mostly male canon of "great" literature.

**Feminist theater** Any play or theater whose primary object is to shine light on the issues of women's rights and sexism.

**Fiction** Generally speaking, any imaginative, usually prose, work of literature. More narrowly, narratives—short stories, novellas, or novels—whose plots, characters, and settings are constructions of its writer's imagination, which draws on the writer's experiences and reflections.

**Figurative language** Uses of language—employing metaphor or simile or other figures of speech—that depart from standard or literal usage in order to achieve a special effect or meaning. Figurative language is often employed in poetry; although less often seen in plays and stories, it can be used powerfully in those forms. Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use" opens with a figurative description of the family's yard.

**First-person narrator** In a story told by one person, the "I" who tells the story. Sometimes the first-person narrator is purely an observer; more often he or she is directly or indirectly involved in the action of the story. Montresor is the first-person narrator of, and one of two characters in, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." As a first-person narrator, he reveals much about his own emotions and motivations.

**Fixed form** Poetry written in definite, repeating patterns of line, rhyme scheme, or stanza.

**Flashback** A writer's way of introducing important earlier material. As a narrator tells a story, he or she may stop the flow of events and direct the reader to an earlier time. Sometimes the narrator may return to the present, sometimes remain in the past. The narrator in William Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" uses flashbacks to depict the events leading up to Emily Grierson's death.

**Foil** A character who exists chiefly to set off or display, usually by opposition, the important character traits of the protagonist or another important person.

**Foot** The basic unit in metrical verse, comprising (usually) one stressed syllable and one or more unstressed syllables. See also anapest, dactyl, iamb, spondee, and trochee.

**Foreshadowing** Words, gestures, or other actions that suggest future events or outcomes. The opening of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" foreshadows serious trouble ahead when Faith, Brown's wife, begs him to stay home with her "this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year."

**Form** (1) Genre or literary type (e.g., the lyric form); (2) patterns of meter, lines, and rhymes (stanzaic form); (3) the organization of the parts of a literary work in relation to its total effect (e.g., "The form [structure] of this poem is very effective").

**Formalism** A broad term for the various types of literary theory that advocate focusing attention on the text itself and not on extratextual factors. Formalist critics are interested in the formal elements of a literary text—structure, tone, characters, setting, symbols, linguistic features—and seek to create meaning by examining the relationships between these different parts of a text.

**Fourth wall** The theatrical convention, dating from the nineteenth century, whereby an audience seems to be looking and listening through an invisible fourth wall, usually into a room in a private residence. The fourth wall is primarily associated with realism and domestic dramas.

**Free verse** See open form.

**Gender criticism** A broad term for literary criticism that highlights gender roles or relationships between the sexes. In this expansive sense, feminist criticism is a kind of gender criticism, although the latter term is most often applied to gay and lesbian approaches to literature that explore the construction of sexual identity.

**Genre** A type or form of literature. While the major literary genres are fiction, drama, poetry, and exposition, many other subcategories of genres are recognized, including comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy, romance, melodrama, epic, lyric, pastoral, novel, short story, and so on.

**Haiku** A lyric form, originating in Japan, of seventeen syllables in three lines, the first and third having five syllables and the second seven, presenting an image of a natural object or scene that expresses a distinct emotion or spiritual insight.
Half rhyme  See slant rhyme.

Hamartia  Sometimes translated as "tragic flaw" but more properly understood as an error or general character trait that leads to the downfall of a character in tragedy.

Heptameter  A poetic line with seven metrical feet.

Hero, heroine  Sometimes used to refer to any protagonist, the term more properly applies only to a great figure from legend or history or to a character who performs in a remarkably honorable and selfless manner.

Heroic couplets  Couplets in iambic pentameter that usually end in a period. See Alexander Pope's poem "An Essay on Criticism." Also called closed couplets.

Hexameter  A poetic line with six metrical feet. See also alexandrine.

Historical criticism  A kind of literary criticism based on the notion that history and literature are often interrelated. For example, literary critics might read history books and various sorts of historical documents in order to gain insights into the composition and significance of a literary work.

Hubris  An arrogance or inflated sense of self that can lead to a character's downfall. The protagonists of tragedy often suffer from hubris.

Hyperbole  Exaggeration; a figure of speech in which something is stated more strongly than is logically warranted. Hyperbole is often used to make a point emphatically, as when Hamlet protests that he loves Ophelia much more than her brother does: "Forth thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.239–41). See also Robert Burns's "A Red, Red Rose."

Iamb  A metrical foot consisting of two syllables, an unaccented one followed by an accented one (–). In iambic meter (the most widely used of English metrical forms), iambics are the predominant foot in a line or poem. The following line from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is in iambic pentameter: "The cūr | feō tōlls | tē knēll | ōf pārt | ēg dāy." See pentameter.

