

AP English Language and Composition

Key Terminology

Every academic subject has a vocabulary that describes and identifies its inherent substance. You will be expected to apply that vocabulary to any piece of writing presented in the English Language exam.

On the following pages are the most common terms you have to face on the English Language Exam. You should be able to use some of this terminology—correctly of course!—as you describe the writing within the passages that you must read and write about on the essay questions.

Review unfamiliar terms. Notice how many language terms are also used to describe aspects of literature. That's because they have to do with an author's writing style. In addition, Language and Composition has terminology that is specific to rhetoric and argument.

As you begin to see some of these terms appear, especially in multiple-choice questions, do not hesitate to refer to this list for clarification. The more you use it, the more familiar the terms will become. Many examples are given within the definitions to help you commit the term to memory.

Allegory- a narrative in which the characters, behavior, and even the setting demonstrate multiple levels of meaning and significance. Often allegory is a universal symbol or personified abstraction, such as Cupid portrayed as a chubby angel with a bow and arrows.

Alliteration- the sequential repetition of a similar initial sound, usually applied to consonants, usually in closely proximate stressed syllables. For instance, "She sells sea shells by the sea shore."

Allusion- a literary, historical, religious, or mythological reference. For example, one might contrast the life and tribulations of Frederick Douglass to the trials of Job.

Anaphora- the regular repetition of the same words or phrases at the beginning of successive phrases or clauses. The following is an example: "To raise a happy, healthful, and hopeful child, it takes a family; it takes teachers; it takes clergy; it takes business people; it takes community leaders; it takes those who protect our health and safety; it takes all of us." (Hillary Clinton, National Convention Address, 1996)

Antithesis- the juxtaposition of sharply contrasting ideas in balanced or parallel words, phrases, grammatical structure, or ideas. For example, Alexander Pope reminds us that "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Aphorism- a concise statement designed to make a point or illustrate a commonly held belief. For example, "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is an aphorism.

Apostrophe- an address or invocation to something inanimate—such as when the slave Fredrick Douglass exclaims as he looks upon the ships in the Chesapeake Bay: “I would pour out my soul’s complaint, in my rude way, with an *apostrophe* to the moving multitude of ships.”

Appeals to...authority, emotion, or logic- rhetorical arguments in which the speaker claims to be an authority or expert in a field, or attempts to play upon the emotions, or appeals to the use of reason. Classically trained rhetoricians identify these appeals with their Greek names: *ethos* is authority, *logos* is logic, and *pathos* is emotion.

Assonance- the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, usually in successive or proximate words. The alliteration example also demonstrates assonance: “She sells sea shells by the sea shore.”

Asyndeton- a syntactical structure in which conjunctions are omitted in a series, usually producing more rapid prose. For example: “*Veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered),” supposedly said by Julius Caesar.

Attitude- the sense expressed by the tone of voice or the mood of a piece of writing; the author’s feelings toward his or her subject, characters, events, or theme. It might even be his or her feelings for the reader. AP English Exam essay prompts often require students to respond to some aspect of the attitude of the writer, speaker, or narrator.

Begging the question- an argumentative ploy where the arguer sidesteps the question or the conflict, evades or ignores the real question.

Cannon- that which has been accepted as authentic, such as in cannon law, or the “Cannon according to the Theories of Einstein.”

Chiasmus- a figure of speech and generally a syntactical structure wherein the order of the terms in the first half of a parallel clause is reversed in the second. For example “He thinks I am but a fool. A fool, perhaps I am.”

Claim- in argumentation, an assertion of something as fact.

Colloquial- a term identifying the diction of the common, ordinary folks, especially in a specific region or area. For instance, most people expect Southerners to use the colloquial expression, “y’all” to enrage the attention of a group of people. In some parts of the United States, a Coke® is a product of the Coca-Cola Company. In some parts of the country, coke means a type of carbonates beverage. Other people refer to Coke as a “pop” or “soda pop.” These are all colloquial terms for the drink.

