English Literature A Level Key Words:

Subject specific vocabulary

The following subject specific vocabulary provides definitions of key terms used in AQA's AS and A-level English Literature B specifications.

Significance

When used in AS and A-level English Literature B questions, the term ‘significance’ has a very specific use and gives access to Assessment objectives (AOs) 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Its use here derives from semiotics and involves understanding the idea of signification. In this specification, 'significance' involves weighing up all the potential contributions to how a text can be analysed: for example, through the way the text is constructed and written; through text specific contexts which can be relevantly applied; through connecting the text(s) to other texts; and then finding potential meanings and interpretations.

Genre

This specification's examination components are organised around 'genres', but the term is used somewhat differently in each of the two components. In a most general sense, genre involves grouping texts by type, and so connecting texts. There are many ways of grouping literary texts though. Two of the most frequent appear in this specification: 'Literary genres' (Tragedy or Comedy) have their origins in the Ancient World with a specific emphasis on drama; 'Texts and Genres' (Crime Writing/Political and Social Protest Writing) are more modern and, being heavily influenced by culture, are continually evolving.

Aspects

Aspects of Tragedy/Comedy: the use of the word ‘aspects’ highlights the fact that it is the actual texts which are the focus of study, seen through the lens of the genre, rather than wholesale study of the genre *per se*. It also suggests that specific questions will focus on specific areas within the genre, and that differences between texts can be as significant as similarities.

Elements

Elements of Crime Writing/Political and Social Protest Writing: the use of the word ‘elements’ is similar to the use of the word ‘aspects’ above, in that again it is the actual texts which are the focus of study, seen through the lens of the genre, rather than wholesale study of the genre *per se*. The word ‘elements’ also acknowledges that the two genre topics are less formalised groupings than Tragedy/Comedy, covering a wider spread of prose, poetry and drama.

Dramatic methods

The requirement to consider author’s dramatic methods appears on many questions involving drama texts. This requires students to understand that drama text is a very specific type of literary writing: studied on the page, but written for performance.

The following phrases, which signal A02, will frequently appear as parts of questions on Specification B:

'Remember to include relevant analysis of dramatic/authorial methods/relevant comment on the ways that writers have shaped meanings.'

When responding to questions built around the idea of significance, students need to be reminded that they must consider AO2 as part of their wider discussion of the literary debates they are engaging with. These phrases remind students of the need to consider relevant aspects of structure and language use, especially as it relates to the combinations of genre (prose/poetry/drama: tragedy/comedy/crime/political and social protest) that they are working on.

Theory

The use of ‘Theory’ in the title of the Non-exam assessment (NEA) component is a clear statement that this specification understands that literary reading and interpretation is never fixed, and that one way debates can arise is through an awareness that the critical methodology you use can shape the meanings that you find

# Glossary of Literary Terms

### Terms for analysis of verse

**Accentual Verse**: Verse in which the [metre](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#metre) depends upon counting a fixed number of stresses (which are also known as 'accents') in a line, but which does not take account of unstressed syllables. The majority of Germanic poetry (including Old English) is of this type.

**Accentual-Syllabic Verse**: The normal system of verse composition in England since the fourteen century, in which the [metre](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#metre) depends upon counting both the number of [stresses](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stress) and the total number of syllables in any give line. An [iambic pentameter](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter) for example contains five stressed syllables and a total of ten syllables.

**Alexandrine**: a line of six iambic feet, often used to mark a conclusion in a work which is in [heroic couplets](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#couplet): Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* (1709) satirised this technique (which he was not above using himself): ' Then, at the last and only couplet fraught | With some unmeaning thing they call a thought, | A needless Alexandrine ends the song, | That like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.' The final line of that extract is of course itself an alexandrine. Spenser used an alexandrine to end his modified form of [ottava rima](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#ottava). The same word is used to describe a line of twelve syllables which is the dominant form of French verse. See [syllabic verse](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#syllabic).