Image  (1) Sometimes called a "word-picture," an image is a word or group of words that refers to a sensory experience or to an object that can be known by one or more of the senses. Imagery signifies all such language in a poem or other literary work collectively and can involve any of the senses; see, for example, the first two stanzas of T. S. Eliot's poem "Preludes" or the narrator's description of the girl he loves in James Joyce's story "Araby": "The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing." See also synesthesia. (2) A metaphor or other comparison. Imagery in this sense refers to the characteristic that several images in a poem may have in common, as for example, the Christian imagery in William Blake's "The Lamb."

Imitation  Since Aristotle, drama has been differentiated from fiction because it is said to rely on an imitation (in Greek, mimesis) of human actions rather than on a narration of them.

Implied metaphor  Metaphor in which the to be verb is omitted and one aspect of the comparison is implied rather than stated directly. Whereas "a car thief is a dirty dog" is a direct metaphor, "some dirty dog stole my car" contains an implied metaphor.

Interlude  A brief, usually comic, performance inserted between the acts of a play or between courses at a formal banquet. Interludes were most popular during the Renaissance.

Internal rhyme  Rhyme that occurs with words within a line, words within lines near each other, or a word within a line and one at the end of the same or a nearby line. Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" offers many examples: "chilling / And killing," "Can ever dissemble," "And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes."

Intertextuality  The implied presence of previous texts within a literary work or as context, usually conveyed through allusion or choice of genre. An intertextual approach assumes that interpretation of a text is incomplete until the relation of the work to its predecessors—response, opposition, and development—has been considered.

Irony  A feeling, tone, mood, or attitude arising from the awareness that what is (reality) is opposite from, and usually worse than, what seems to be (appearance). What a person says may be ironic (see verbal irony), and a discrepancy between what a character knows or means and what a reader or an audience knows can be ironic (see dramatic irony). A general situation also can be seen as ironic (see situational irony). Irony should not be confused with mere coincidence. See also Socratic irony.

Italian sonnet  Generally speaking, a sonnet composed of an octave (an eight-line unit), rhyming abbaabba, and a sestet (a six-line unit), often rhyming cdccde or cdcdcd. The octave usually develops an idea, question, or problem; then the poem pauses, or "turns," and the sestet completes the idea, answers the question, or resolves the difficulty. Sometimes called a Petrarchan sonnet. See Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur."

Juxtaposition  Placement of things side by side or close together for comparison or contrast, or to create something new from the union. See Alexander Pope's poem "An Essay on Criticism": "Now his fierce eyes with sparkling fury glow, / Now sighs steal out, and tears begin to flow."

Line  A sequence of words printed as a separate entity on a page; the basic structural unit in poetry (except in prose poems).

Lineation  The arrangement of lines in a poem.

Literal  In accordance with the primary or strict meaning of a word or words; not figurative or metaphorical.

Litotes  See understatement.

Lyric  Originally, a poem sung to the accompaniment of a lyre; now a short poem expressing the personal emotion and ideas of a single speaker.

Marxist criticism  Deriving from Karl Marx's theories of economics and class struggle, Marxist criticism sees
literature as a material product of work, one that reflects or contests the ideologies that generated its production and consumption.

**Masculine rhyme** See single rhyme.

**Melodrama** A type of play employing broadly drawn heroes and villains, suspenseful plots, music, and a triumph of good over evil. Melodrama thrived throughout the nineteenth century and remained popular into the twentieth.

**Melody** One of the six elements of drama identified by Aristotle. Since the Greek chorus communicated through song and dance, melody was an important part of even the most serious play, though it is now largely confined to musical comedy.

**Metaphor** A figure of speech in which two things usually thought to be dissimilar are treated as if they were alike and have characteristics in common: "Whose palms are bulls in china" (John Frederick Nims's "Love Poem"). See also implied metaphor.

**Metaphysical poetry** The work of a number of seventeenth-century poets that was characterized by philosophical subtlety and intellectual rigor; subtle, often outrageous logic; an imitation of actual speech sometimes resulting in a "rough" meter and style; and far-fetched analogies. John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" exemplifies the type. See also conceit.

**Meter** A steady beat, or measured pulse, created by a repeating pattern of accents or syllables, or both.

**Metonymy** A figure of speech in which the name of one thing is substituted for something closely associated with it, as in "The White House announced today..." a phrase in which the name of a building is substituted for the president or the staff members who issued the announcement; "He's got a Constable on his wall"; "The trains are on strike"; or "Wall Street is in a panic." In the last line of John Frederick Nims's "Love Poem," "All the toys of the world would break," "toys" is substituted for "things that give happiness" (as toys do to a child). See also synecdoche.

**Mock epic** A literary form that imitates the grand style and conventions of the epic genre—the opening statement of a theme, an address to the muse, long formal speeches, and epic similes—but applies them to a subject unworthy of such exalted treatment. Also called mock heroic. See also epic.