Comparison and contrast- a mode of discourse in which two or more things are compared, contrasted, or both. On the 1993 English Language exam, students were asked to contrast two marriage proposals taken from literature, analyzed for the use the narrators made of rhetorical devices and their argumentative success.

Connotation- the implied, suggested, or underlying meaning of a word or phrase. It is opposite of **denotation** which is the “dictionary definition” of the word.

Conceit- a comparison of two unlikely things that is drawn out within a piece of literature, in particular an extended metaphor within a poem. However, conceits can also be used in non-fiction and prose. For instance, Richard Selzer’s passage “The Knife” compares the preparation and actions of surgery to preparing for and conducting a religious service or a sacred ritual.

Consonance- the repetition of two or more consonants with a change in the intervening vowels, such as pitter-patter, splash-splash, and click-clack.

Convention-An accepted manner, model, or tradition. For instance, Aristotle's conventions of tragedy.

Critique- an assessment or analysis of something, such as a passage of writing, for the purpose of the determining what it is, what its limitations are, and how it conforms to the standard of the genre.

Deductive reasoning (deduction)- the method of argument in which specific statements and conclusions are drawn from general principles: movement from the general to the specific, in contrast to Inductive reasoning (induction).

Dialect- the language and speech idiosyncrasies of a specific area, region, or group. For example, Minnesotans say "you betcha" when they agree with you. Southerners refer to the gathering of folks as "y'all." Although dialect is most often found in fiction, sometimes it is evident in speeches from a different era or from a different culture.

Diction- the specific word choice an author uses to persuade or convey tone, purpose, or effect. The 1982 English Language exam included Adlai Stevenson's famous "Cat Bill" veto addressed to the Illinois State Senate. Cats roaming without leashes were "feline delinquency," and irritated citizen reactions were referred to as "small game hunts by zealous citizens." On the AP exam you must relate how a writer's diction, combined with syntax, figurative language, literary devices, etc., all come together to become the author's style.

Didactic- (from Greek, meaning "good teaching") writing or speech is didactic when it has an instructive purpose or a lesson. It is often associated with a dry, pompous presentation, regardless of its innate value to the reader/listener. Some of Aesop's fables are didactic in that they maintain an underlying moral or social message.

Elegy- a poem or prose work that laments, or meditates upon the death of, a person or persons. Sometimes an elegy will end with words of consolation. Many public elegies were presented in the aftermath of 9/11.

Epistrophe- in rhetoric, the repetition of a phrase at the end of successive sentences. For example: "If women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work . . . their families will flourish." (Hillary Clinton, October 1, 1995)

Epitaph- writing in praise of a dead person, most often inscribed upon a headstone.

Ethos- in rhetoric, the appeal of a text to the credibility and character of the speaker, writer, or narrator. (Who is this person saying what, and what makes him able to say so?)

Euphemism- an indirect, kinder, or less harsh or hurtful way of expressing unpleasant information. For instance, it is much nicer for a person who has just been given a pink slip to hear that she has been made redundant, rather than she has hereby been terminated.

Exposition- the interpretation or analysis of a text.

Eulogy- a speech or written passage in praise of a person; an oration in honor of a deceased person. Elegy laments; eulogy praises. Many eulogies were spoken in honor of the brave New York Fire Fighters who heroically lost their lives on 9/11.

Extended metaphor- a series of comparisons within a piece of writing. If they are consistently one concept, this is also known as a conceit.

Figurative language/Figure of speech- figurative (in contrast to literal) language has levels of meaning expressed through figures of speech such as personification, metaphor, hyperbole, irony, oxymoron, litote, and others.

Flashback- (also known as retrospection) an earlier event is inserted into the normal chronology of the narration.

Genre- a type or class of literature, such as epic, narrative, poetry, biography, history.

Homily- a sermon, but more contemporary uses include any serious talk, speech, or lecture involving moral or spiritual life. John Donne was known for his homilies, among other things.

Hyperbole- overstatement characterized by exaggerated language, usually to make a point or draw attention. If in a state of exhaustion you say "I'm really beat," that is hyperbole.

