



# The Ultimate HSC English Literary Techniques Cheat Sheet

## Allegory

**A story or narrative with two meanings; the obvious or literal meaning that is immediately clear, and a second, usually hidden meaning.**

The second meaning often acts as a commentary on real world events or issues or relates to a specific topic/theme being dealt with.

**Example:** Many people claim Lord of the Rings is an allegory for the World War I because it portrays war (and especially industrialisation for war production) negatively.

## Alliteration

**Repetition of consonants at the beginning of successive words or within sentences/phrases to create a sense of rhythm, though they can be overdone (as in tongue twisters).**

This English technique is also common in poetry.

**Example:** *“Peter piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”*

## Allusion

**A subtle or passing reference to an event, person, place, other text, etc. that is intended to be noticed by readers (though isn't always picked up on).**

Religious allusions are some of the easiest to spot, especially Christian religious allusions due to the oversaturation of Christian imagery in texts and media.



**Example:** Remus Lupin in Harry Potter is named for Remus of 'Remus and Romulus', twins in Greek mythology who were raised by a wolf. This is a mythological allusion that ties into his being a werewolf.

## Ambiguity

**When something is left to the reader's imagination. Often this involves the author not stating explicitly what is happening, what has been said, etc.**

This English technique boosts reader interest as they are encouraged to make up their own mind about what is happening, or they become suspicious of what they have not been explicitly told. Common in poetry.

**Example:** The ending of Inception (Christopher Nolan) is incredibly ambiguous. In the film audiences are shown that the main character's spinning top will continue to spin if he's in a dream and topple if he's in reality – however the final shot cuts just as the spinner begins to wobble, leaving audiences to wonder if he's in reality or still dreaming.

## Analogy

**Uses two similar concepts or ideas to create a relationship or draw comparisons between the two.**

Can also be used to contrast two ideas, however it's most commonly used to prove how something is similar or use one idea to explain another. Often features the phrase "is to", though not always.

**Example:** *"A sword is to a warrior as a pen is to a writer."*

## Antithesis

**Using two sentences with contradictory or contrasting meanings close to one another, sometimes even in immediate succession.**



This creates strong contrast, however the two sentences are usually designed to balance each other out through opposite connotations and then represent a whole idea.

Antitheses often show how a character or idea may be contradictory but still whole.

**Example:** *“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”* (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*).

## Archetype

**An archetype is an immediately recognisable character, concept or object that makes it easy for audiences to categorise them based on what they resemble in literature.**

Character archetypes are most common, with popular ones including: the femme fatale, the average joe, the class clown, the anti-hero, the bad boy, etc. Most characters fit into at least one archetype.

**Example:** Hagrid (Harry Potter) and Hodor (Game of Thrones) fit the ‘gentle giant’ archetype, while Batman is the ultimate ‘lone vigilante’ archetype.

## Assonance

**Similar to alliteration, however in this case it is vowel sounds that are repeated.**

This may be at the beginning of words/phrases, or within the words themselves. Very common in poetry.

**Example:** *“A long song.”* has a repeated long ‘o’ sound in the last two words that creates assonance, however the name *“Rita Skeeter”* from Harry Potter also features assonance, as the ‘i’ and ‘ee’ create the same sound.



## Atmosphere

**Atmosphere and mood are often used interchangeably, as they are similar but used in different ways and have different results.**

Atmosphere refers to the feeling or mood created by a place, situation or text – it usually changes from scene to scene and is built by sensory imagery and word choices. This is what makes dark, stormy nights in novels feel eerie and foreboding.

**Example:** *“The floorboards creaked in time with the wind whistling around the houses’ jagged edges, and waves crashed angrily against the rocky cliffs below. She clutched her coat tighter around her and stepped into the flickering light of the fire.”*

## Characterisation

**The process by which characters are introduced, described and then fully formed through their choices, interactions, etc.**

Characterisation is what makes characters feel like real people, and is often based in their morals, values and personality traits.

If a character has strong characterisation it is easy to imagine how they would react in any given situation.