**Monometer** A poetic line with one metrical foot.

**Motivation** What drives a character to act in a particular way. To be convincing to an audience, an actor must understand and make clear to the audience the character's motivation.

**Narrative** A story in prose or verse; an account of events involving characters and a sequence of events told by a storyteller (narrator). A poem such as "John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" tells a story and is thus a narrative poem. Usually, the characters can be analyzed and generally understood; the events unfold in a cause-and-effect sequence; and some unity can be found among the characters, plot, point of view, style, and theme. Novels as well as stories are most often narratives, and journalism commonly employs narrative form.

**Narrative poem** See narrative.

**Narrator** The storyteller, usually an observer who is narrating from a third-person point of view or a participant in the story's action speaking in the first person. Style and tone are important clues to the nature of a narrator and the validity and objectivity of the story he or she is telling. Montesquieu, the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," creates his own self-portrait as he relates what has happened.

**Naturalism, naturalistic** A style of writing or acting meant to mimic closely the patterns of ordinary life.

**Near rhyme** See slant rhyme.

**New comedy** An ancient form of comedy that told of initially forbidden but ultimately successful love and that employed stock characters. New comedy is particularly associated with the Greek playwright Menander (342-292 B.C.E.).

**New Criticism** A kind of formalism that dominated Anglo-American literary criticism in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It emphasized close-reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object.

**New Historicism** A school of historical criticism that takes account of both what history has to teach us about what literature is and what literature has to teach us about history. New Historicismists examine many different types of texts—government records, periodicals, private diaries, bills of sale—in order to re-create, as much as possible, the rich cultural context that surrounded both an author and that author's original audience.

**Novel** An extended prose narrative or work of prose fiction, usually published alone. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a fairly short novel, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, or, *The Whale* a very long one. The length of a novel enables its author to develop characters, plot, and settings in greater detail than a short-story writer can.

**Novella** Between the short story and the novel in size and complexity. Like them, the novella is a work of prose fiction. Sometimes it is called a long short story. Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" are novellas.

**Octameter** A poetic line with eight metrical feet.

**Octave** The first eight lines of an Italian sonnet.

**Ode** (1) A multipart song sung by the chorus of Greek drama. A classical ode consists of a strophe followed by an antistrophe and sometimes by a final section called the epode. (2) A long lyric poem, serious (often intellectual) in tone, elevated and dignified in style, dealing with a single theme. The ode is generally more complicated in form than other lyric poems. Some odes retain a formal division into strophe, antistrophe, and epode, which reflects the form's origins in Greek tragedy. See William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."

**Old comedy** Comedy, such as that of Aristophanes, employing raucous (sometimes coarse) humor, elements of
satire and farce, and often a critique of contemporary persons or political and social norms.

Omniscient narrator A narrator who seems to know everything about a story's events and characters, even their inner feelings. Usually, an omniscient narrator maintains emotional distance from the characters.

One act A short play that is complete in one act.

Onomatopoeia The use of words whose sounds supposedly resemble the sounds they denote (such as thump, rattle, growl, hiss), or a group of words whose sounds help to convey what is being described; for example, Emily Dickinson's poem "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died."

Open form A form free of any predetermined metrical and stanzaic patterns. Cf. closed form.

Orchestra In Greek theater, the area in front of the stage proper where the chorus performed its songs and dances. Later, a pit for musicians in front of the stage.

Organic form The idea, grounded in Plato and strong since the nineteenth century, that subject, theme, and form are essentially one, that a work "grows" from a central concept. A contrary idea, that literary works are unstable and irregular because of changes in linguistic meanings and literary conventions, has led to a critical approach called deconstruction.

Ottava rima An eight-line stanza in iambic pentameter rhyming abab-ABCC.

Overstatement See hyperbole.

Oxymoron A figure of speech combining in one phrase (usually an adjective and a noun) two seemingly contradictory elements, such as "loving hate" or "feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health" (from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, 1.1.176–80). Oxymoron is a type of paradox.

Pantoum A poem composed of quatrains rhyming abab in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next, continuing through the last stanza, which repeats the first and third lines of the first stanza in reverse order.

Paradox A figure of speech in which a statement initially seeming self-contradictory or absurd turns out, seen in another light, to make good sense. The closing line of John Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud" contains a paradox: "Death, thou shalt die." See also oxymoron.

Parallelism (1) A verbal arrangement in which elements of equal weight within phrases, sentences, or paragraphs are expressed in a similar grammatical order and structure. It can appear within a line or pair of lines ("And he was always quietly arrayed, / And he was always human when he talked"—Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Richard Cory") or, more noticeably, as a series of parallel items, as found in Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem." (2) A principle of poetic structure in which consecutive lines in open form are related by a line's repeating, expanding on, or contrasting with the idea of the line or lines before it, as in the poems of Walt Whitman.