Imagery- broadly defined, any sensory detail or evocation in a work; more narrowly, the use of figurative language to evoke a feeling, call to mind an idea, or to describe an object. Basically, imagery involves any or all of the five senses. A writer generally uses imagery in conjunction with other figures of speech, such as simile and metaphor. "Her cheeks were rosy and so was my love—bursting with fragrance and softness." Here metaphor is used, with the images of rosy cheeks (the visual color) and the smell and feel of roses.

Inductive Reasoning (induction) - the method of reasoning or argument in which general statements and conclusions are drawn from specific principals: movement from the specific to the general. In other words, a general supposition is made after investigating specific instances, a common logic used in study. See Deductive reasoning.

Inference – a conclusion or proposition arrived at by considering facts, observations, or some other specific data. It is through inference- looking at the clues, learning the facts- that Sherlock Holmes was able to solve the crimes. It was elementary.

Irony (ironic)- the contrast between what is stated explicitly and what is really meant. The intended meaning is often the opposite of what is stated, often suggesting light sarcasm. The most famous classical ironist is Jonathan Swift in his "Modest Proposal." Irony is used for many reasons, often to create poignancy or humor. There are three major types of irony:

Verbal Irony- what the author/narrator says is actually the opposite of what is meant.

Situational Irony- when events end up the opposite of what is expected.

Dramatic Irony- in drama and fiction, facts or situations are known to the reader or audience but not the characters.

Isocolon- parallel structure in which the parallel elements are similar not only in grammatical structure, but also in length. For example: the Biblical admonition "Many are called, but few are chosen" is an isocolon.

Jargon - specialized or technical language of a trade, profession, or similar group. The computer industry for example, has introduced much jargon into our vocabulary, such as geek, crash, interface, down, delete, virus and bug.

Juxtaposition – the location of one thing adjacent to or juxtaposed with another to create an effect, reveal an attitude, or accomplish some other purpose.

Litote- a figure of speech that emphasizes its subject by conscious understatement – for instance, the understated “not bad” as a comment about something especially well done. George Orwell wrote, “Last week I saw a woman flayed and you would hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse.”

Loose Sentence – (a term from syntax) a long sentence that starts with its main clause, which is followed by several dependent clauses and modifying phrases. For example, “The child ran, frenzied and ignoring all hazards, as if being chased by demons.”

Metaphor – one thing pictured as if it were something else, suggesting a likeness or analogy. Metaphor is an implicit comparison or identification of one thing with another, without the use of a verbal signal such as *like* or *as*. Shakespeare’s Romeo says, “It is the east and Juliet is the sun,” directly comparing Juliet to the sun. Sometimes the term metaphor is used as a general term for any figure of speech.

Metonymy – a figure of speech in which an attribute or commonly associated feature is used to name or designate something, as in “Buckingham Palace announced today. . .”

Mode of discourse – the way in which information is presented in written or spoken form. The Greeks believed there were only four modes of discourse: narration, description, exposition (cause and effect, process analysis, comparison/contrast), and argumentation. Contemporary thought often includes other modes, such as personal observation and narrative reflection.

Mood – a feeling or ambience resulting from the tone of a piece as well as the writer/narrator’s attitude and point of view. It is a “feeling” that establishes the atmosphere in a work of literature or other discourse.

Narrative – a mode of discourse that tells a story of some sort and it is based on sequences of connected events, usually presented in a straightforward, chronological framework.

Onomatopoeia – a word capturing or approximating the sound of what it describes; “buzz” is a good example. The purpose of these words is to make a passage more effective for the reader or listener. For example, “Becca *whacked* the ball over the fence and took her time walking the bases.”

Oxymoron – a figure of speech that combines two apparently contradictory elements as in “wise fool,” “baggy tights,” or “deafening silence.”

Paradox – a statement that seems contradictory but may probably be true. A popular paradox from the 1960’s was that war protesters would “fight for peace.”