**Allegory**: the saying of one thing and meaning another. Sometimes this [trope](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#trope) works by an extended metaphor ('the ship of state foundered on the rocks of inflation, only to be salvaged by the tugs of monetarist policy'). More usually it is used of a story or fable that has a clear secondary meaning beneath its literal sense. Orwell's *Animal Farm*, for example, is assumed to have an allegorical sense.

**Alliteration**: The repetition of the same consonants (usually the initial sounds of words or of stressed syllables) at the start of several words or syllables in sequence or in close proximity to each other. In Anglo-Saxon poetry and in some fourteenth century texts such as *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* rigid patterns of alliteration were an essential part of poetic form. More recently it is used for expressive or occasionally onomatopoeic effect.

**Anapaest**: A metrical [foot](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#foot) consisting of three syllables. The first two are unstressed and the last is stressed: 'di di dum'.

**Anaphora**: Repitition of the same word or words at the beginning of consecutive syntactic units.

**Apostrophe**: In rhetoric the word is used to describe a sudden address to a person or personification. In punctuation the same word is used to describe the mark ' which can be used to indicate the beginning and end of direct speech, a quotation, or an [elision](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#elision). From the late sixteenth century an apostrophe was used, very irregularly, to indicate a possessive form of a noun: by the mid-nineteenth century it was established by convention that singular possessive forms should be indicated by "'s" ('the cat's pajamas') and that regular plural possessive forms should be indicated by "s'" ('my parents' house'). If a plural does not normally end in 's' then the form "'s" is used for the plural possessive form ('the children's tea was delicious'). The main exception to this rule is 'it's', which is used as the contracted form of 'it is' or 'it has'. The form 'its' is reserved for the possessive use ('the door has lost its paint').

**Assonance**: The word is usually used to describe the repetition of vowel sounds in nieghbouring syllables (compare [Alliteration](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#alliteration). The consonants can differ: so 'd**ee**p s**ea**' is an example of assonance, whereas 'The queen will sw**eep** past the d**eep** crowds' is an example of internal [rhyme](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#rhyme). More technically it is used to describe the 'rhyming of one word with another in the accented vowel and those which follow, but not in the consonants, as used in the versification of Old French, Spanish, Celtic, and other languages' (OED).

**Asyndeton**: The omission of a conjunction from a list ('chips, beans, peas, vinegar, salt, pepper'). Compare [polysyndeton](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#polysyndeton).

**Blank verse**: is the metre most frequently used by Shakespeare. It consists of an unrhymed [iambic pentameter](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter). It was first used in Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey's, translation of Books 2 and 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, composed some time in the 1530s or 40s. It was adopted as the chief verse form in Elizabethan verse drama, and was subsequently used by Milton in *Paradise Lost* and in a wide range of subsequent meditative and narrative poems.

**Caesura**: A pause or breathing-place about the middle of a metrical line, generally indicated by a pause in the sense. The word derives from a Latin word meaning 'cut or slice', so the effect can be quite violent. However in many lines of [blank verse](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#blank_verse) the caesura may be almost inaudible. A medial caesura is the norm: this occurs in the middle of a line. An initial caesura occurs near the start of a line; a terminal caesura near its end. A 'masculine caesura' occurs after a stressed syllable, and a 'feminine caesura' occurs after an unstressed syllable.

**Couplet**: a rhymed pair of lines, which are usually of the same length. If these are [iambic pentameters](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter) it is termed a **heroic couplet**. This form was made popular by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and became the dominant poetic form in the latter part of the seventeenth century. In the work of Alexander Pope it becomes a flexible medium for pointed expression. Couplets of four iambic feet (i.e. eight syllables in all) are called **octosyllabic couplets**. These were favoured by John Gower, Chaucer's near contemporary, and became a vehicle for a comically brisk style in Samuel Butler's satirical poem *Hudibras* (1663-78).

**Dactyl**: A metrical [foot](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#foot) consisting of three syllables, in which the first is stressed and the last two are unstressed.