Paraphrase To restate a passage of literature or criticism in your own words, particularly useful as a method for taking research notes, or for interpreting a text. Generally, a paraphrase will be equal in length to the passage being paraphrased, while a summary will be much shorter.

Parody Now, a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, poets such as George Herbert practiced "sacred parody" by adapting secular lyrics to devotional themes.

Partial rhyme See slant rhyme.

Pastoral A poem (also called an eclogue, a bucolic, or an idyll) that expresses a city poet's nostalgic image of the simple, peaceful life of shepherds and other country folk in an idealized natural setting. Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" uses some pastoral conventions, as do certain elegies.

Pause See caesura.

Pentameter A poetic line with five metrical feet.

Performance art Loose term for a variety of performances that defy traditional categories of play, monologue, musical act, and so on. The term arose in the late twentieth century as a catchall to name the growing number of nontraditional performances, many of which addressed controversial subjects and themes.

Peripeteia A reversal or change of fortune for a character, for better or worse.

Persona Literally, the mask through which actors spoke in Greek plays. In some critical approaches of recent decades, persona refers to the "character" projected by an author; the "I" of a narrative poem or novel, or the speaker whose voice is heard in a lyric poem. In this view, a poem is an artificial construct distanced from a poet's autobiographical self: cf. voice.

Personification A figure of speech in which something nonhuman is treated as if it had human characteristics or performed human actions. Sometimes it involves abstractions, as in Thomas Gray's phrase "Fair Science frowned" ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"); science cannot literally frown. In other cases, concrete things are given human characteristics, as in the phrase "Wearing white for Easter-tide" from A. E. Houseman's poem "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now." Cherry trees do not actually wear clothes—but here they are being given, briefly, a human attribute. Difficulty can arise when personification is incorrectly defined as treating something nonhuman in terms of anything alive rather than what is specifically human; "the mouth of time," for instance, in Nancy Willard's poem "Questions My Son Asked Me, Answers I Never Gave Him" is metaphor, not personification, since animals as well as humans have mouths. See also apostrophe.

Petrarchan sonnet See Italian sonnet.

Plagiarism The act of closely imitating or outright adopting the language or ideas of another author and presenting them as one's own work without giving credit to the original author. This includes copying and pasting
from any Web source. Most colleges and universities have codes of academic honesty forbidding such practices and imposing severe penalties—including expulsion from the institution in some cases—on students who are caught breaking them.

**Plot** (1) The sequence of major events in a story, usually related by cause and effect. Plot development refers to how the sequence evolves or is shaped. Plot and character are intimately related, since characters carry out the plot’s action. Plots may be described as simple or complex, depending on their degree of complication. “Traditional” writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Guy de Maupassant, usually plot their stories tightly; modernist writers such as James Joyce employ looser, often ambiguous plots. (2) The action that takes place within the play. Of the six elements of drama, Aristotle considered plot to be the most important. Typical elements of plot include a prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe or denouement.

**Point of view** One of the elements of fiction, point of view is the perspective, or angle of vision, from which a narrator presents a story. Point of view tells us about the narrator as well as about the characters, setting, and theme of a story. Two common points of view are first-person narration and third-person narration. If a narrator speaks of himself or herself as “I,” the narration is in the first person; if the narrator’s self is not apparent and the story is told about others from some distance, using “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they,” then third-person narration is likely in force. The point of view may be omniscient (all-knowing) or limited, objective or subjective. When determining a story’s point of view, it is helpful to decide whether the narrator is reporting events as they are happening or as they happened in the past; is observing or participating in the action; and is or is not emotionally involved. Eudora Welty’s story “A Worn Path” is told from the third-person objective point of view, since its narrator observes what the character is doing, thinking, and feeling, yet seems emotionally distant. Stories like Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” and James Joyce’s “Araby” are told in the first-person subjective and limited point of view, since their narrators are very much involved in the action. In Kate Chopin’s story “The Story of an Hour” (p. 89), shifting points of view enable us to see Mrs. Mallard from the outside, as her family does (third-person subjective); learn about her most private emotional responses and secrets (third-person subjective); and hear her thoughts directly as if we were inside her mind (first-person subjective).

**Postcolonial criticism** A branch of cultural studies that focuses on writing from former British (and other, mostly European) colonies around the world. Postcolonial criticism seeks to recover literary history that was ignored or suppressed during the colonial period, and to celebrate indigenous cultures of storytelling, drama, and poetry. At the same time, it attempts to understand how occupation by a more powerful colonizing nation disrupted and changed the course of history in a particular place.

**Poststructuralism** Positing that no text can have a fixed or real meaning because no meaning can exist outside the network of other meanings to which it is connected, poststructuralism carries the insights of structuralism one step further. If, as structuralists claim, we can understand things only in terms of other things, then perhaps there is no center point of understanding, but only an endlessly interconnected web of ideas leading to other ideas leading to still other ideas. Meaning, then, is forever shifting and altering as our understanding of the world changes.