Parallel structure – the use of similar forms in writing nouns, verbs, phrases, or thoughts, for example, “Jane enjoys reading, writing, and skiing.” In prose, parallel, recurrent syntactical similarity where several parts of a sentence or several sentences are expressed alike to show that their ideas are equal in importance. *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. . .”

Pathos – that element in literature that stimulates pity or sorrow. In argument or persuasion it tends to be the evocation of pity from the reader/listener. Think of it as the “poor starving children” approach to convincing you.

Periodic sentence – a long sentence in which the main clause is not completed until the end. For example, “Looking as if she were being chased by demons, ignoring all hazards, the child ran.” “The child, who looked as if she were being chased by demons, frenzied and ignoring all hazards, ran.”

Personification – Treating an abstraction or nonhuman object as if it were a person by endowing it with human features or qualities. William Wordsworth speaks of the stars “Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.” Or, looking at a prose speech: “Once again the heart of America is heavy. The spirit of America weeps for tragedy that denies the very meaning of our land.” (Lyndon B. Johnson)

Point of View – the relation in which a narrator/author stands to a subject of discourse. Point of view in nonfiction requires the reader to establish the historical perspective of what is being said.

Prose – the ordinary form of written language without metrical structure in contrast to verse and poetry.

Realism – attempting to describe nature and life without idealization and with attention to detail. Mark Twain is an author of this school. Thoreau, with his romantic outlook toward nature is not.

Rebuttal/Refutation – an argument technique wherein opposing arguments are anticipated and countered.

Rhetoric – the art of using words to persuade in writing or speaking. All types of writing may seek to persuade and rhetoricians study these genres for their persuasive qualities.

Rhetorical Question – a question that is asked simply for the sake of stylistic effect and its not expected to be answered.

Sarcasm – a form of verbal irony in which apparent praise is actually critical. Sarcasm can be light, and gently poke fun at something, or it can be harsh, caustic, and mean.

Satire – a literary work that holds up human failings to ridicule and censure. Jonathan Swift and George Orwell were masters of satire. Several years ago, the English language exam included a satirical piece by columnist Ellen Goodman, “The Company Man,” a satire attacking the struggle for corporate survival by the little man. Arthur Miller exposed the same subject several decades ago in his tragic play, *Death of a Salesman*.

Simile – a direct, explicit comparison of one thing to another, usually using the words *like* or *as* to draw the connection. For instance, Charles Dickens wrote: “there was a steamy mist in all the hollows, and it had roared in its forlornness up the hill like an evil spirit.”

Style – the manner in which a writer combines and arranges words, shapes ideas, and utilizes syntax and structure. It is the distinctive manner of expression that represents that author’s typical writing style. This is often queried on the English Language test. In particular, when two passages on the same topic are presented, you must pay the most attention to their styles.

Symbolism – use of a person, place, thing, event, or pattern that figuratively represents or “stands for” something else. Often, the thing or idea represented is more abstract or general than the symbol, which is concrete. Everyone recognizes the symbol of the Golden Arches representing McDonald’s™ restaurants.

Synecdoche – a figure of speech in which a part signifies the whole, such as “fifty masts” representing fifty ships or “100 head of steer had to be moves to their grazing land.”

Syntax- the way words are put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. Syntax is sentence structure and how it influences the way the reader receives a particular piece of writing. It is important in establishing the tone of a piece and the attitude of the author/narrator. See Loose sentence, Parallel structure, and Periodic sentence.

Theme – the central of dominant idea or focus of a work. The statement a passage makes about its subject.

Tone – the attitude the narrator/writer takes toward a subject and theme; the tenor of a piece writing based on particular stylistic devices employed by the writer. Tone reflects the narrator/author’s attitude.

Voice- the acknowledged or unacknowledged source of the words of the story; the speaker’s or narrator’s particular “take” on an idea based on particular passage and how all the elements of the style of the piece come together to express his or her feelings.

Zeugma –a grammatically correct construction in which a word, usually a verb or adjective, is applied to two or more nouns without being repeated. Often used to comic effect (“the thief took my wallet and the Fifth Avenue bus”)