**Decorum**: In literary parlance, the appropriateness of a work to its subject, its genre and its audience.

**Diction**: or lexis, or vocabulary of a passage refers to nothing more or less then its words. The words of a given passage might be drawn from one [register](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#register), they might be drawn from one linguistic origin (e.g. Latin, or its Romance descendants Italian and French; Old English); they might be either very formal or very colloquial words.

**Elision**: The omission of one or more letters or syllables from a word. This is usually marked by an apostrophe: as in 'he's going to the shops'. In early printed texts the elided syllable is sometimes printed as well as the mark of elision, as in Donne's 'She 'is all States, all Princes I'.

**Enjambement**: The effect achieved when the syntax of a line of verse transgresses the limits set by the metre at the end of the verse. Metre aims for the integrity of the single verse, whereas syntax will sometimes efface that integrity. Thus 'Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side/ As if a voice were in them, the sick sight/ And giddy prospect of the raving stream...' [End-stopping](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#endstopping) is the alternative to enjambement.

**End-stopping**: The effect achieved when the syntax of a line coincides with the metrical boundary at the end of a line. The contrary of [enjambement](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#enjambement).

***Fabliau*** (plural *fabliaux*): A short, pithy story, usually of a bawdy kind.

**Foot**: the basic unit for describing metre, usually consisting of a certain number and combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. Stressed and unstressed syllables form one or other of the recognised metrical forms: an iamb is 'di dúm'; a trochee is 'dúm di', a spondee is 'dúm dúm' (as in 'home-made'), an [anapaest](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#anapaest) is 'di di dúm', and a [dactyl](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#dactyl) is 'dúm di di'.

**Feminine Rhyme**: a rhyme of two syllables in which the final syllable is unstressed ('mother | brother'). If an iambic pentameter ends in a feminine rhyme the last, unstressed, syllable is usually not counted as one of the ten syllables in the line ('To be or not to be, that is the question' - the 'ion' is unstressed and takes the line into an eleventh syllable). Feminine rhyme can be used for comic effect, as it is frequently in the works of Byron: 'I've spent my life, both interest and principle, | And think not what I thought, my soul invincible.' It can also be sometimes used to suggest a feminine subject-matter, as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 20, which is addressed to the 'master mistress of my passion' and which makes extensive use of 'feminine' rhymes.

**Form**: The term is usually used in the analysis of poetry to refer to the structure of stanzas (such as [ottava rima](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#ottava)). It can also be used less technically of the general structural principles by which a work is organised, and is distinguished from its content.

**Free Verse**: verse in which the metre and line length vary, and in which there is no discernible pattern in the use of rhyme.

**Genre**(from Latin *genus*, type, kind): works of literature tend to conform to certain types, or kinds. Thus we will describe a work as belonging to, for example, one of the following genres: epic, pastoral, satire, elegy. All the resources of linguistic patterning, both stylistic and structural, contribute to a sense of a work's genre. Generic boundaries are often fluid; literary meaning will often be produced by transgressing the normal expectations of genre.

**Homophones**: Words which sound exactly the same but which have different meanings ('maid' and 'made').

**Hypermetrical**: having an extra syllable over and above the expected normal length of a line of verse. See also [feminine rhyme](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#feminine).

**Iambic pentameter**: an unrhymed line of five [feet](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#foot) in which the dominant accent usually falls on the second syllable of each foot (di dúm), a pattern known as an iamb. The form is very flexible: it is possible to have one or more feet in which the expected order of accent is reversed (dúm di). These are called [trochees](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#trochee).

**Irony**: strictly a sub-set of [allegory](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#allegory): irony not only says one thing and means another, but says one thing and means its opposite. The word is used often of consciously inappropriate or understated utterances (so two walkers in the pouring rain greet each other with 'lovely day!', 'yes, isn't it'). Irony depends upon the audience's being able to recognise that a comment is deliberately at odds with its occasion, and may often discriminate between two kinds of audience: one which recognises the irony, and the other which fails to do so. **Dramatic irony** occurs when an audience of a play know some crucial piece of information that the characters onstage do not know (such as the fact that Oedipus has unwittingly killed his father).