**Primary source** Term used in writing about literature to refer to the literature itself—the poem, story, or play on which the writing is based. Cf. secondary source.

**Prologue** A speech or scene that occurs before the beginning of the plot proper.

**Properties, props** Any movable objects, beyond scenery and costumes, used in the performance of a play. Early drama was performed with few props, but as theater moved toward realism, props took on greater importance.

**Proscenium arch** An arch across the front of a stage, sometimes with a curtain. The proscenium frames the action and provides a degree of separation between the actors and the audience.

**Prose poem** A poem printed as prose, with lines wrapping at the right margin rather than being divided through predetermined line breaks. See Carolyn Forchés “The Colonel.”

**Prosody** The principles of versification, especially of meter, rhythm, rhyme, and stanza forms.

**Protagonist** The lead character of a play, though not necessarily a hero in the classic sense.

**Psychological literary criticism** A broad term for the various types of literary theory that focus on the inner workings of the human psyche and the ways in which they manifest themselves in literature. Psychological critics often interpret literature as a psychologist might interpret a dream or a wish, often paying special attention to unstated motives and to the unconscious states of mind in characters, authors, or readers.

**Pun** A play on words based on the similarity in sound between two words having very different meanings. Also called paronomasia. See the puns on “heart” and “kindly” in Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poem “They flee from me.”
Quantitative verse Verse whose meter is based on the length of syllables. (Phonetic length was a distinguishing feature of ancient Greek and Latin, whereas English is an accentual language.) Classical poetry exhibits a great variety of meters, and some English poets in the late 1500s attempted to fashion English verse on this principle. In Evangeline, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used dactylic hexameter in imitation of Virgil's Aeneid, but defined it by accent, not quantity. Cf. accentual-syllabic verse.

Quatrain A stanza of four lines or other four-line unit within a larger form, such as a sonnet.

Queer theory One of the more recent and more challenging critical schools to emerge out of critical interest in gender. Queer theorists, like all literary critics, differ substantially in their focus: Some queer theorists are interested in studying literary texts written by authors known or suspected to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Other queer theorists are interested in portrayals of gay or lesbian characters in literature. Still others seek a "queer subtext" in canonical works of literature that have long been considered heteronormative.

Reader-response criticism The various theories of reader-response criticism hold that a text is an interaction between author and reader, and a text can never be complete unless readers bring to it their own unique insights. Reading, then, is not a passive attempt to understand a text but is itself an act of creation, no less than writing.

Realism Any drama (or other art) that seeks to closely mimic real life.

Realism more specifically refers to a sort of drama that rose in opposition to melodrama in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and that attempted to avoid some of the more artificial conventions of theater and present the problems of ordinary people living their everyday lives.

Recognition See anagnosis.

Refrain One or more identical or deliberately similar lines repeated throughout a poem, such as the final line of a stanza or a block of lines between stanzas or sections.

Resolution A satisfying outcome that effectively ends the conflict of a play.

Rhyme The repetition of the accented vowel sound of a word and all succeeding consonant sounds. See also exact rhyme; slant rhyme.

Rhyme royal An alternative term for Chaucerian stanza coined by King James I of Scotland in his poem The Kingis Quair ("The King's Book"), written about 1424.

Rhyme scheme The pattern of end-rhymes in a poem or stanza usually represented by a letter assigned to each word-sound, the same word-sounds having the same letter (e.g., a quatrain's rhyme scheme might be described as abcb).

Rhythm The patterned "movement" of language created by the choice of words and their arrangement, usually described through such metaphors as fast or slow, smooth or halting, graceful or rough, deliberate or frenzied, syncopated or disjointed.

Rhythm in poetry is affected by, in addition to meter, such factors as line length; line endings; pauses (or lack of them) within lines; spaces within, at the beginning or end of, or between lines; word choice; and combinations of sounds.

Rising action The increasingly tense and complicated action leading up to the climax in a traditionally structured play.

Rising meter A foot (usually an iamb or an anapest) in which the final, accented syllable is preceded by one or two unaccented syllables, thus giving a sense of stepping up. Cf. falling meter.

Romance A play neither wholly comic nor wholly tragic, often containing elements of the supernatural. The best-known examples are Shakespeare's late plays, such as The Winter's Tale and The Tempest, which have a generally comic structure but are more ruminative in theme and spirit than traditional comedy.

Run-on line A line whose sense and grammatical structure continue into the next line. In the following lines by William Stafford ("Traveling through the Dark"), the first line is run-on, the second end-stopped: "Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road." Also called enjambment. Cf. end-stopped line.

Sarcasm A harsh and cutting form of verbal irony, often involving apparent praise that is obviously not meant: "Oh, no, these are fine. I prefer my eggs thoroughly charred."