**Lexical set**: words that are habitually used within a given environment constitute a lexical set. Thus 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...' form a lexical set.

**Metaphor**: the transfer of a quality or attribute from one thing or idea to another in such a way as to imply some resemblance between the two things or ideas: 'his eyes **blazed**' implies that his eyes become like a fire. Many metaphors have been absorbed into the structure of ordinary language to such an extent that they are all but invisible, and it is sometimes hard to be sure what is or is not dead metaphor: 'the fat book' may imply a metaphor, as may also be the case when we talk of a note of music as 'high' or 'low'. **Mixed metaphors** often occur when a speaker combines two metaphors from very diverse areas in such a way as to create something which is physically impossible or absurd ('the report of the select committee was a bombshell which got right up my nose'). These often result from the tendency of metaphors to become received idioms in which the original force of the implied comparison is lost. See also [Simile](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#simile).

**Metonymy**: A figure of speech in which the name of one object is replaced by another which is closely associated with it. So 'the turf' is a metonym for horse-racing, 'Westminster' is a metonym for the Houses of Parliament, 'Downing Street' is a metonym for the Prime-Minister or his office. 'Sceptre and crown came tumbling down' is a metonymic way of saying 'the king fell from power'. See [synecdoche](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#synecdoche).

**Metre**: A regular patterned recurrence of light and heavy stresses in a line of verse. These patterns are given names. Almost all poems deliberately depart from the template established by a metrical pattern for specific effect. Assessing a poem's metre requires more than just spotting an [iambic pentameter](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter) or other metrical pattern: it requires you to think about the ways in which a poem departs from its underlying pattern and why. Emotion might force a reverse foot or [trochee](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#trochee), or the normal patterns of speech might occasionally cut across an underlying rhythm. See [Iambic Pentameter](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter).

**Monorhyme**: A rhymescheme in which all lines rhyme (aaaa etc.)

**Onomatopoeia**: The use of words or sounds which appear to resemble the sounds which they describe. Some words are themselves onomatopoeic, such as 'snap, crackle, pop.'

**Ottava rima**: an eight line verse [stanza](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stanza) [rhyming](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#rhyme) abababcc. In English it is usually in [iambic pentameter](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter). It was introduced into English by Sir Thomas Wyatt in the 1530s, and was widely used for long verse narratives. Sir John Harington translated Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* into ottava rima in 1591; Byron used the form in *Don Juan* (1819-24). Edmund Spenser produced a nine line modification of the form which ends with an [alexandrine](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#alexandrine) and rhymes ababbcbcc. for his *Faerie Queene* (1590-6). This is known as the Spenserian stanza, and was quite widely used by Wordsworth, Byron and Keats.

**Personification**: the attribution to a non-animate thing of human attributes. The thing personified is often an abstract concept (e.g. 'Lust'). Personification is related to allegory, insofar as personification says one thing ('Lust possessed him') and really means another. But it is opposed to allegory insofar as it aims for the maximum degree of explicitness, whereas allegory necessarily involves greater degrees of obliquity.

**Plosive**: A consonantal sound in the formation of which the passage of air is completely blocked, such as 'p', 'b', 't'. The blockage can be made in a variety of places (between the lips, between the tongue and teeth, between the tongue and palate). A 'bi-labial plosive' is made with the lips (Latin *labia*): examples are 'p' and 'b'; a 'dental plosive' is made by blocking the passage of air with the tongue and the teeth ('d', 't'); an 'uvular' plosive is made right at the back of the throat ('q', 'g'). Phoneticists (people who study the science of pronunciation) distinguish between 'voiced' and 'unvoiced' plosives. This is the distinction between 'b' (in saying which you have to make a sound as well as simply letting the air escape between your lips; hence it is 'voiced') and 'p' (in saying which you do not have to make a sound; hence it is termed 'unvoiced'). Similarly 't' is an unvoiced dental plosive; 'd' is a voiced dental plosive. The [International Phonetic Association](http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/fullchart.html) provides more information about how words are pronounced and the specialised alphabet with which such sounds are transcribed.

**Polysyndeton**: The use of multiple conjunctions, usually where they are not strictly necessary ('chips and beans and fish and egg and peas and vinegar and tomato sauce'). Compare [asyndeton](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#asyndeton).

**Quantitative Metre**: A metrical system based on the length or 'weight' of syllables, rather than on [stress](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stress). This is the norm in classical Latin and Greek, but is rare in English. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) made some attempts to write in quantitative metre in order to bring English poetry closer to its classical models, but he had few imitators.

**Quatrain**: a verse stanza of four lines, often rhyming abab. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* rhymes abba, however.

**Refrain**: A repeated line, phrase or group of lines, which recurs at regular intervals through a poem or song, usually at the end of a [stanza](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stanza). The less technical term is 'chorus'.

**Register**: a term designating the appropriateness of a given style to a given situation. Speakers and writers in specific situations deploy, for example, a technical vocabulary (e.g. scientific, commercial, medical, legal, theological, psychological), as well as other aspects of style customarily used in that situation. Literary effect is often created by switching register.

**Rhetorical Figures**: Linguistic effect can be perceptible to the mind and/or the eye. Figures of thought appeal to the mind by twisting language in a way that is strictly improper, but licensed by usage. Thus the word 'is' is used improperly in the sentence 'John is a lion', but the metaphorical usage is permissible. Or when we hear the sentence 'All hands on deck', we understand that the word 'hands' is being used as a [synecdoche](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#synecdoche) for sailors. Figures of thought are sometime called [tropes](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#trope) (from a Greek word meaning 'turn', 'twist') or conceits (from a Latin word meaning 'concept', because the conceit appeals to the mind). Figures of speech are perceptible to the eye and the ear. Thus rhyme is a figure of speech, as is alliteration and [anaphora](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#anaphora). Figures of speech are sometimes called schemes (Greek 'forms').

**Rhyme**: When two or more words or phrases contain an identical or similar vowel-sound, and the consonant-sounds that follow are identical or similar (red and dead). **Feminine rhyme** occurs when two syllables are rhymed ('mother | brother'). **Half-rhyme** occurs when the final consonants are the same but the preceding vowels are not. ('lo**ve** | ha**ve**')**. Eye rhyme** occurs when two syllables look the same but are pronounced differently ('kind | wind' - although sometimes changes in pronunciation have made what were formerly perfect rhymes become eye rhymes). **Rime riche** occurs when the same combination of sounds is used in each element of the rhyme, but where the two identical sounding words have different senses ('maid | made'). This was in the medieval period regarded as a particularly perfect form of rhyme. **Leonine rhyme** occurs when the syllable immediately preceding the [caesura](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#caesura) rhymes with the syllable at the end of the line. The **Rhyme Scheme**, or regularly recurring patterns of rhyme within a poem or stanza, is recorded by using a letter of the alphabet to denote each rhyme, and noting the order in which the rhymes recur (aabbcc... is the most simply rhyme scheme of all, that of the couplet).

**Rhythm**: a term designating the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse or prose. Different lines of verse can have the same [metre](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#metre) but a different rhythm. Thus two lines of alliterative verse in Middle English poetry might have the same metrical pattern of four stressed syllables, but their rhythm might differ by having a greater or lesser number of unstressed syllables intervening between the stressed syllables.

**Rhyme Royal**: A form of verse which consists of [stanzas](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stanza) of seven ten-syllable lines, riming a b a b b c c. It was first used by Chaucer, and was also the form chosen by Shakespeare for the tragic gravity of his narrative poem *Lucrece* (1594).