Satire A work, or manner within a work, employing comedy and irony to mock a particular human characteristic or social institution. Generally, a satirist wants the audience not only to laugh but also to change its opinions or actions.

Scansion The division of metrical verse into feet in order to determine and label its meter. Scanning a poem involves marking its stressed syllables with an accent mark (') and its unstressed syllables with a curved line (').

Scene One of the secondary divisions within an act of a play.

Secondary source Outside source used in writing about literature: biographical, historical, or critical writing that discusses the literature but is not the literature itself. (The literature itself is considered a primary source.)

Sestet The last six lines of an Italian sonnet.

Sestina A lyric poem consisting of six six-line stanzas and a three-line concluding stanza (or "envoy"). The last words of the lines of the first stanza must be used as the last words of the lines of the other five stanzas in a specified pattern (the first line ends with the last word of the last line of the previous stanza, the second line with that of the first line of the previous stanza, the third line with that of the previous fifth line, the fourth line with that of the previous second line, the fifth line with that of the previous fourth line, the sixth line with that of the previous...
third line). The three-line envoy must use the end-words of lines 5, 3, and 1 from the first stanza, in that order, as its last words and must include the first stanza’s other three end-words within its lines.

Set The stage dressing for a play, consisting of backdrops, furniture, and similar large items.

Setting One of the elements of fiction, setting is the context for the action: the time, place, culture, and atmosphere in which it occurs. A work may have several settings; the relation among them may be significant to the meaning of the work. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Young Goodman Brown,” for example, the larger setting is seventeenth-century Puritan Salem, Massachusetts, but Brown’s mysterious journey is set in a forest, and its prelude and melancholy aftermath are set in the village.

Shakespearean sonnet See English sonnet.

Shaped poem See concrete poem.

Short story A short work of narrative fiction whose plot, characters, settings, point of view, style, and theme reinforce one another, often in subtle ways, creating an overall unity.

Simile Expression of a direct similarity, using such words as like, as, or than, between two things usually regarded as dissimilar, as in “Shrinking from far headlights pale as a dime” (John Frederick Nims’s “Love Poem”). It is important to distinguish simile from comparison, in which the two things joined by “like” or “as” are not dissimilar.

Single rhyme A rhyme in which the stressed, rhyming syllable is the final syllable: west and vest, away and today. Formerly called “masculine rhyme.”

Situational irony The mood evoked when an action intended to have a certain effect turns out to have a different and more sinister effect. See Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Convergence of the Twain.”

Slant rhyme Consonance at the ends of lines; for example, Room and Storm, form and Room, and be and Fly in Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died.” It can also be internal, if repeated enough to form a discernible pattern.

Socratic irony A pose of self-deprecation, or of belittling oneself, in order to tease the reader into deeper insight.

Soliloquy A speech delivered by a character who is alone onstage or otherwise out of hearing of the other characters. Since the character is effectively speaking to himself or herself, a soliloquy often serves as a window into the character’s mind and heart.

Sonnet A fourteen-line poem usually written in iambic pentameter; originally lyrical love poems, sonnets came to be used also for meditations on religious themes, death, and nature and are now open to all subjects. Some variations in form have been tried: Sir Philip Sidney’s “Loving in truth, and pain in verse my love to show” (1591) is written in hexameters; George Meredith wrote sixteen-line sonnets; John Milton’s “On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament,” written around 1646, is a “cauda” (tailed) sonnet with a six-line coda appended; and Gerard Manley Hopkins designed “Pied Beauty” as a “curtal” (abbreviated) sonnet (six lines in place of the octave, then four lines, and a half-line ending in place of a sestet). See English sonnet and Italian sonnet.

Sonnet sequence A group of sonnets arranged so as to imply a narrative progression in the speaker’s experience or attitudes; used especially in the sixteenth century. Also called a sonnet cycle.

Speaker The persona voicing the poem. The speaker is sometimes the poet, though other times a poem may speak from a different perspective.

Spectacle The purely visual elements of a play, including the sets, costumes, props, lighting, and special effects. Of the six elements of drama he identified, Aristotle considered spectacle to be the least important.

Spenserian sonnet A variation of the English sonnet that employs the structure of three quatrains followed by a couplet but joins the quatrains by linking rhymes: abab ccde ee.

Spenserian stanza A stanza of nine iambic lines, the first eight in pentameter and the ninth in hexameter, rhyming ababcdcde. They are used in Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596) and in such romantic narrative poems as John Keats’s The Eve of St. Agnes (1820) and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Adonais (1824).

Spondee A metrical foot made up of two stressed syllables (’”), with no unstressed syllables. Spondees could not, of course, be the predominant foot in a poem; they are usually substituted for iambic or trochaic feet as a way of increasing emphasis, as in this line from John Donne’s “Batter my heart, three-personed God” (1633): “As ye yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.”

Sprung rhythm See accentual meter.