**Simile**: a comparison between two objects or ideas which is introduced by 'like' or 'as'. The literal object which evokes the comparison is called the **tenor** and the object which describes it is called the **vehicle**. So in the simile 'the car wheezed like an asthmatic donkey' the car is the tenor and the 'asthmatic donkey' is the vehicle. **Negative similes** are also possible (as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun'). **Epic similes** are more extended similes, which might involve multiple points of correspondence between tenor and vehicle. The frequently occur in long heroic narrative poems in the classical tradition, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), as when Milton describes the combat of Satan and Death:

'Incenst with indignation Satan stood  
Unterrifi'd, and like a Comet burn'd,   
That fires the length of Ophiucus huge   
In th' Artick Sky, and from his horrid hair   
Shakes Pestilence and Warr. Each at the Head   
Level'd his deadly aime; thir fatall hands   
No second stroke intend, and such a frown   
Each cast at th' other, as when two black Clouds   
With Heav'ns Artillery fraught, come rattling on   
Over the Caspian, then stand front to front   
Hov'ring a space, till Winds the signal blow   
To joyn thir dark Encounter in mid air:   
So frownd the mighty Combatants, that Hell   
Grew darker at thir frown, so matcht they stood...'

This double simile (first Satan is compared to a comet, then to a cloud) reflects back on the literal action: the violent energy of the comet is damped down by the immobile clouds. This change of vehicle reflects back on the fight which is the simile's tenor: it suggests that Satan starts off blazing with eagerness to fight Death, and then pauses, perhaps nervously.

**Sonnet**: In its earliest usages this can mean just 'a short poem, often on the subject of love.' Now it is almost always used to denote a fourteen line poem in [iambic pentameter](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter). There are two main forms of Sonnet: the 'Shakespearean Sonnet' rhymes abab cdcd efef gg. It was the form favoured by Shakespeare, in his *Sonnets* (1609), although it is first found in the work of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. The three quatrains can be linked together in argument in a variety of ways, but often there is a 'volta' or turn in the course of the argument after the second quatrain. The final [couplet](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#couplet) often provides an opportunity to sum up the argument of the poem with an epigram. Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) introduced a variant form in which the quatrains are connected by rhyme: abab bcbc cdcd ee. The 'Petrarchan Sonnet', which is the earliest appearance of the form, falls into an octet, or eight line unit, and a sestet, or six line unit. The Petrarchan sonnet form rhymes abbaabba cdecde (although the sestet can follow other rhyme-schemes, such as cdcdcd). Often there is a marked shift in the progression of the argument after the octet in the Petrarchan sonnet, which is sometimes vestigially registered in the Shakespearean form by a change of argument or mood at the start of the third quatrain. Sonnets may be free-standing poems, or they may form part of an extended sequence of poems which might relate in a loose narrative form the progress of a love affair (as is the case in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Spenser's *Amoretti* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*).

**Stanza**: 'A group of lines of verse (usually not less than four), arranged according to a definite scheme which regulates the number of lines, the metre, and (in rhymed poetry) the sequence of rhymes; normally forming a division of a song or poem consisting of a series of such groups constructed according to the same scheme' (OED). See also [ottava rima](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#ottava), [quatrain](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#quatrain). This term is preferable to the less technical 'verse', since that word can also refer to a single line of a poem. In printed poems divisions between stanzas are frequently indicated by an area of blank space.

**Stress**: Emphasis given to a syllable in pitch, volume or duration (or several of these). In normal spoken English some syllables are given greater stress than others. In [metrical](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#metre) writing these natural variations in stress are formed into recurrent patterns, such as [iambs](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pentameter), [anapaests](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#anapaest) or [trochees](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#trochee).

**Strophe**: A [stanza](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stanza) or other grouping of lines within a poem. In classical odes the term is used of the first group of lines which might be followed by an antistrophe which exactly replicates the [form](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#form) of the strophe.

**Syllable**: The smallest unit of speech that normally occurs in isolation, or a distinct sound element within a word. This can consist of a vowel alone ('O') or a combination of a vowel and one or more consonants ('no', 'not'). **Monosyllables** contain only one syllable ('dog', 'big', 'shoe'); **polysyllables** contain more than one syllable. The word 'syllable' contains three syllables.

**Syllabic Verse**: A metrical system which depends solely on syllable count, and which takes no account of [stress](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#stress). This is the norm in most Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish), but is unusual (and almost always consciously experimental) in English.

**Synecdoche**: the rhetorical figure whereby a part is substituted for a whole ('a suit entered the room'), or, less usually, in which a whole is substituted for a part (as when a policeman is called 'the law' or a manager is called 'the management'). See [metonymy](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#metonymy).

**Topos**: from a Greek word meaning 'place', a 'topos' in poetry is a 'commonplace', a standard way of describing a particular subject. Describing a person's physical features from head to toe (or somewhere in between) is, for example, a standard topos of medieval and Renaissance poetry.

**Trochee**: a [foot](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#foot) of two syllables, in which the accent falls on the first syllable (dúm di). Some words which are trochaic include 'broken', 'taken', 'Shakespeare'.

**Trope**: a general term for any figure of speech which alters the literal sense of a word or phrase: so [metaphor](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#metaphor), [simile](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#simile) and [allegory](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#allegory) are all tropes, since they affect the meaning of words. In the rhetorical tradition tropes are contrasted with **figures**, which are rhetorical devices which affect the order or placing of words (so the repetition of a particular word at the start of each line is a figure).

### Basic Grammatical Terms

**Adjective**: A word which qualifies or modifies the meaning of a [noun](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#noun); as in a '**red** hat' or a '**quick** fox'. They can be used to complement the verbs 'to be' or 'to seem' ('Sue seems **happy** today'). Adjectives are sometimes formed from [nouns](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#noun) or [verbs](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#verb) by the addition of a suffix such as '-able' (lovable), '-ful' (heedful), '-ic' (heroic), '-ish' (foolish), '-ive' (combative), '-ous' (famous), or '-y' (needy).

**Adverb**: A word which qualifies or adds to the action of a verb: as in 'he ran **quickly**', or 'he ran **fast**'. Adverbs can also qualify [adjectives](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#adjective), as in 'the grass is **intensely** green'. They are usually formed by adding '-ly' to an [adjective](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#adjective): 'playfully', 'combatively', 'foolishly'. They can also sometimes be formed by the addition of '-wise' to a noun ('the hands went round **clockwise**).

**Clause**: The word is often used but very hard to define. It is a [sentence](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#sentence) or sentence-like construction included within another sentence. A **main clause** might be a simple [noun](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#noun) plus [verb](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#verb) ('I did it'). A **co-ordinate clause** is of equal status with the main clause: 'I did it and she did it at the same time.' A **subordinate clause** might be nested within a sentence using the [conjunction](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#conjunction) 'that': 'he said that the world was flat.' Here 'he said' is the main clause and the subordinate clause is 'the world was flat'. **Relative clauses** are usually introduced by a [relative pronoun](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#pronoun): 'I read the book **which was falling to pieces**'; 'She spoke to the man **who was standing at the bar**.'

**Conjunction**: A word used to connect words or constructions. **Co-ordinating conjunctions** such as 'and', and 'but' link together elements of equal importance in a sentence ('Fish and chips' are of equal importance). **Subordinating conjunctions** such as 'because', 'if', 'although', connect a subordinate [clause](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#clause) to its superordinate clause ('We will do it **if** you insist'; 'We did it **because** he insisted).

**Noun**: A word used as the name or designation of a person or thing, such as 'duck' or 'river'. **Abstract nouns** denote abstract properties, such as 'invisibility', 'gentleness'. **Proper nouns** are nouns that designate one thing, as, for example, personal names.