Stage business Minor physical activity performed by actors on stage, often involving props, intended to strengthen characterization or modulate tension in a play.

Stage directions Written instructions in the script telling actors how to move on the stage or how to deliver a particular line. To facilitate the reading of scripts and to distinguish them from simple dialogue, stage directions are interspersed throughout the text, typically placed in parentheses and set in italics.

Stage left, stage right Areas of the stage seen from the point of view of an actor facing an audience. Stage left, therefore, is on the audience’s right-hand side, and vice versa.

Stanza A grouping of poetic lines into a section, either according to form—each section having the same number of lines and the same prosody (see Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “They flee from me”—or according to thought, creating irregular units comparable to paragraphs in prose (see William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Mortality”).
Stichomythia  Short lines of dialogue quickly alternating between two characters.

Stock character  Any of a number of traditional characters easily identified by a single, stereotypical characteristic. Stock characters include innocent young women, rakish young men, clever servants, and so forth.

Stress  See accent.

Strophe  The first part of a choral ode in Greek drama. The strophe was traditionally sung as the chorus moved from stage right to stage left.

Structuralism  Based on the work of anthropologists, linguists, and philosophers of the mid-twentieth century who sought to understand how humans think and communicate, structuralism is concerned with the cognitive and cultural structures that help us understand and interpret literary texts. The basic insight at the heart of the movement is the realization that we understand nothing in isolation, but rather that every piece of knowledge is part of a network of associations.

Structure  (1) The framework—the general plan, outline, or organizational pattern—of a literary work; (2) narrower patterns within the overall framework. Cf. form.

Style  One of the elements of fiction, style refers to the diction (choice of words), syntax (arrangement of words), and other linguistic features of a literary work. Just as no two people have identical fingerprints or voices, so no two writers use words in exactly the same way. Style distinguishes one writer's language from another's. William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, two major modern writers, had very different styles.

Subplot  A secondary plot that exists in addition to the main plot and involves the minor characters. In tragedy, particularly, a subplot might provide comic relief.

Substitution  The use of a different kind of foot in place of the one normally demanded by the predominant meter of a poem, as a way of adding variety, emphasizing the dominant foot by deviating from it, speeding up or slowing down the pace, or signaling a switch in meaning.

Subtext  The unspoken meaning, sense, or motivation of a scene or character.

Summary  A brief recap of the most important points in a work of literature, such as plot, character, setting, etc.

Surrealism  An artistic movement that attempted to portray or interpret the workings of the unconscious mind, especially as realized in dreams, by an irrational, noncontextual choice and arrangement of images or objects. Now more often used to refer to anything defying the normal sense of reality.

Syllabic verse  A metrical pattern in which all lines in a poem have the same number of syllables (as in Sylvia Plath’s “Metaphors”) or all the first lines of its stanzas have the same number, all second lines the same, and so on (see Dylan Thomas’s “ Fern Hill”)—while the stressed syllables are random in number and placement.

Syllable  A unit of language consisting of one uninterrupted sound.

“Ferry” (feh’ree) has two syllables, for example.

Symbol  Something that is itself and also stands for something else; a literary symbol is a prominent or repeated image or action that is present in a story, poem, or play and can be seen, touched, smelled, heard, tasted, or experienced imaginatively, but also conveys a cluster of abstract meanings beyond itself. Most critics agree that the wallpaper in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the tiger in William Blake’s poem “The Tyger,” and the glass animals in Tennessee Williams’s play The Glass Menagerie, for example, carry symbolic meaning. See also archetype.

Symbolism  The use of objects or events to suggest meaning beyond their immediate, physical presence. Symbolism exists in all genres of literature, but in drama it might include visual or sound elements as well as language.

Synecdoche  A special kind of metonymy in which a part of a thing is substituted for the whole, as in the commonly used phrases “give me a hand,” “lend me your ears,” or “many mouths to feed.” See, for example, “whose hands shipwreck vases” and “For should your hands drop white and empty” (John Frederick Nims’s “Love Poem”).

Synesthesia  Description of one kind of sense experience in relation to another, such as attribution of color to sounds (“blue notes”) and vice versa (“a loud tie”) or of taste to sounds (“sweet music”). See, for example, “With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—” (Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died”).

Tercet  A stanza of three lines, each usually ending with the same rhyme; but see terza rima. Cf. triplet.

Terza rima  A poetic form consisting of three-line stanzas (tercets) with interlinked rhymes, aba bcb cdc ded efe, and so on, made famous by Dante’s use of it in The Divine Comedy.

Tetrameter  A poetic line with four metrical feet. Robert Frost’s line “The woods are lovely, dark, and deep” (“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”) is an example of iambic tetrameter.

Text  Traditionally, a piece of writing. In recent reader-response criticism, “text” has come to mean the words with which the reader interacts; in this view, a story, poem, or play is not an object, not a shape on the page or a spoken performance, but what is apprehended and completed in the reader’s mind.