**Object**: Usually the thing to which the action of a verb is done. More technically a substantive word, phrase, or clause, immediately dependent on, or ‘governed by’, a verb, as expressing, in the case of a verb of action, the person or thing to which the action is directed, or on which it is exerted; that which receives the action of the verb. So 'the man patted the **dog**', 'the woman was reading **the book**'. An **indirect object** of a verb denotes that which is indirectly affected by an action, but wihch is not the immediate product of it, as ‘Give **him** the book’, ‘Make **me** a coat’.

**Participle**: a word derived from a [verb](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#verb) which functions like an [adjective](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#adjective), as in 'let **sleeping** dogs lie'. More technically 'A word that partakes of the nature of a verb and an adjective; a derivative of a verb which has the function and construction of an adjective (qualifying a noun), while retaining some of those of the verb'. Present participles usually end in '-ing' and usually describe an action which is going on at the same time as the verb: so in the sentence '"Go and play on your own street," she said, **kicking** the ball', the saying and the kicking are simultaneous. **Past participles** usually end in '-ed' or '-en' ('the door was **kicked** in'; 'the door was **broken**'). They are used in two main ways: combined with the verb 'have' they form a past or 'perfect' tense (so called because it describes an action which has been completed or 'perfected'), as in 'I have **smashed** the plate'. Past participles can also be used in passive constructions (which describe what was done to something rather than what something did), as in 'the plate was **smashed**'.

**Preposition**: A part of speech which indicates a connection, between two other parts of speech, such as 'to', 'with', 'by' or 'from'. 'She came **from** China', 'He gave the chocolates **to** me'.

**Pronoun**: A part of speech which stands for a noun: 'he', 'she', 'him', 'her', 'them'. **Possessive pronouns** express ownership ('his', 'hers'). **Reflexive pronouns** are 'herself', 'himself', 'myself' and are used either for emphasis (he did it all **himself**'), or when an action reflects back on the agent who performs it ('he shot **himself** in the foot'). **Relative pronouns** include 'who', 'which', 'that' and are usually used in the form 'he rebuked the reader **who** had sung in the library'. **Interrogative pronouns** ask questions ('**Who** stole the pie?'; '**Which** pie?'). **Indefinite pronouns** do not specify a particular person or thing: '**Anyone** who studies grammar must be mad.' '**Somebody** has to know about this stuff.'

**Sentence**: This is a term which professional linguists still find impossible to define adequately. It is usually supposed to be 'A sequence of words which makes complete sense, containing [subject](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#subject), [object](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#object) and main [verb](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#verb), and concluded by a full-stop'.

**Subject**: Usually the person or thing who is performing the action of a [verb](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#verb). More technically the grammatical subject is the part of a sentence of which an action is predicated: 'the **man** patted the dog'. It can be a single [noun](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#noun), or it can been a complex clause: 'the **bald man who had just picked up the ball** gave it to the dog.'

**Syntax** (Greek 'together arrangement'): a term designating the way in which words can be arranged and modified to construct sentences. Writers characteristically use syntactic sub-ordination when they aim for a highly formal effect, and syntactic co-ordination when they aim for a simpler, more straight-forward effect.

**Verb**: Usually a word which describes an action (such as 'he **reads** poems', 'she **excels** at cricket'). More technically 'That part of speech by which an assertion is made, or which serves to connect a subject with a predicate.' This technical definition includes the most frequent verb in the language: the verb 'to be' which can be used to connect a 'subject', such as 'he', with a 'predicate', such as 'good at hockey'. There are verbs which take an [object](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm#object) ('he **raps** the desk'), which are called **transitive verbs**. Other verbs do not, and are termed **intransitive verbs** ('I sit, he lives'). Some verbs can be used either transitively or intransitively: 'I sing' is an intransitive usage; 'Paul McCartney sings "God save the Queen"' is a transitive usage. The **main verb** is the verb on which the structure of the sentence depends, and without which the sentence would not make any sense. In the following sentence the verb 'fell' is the main verb: 'The boy, who had run too quickly, fell'