Theater in the round  A circular stage completely surrounded by seating for the audience.

Theater of the absurd/or cruelty  See Absurd, theater of; Cruelty, theater of.

Theme  The central idea embodied by or explored in a literary work; the general concept, explicit or implied, that the work incorporates and makes persuasive to the reader. Other literary elements, including characters, plot, settings, point of view, figurative language, symbols, and style, contribute to a theme’s development.

Thesis statement  A few sentences, usually located toward the beginning of a paper, declaring the position the
author plans to take on the proposed topic.

Third-person narrator The type of narration being used if a storyteller is not identified, does not speak of himself or herself with the pronoun I, asserts no connection between the narrator and the characters in the story, and tells the story with some objectivity and distance, using the pronouns he, she, it, and they—but not I. Eudora Welty chose third-person narration to tell the moving story of Old Phoenix in "A Worn Path," because as a writer she wanted distance.

Title The name attached to a work of literature. For poetry, a title in some cases is an integral part of a poem and needs to be considered in interpreting it. In other cases, a title has been added as a means of identifying a poem and is not integral to its interpretation. Sometimes a poem is untitled and the first line is used as a convenient way of referring to it, but should not be thought of as a title and does not follow the capitalization rules for titles.

Tone The implied attitude, or "stance," toward the subject and toward the reader or audience in a literary work; the "tone of voice" it seems to project (serious or playful; exaggerated or understated; formal or informal; ironic or straightforward; or a complex mixture of more than one of these). For example, the tone of Toni Cade Bambara's story "The Lesson" is streetwise and tough, the voice of its first-person narrator.

Tragedy A play in which the plot moves from relative stability to death or other serious sorrow for the protagonist. A traditional tragedy is written in a grand style and shows a hero of high social stature brought down by peripeteia or by events beyond his or her control.

Tragicomedy A play in which tragedy and comedy are mingled in roughly equal proportion.

Transferred epithet A figure of speech in which a modifier that ought, strictly, to apply to one word is transferred to another word that it does not strictly fit. In "The drunk clambering on his undulating floor" (in John Frederick Nims's "Love Poem"), the drunk's perception, not the floor, is undulating.

Tritter A poetic line with three metrical feet.

Triplet A verse form of eight lines with only two rhymes, rhyming abababab. The first two lines repeat in the last two lines, with the fourth line the same as the first line.

Trailer A group of three consecutive lines with the same rhyme, often used for variation in a long sequence of couplets. Cf. tercet.

Trokoe A metrical foot consisting of two syllables, an accented one followed by an unaccented one (\-\-\-). In trochaic meter, trochae are the predominant foot in a line or poem. The following lines from William Blake's introduction to Songs of Innocence (1789) are in trochaic meter (each line lacking the final unaccented syllable):

"Piping | down the | valley | wild, | Piping | Songs of | pleasing | gleam, | On the | cloud | saw a | child, | And lie | laughing | said to | me."

Understatement A figure of speech expressing something in an unexpectedly restrained way. Paradoxically, understatement can be a way of emphasizing something, of making people think "there must be more to it than that." When Mercutio in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, after being stabbed by Tybalt, calls his wound "a scratch, a scratch" (3.1.92), he is understating, for the wound is serious—he calls for a doctor in the next line, and he dies a few minutes later.

Unities The elements of a play that help an audience understand the play as a unified whole. Aristotle commented on the unities of time (the action of a play usually takes place within approximately one day) and action (the play should have a single, principal plot line). Renaissance critics added a third unity—unity of place (the play has only one main setting). Though Aristotle intended these merely as observations about the most successful dramas he had seen, some later playwrights took them as inflexible laws of drama.

Unity The oneness of a short story. Generally, each of a story's elements has a unity of its own, and all reinforce one another to create an overall unity. Although a story's unity may be evident on first reading, more often discovering the unity requires rereading, reflection, and analysis. Readers who engage in these actions experience the pleasure of seeing a story come to life.

Upstage As a noun or an adjective, the part of the stage farthest from the audience, at the back of the playing area. As a verb, to draw the audience's attention away from another actor onstage.

Verbal irony A figure of speech in which what is said is nearly the opposite of what is meant (such as saying "Lovely day out" when the weather actually is miserable). The name Arnold Friend, in Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is an example, for Arnold is anything but a friend to Connie.

Villanelle A nineteen-line lyric poem divided into five tercets and a final four-line stanza, rhyming aba aba aba aba aba. Line 1 is repeated to form lines 6, 12, and 18; line 3 is repeated to form lines 9, 15, and 19. See Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" and Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night."

Voice The supposed authorial presence in poems that do not obviously employ persona as a distancing device.

Well-made play A type of play that rose to prominence in the nineteenth century and that relied for its effect on clever, causal plotting and a series of startling discoveries or revelations rather than on subtleties of character or language.