It also makes it harder to believe situations where characters do things that go against their usual traits, creating audience suspicion or disbelief.

**Example:** Katniss Everdeen (The Hunger Games) is characterised as being independent, resourceful, focused on survival and having poor social skills. These traits determine how she interacts with people and makes choices, as seen in her initially being vocal in her hatred for the Capitol, but then doing as the Capitol tells her if it means protecting her family and surviving.



## Cliché

**A common and/or overused expression, often found in similes and metaphors.**

While they can sometimes be used ironically or to symbolise a character themselves being unoriginal, clichés are often a sign of lazy or unimaginative writing. Clichés should only be used if there's a reason for them.

**Example:** *“He ran like the wind.”*

## Connotations

**The ideas, feelings or concepts associated with specific words, phrases or situations that go beyond their literal meaning.**

Word choices are often made with the connotations of each word in mind to create a particular atmosphere or tone.

In some instances an interaction or situation may have underlying connotations as well.

**Example:** ‘Beautiful’ and ‘cute’, while both describing how something is visually appealing, have different connotations. ‘Beautiful’ creates a sense of grace, elegance and maturity, while ‘cute’ is more associated with youth, pettiness and the colour pink.

## Contrast

**Any situation wherein two different or opposing things are presented together in order to highlight their differences.**

This can occur with ideas, settings, characters, objects, concepts, themes, etc. and often serve to make the audience more aware of the individual parts of the two things that make them different.

**Example:** Timon and Pumbaa (The Lion King) are visually contrasting, with Timon being small, angular and lightly coloured, while Pumbaa is large,



rounded and a darker colour. This emphasises their differences and the unlikeliness of their friendship.

## Context

**The time, place and social setting within which a text was created, including the values of the time, the world events, major topics of discussion, key figures, etc.**

There are three kinds of context; literary (what was happening in the literary world at the time), historical (what year it was and what major world events were occurring) and personal (who the author was, their experiences and values).

These all influence the text, leading to the text often reflecting the authors own ideas and values as based on their context.

**Example:** [Frankenstein by Mary Shelley](#) explores the idea of science being used to create life, reflecting Shelley's own interest in science and the actual reanimation experiments of the time period.

## Dramatic Irony

**Any situation wherein the audience is privy to some sort of information that the characters do not know, building audience tension, suspense, etc.**

This is usually achieved by cutting away from the main character to see what another character is doing/planning, then returning to the uninformed character and watching the results play out, all the while knowing what the second character has done/planned.

**Example:** [Romeo and Juliet](#) uses dramatic irony to create audience tension and emotional reactions when Romeo believes Juliet to be dead and kills himself, as audiences know she's actually alive and will wake up any moment.

## Emotive Language

**Words chosen to create a specific emotional response in the reader, often linked to the word's connotations and commonly used in highly emotional or descriptive scenes/situations.**

Emotive language can become awkward when used too much in character dialogue, as it doesn't sound like something a person would realistically say. Very common in poetry.

**Example:** “[...] which is what you/ didn't do,/ because you're weak and hollow and it doesn't matter anymore.” (Richard Siken, Crush)

## Euphemism

**A mild or 'proper' expression used to replace one that is harsh, blunt or otherwise offensive in order to not cause trouble or appear vulgar.**

Euphemisms, as English literary techniques, are commonly used to more politely refer to topics of an unsanitary, sexual or 'improper' nature.

**Example:** “*I have to see a man about a dog.*” is often said euphemistically when leaving a room or conversation to go to the toilet.

## Exclamation

**A sentence ending with an exclamation mark (“!”) or said with a tone of shock/excitement is used to express high emotion – e.g. sudden revelations, important discoveries or enthusiasm.**

This is often used to better express the tone of dialogue or show emotional outbursts.

**Example:** “*I can't believe you!*” may be said when someone has done something shocking or betrayed a character in some way and elicited a strong emotional response.



## Frame Narrative

**This is essentially a ‘story within a story’, wherein the main narrative is being told, remembered, etc. by someone in the ‘outside narrative.**

This is much easier to see and understand in films, though it is also very popular in written texts and novels – especially those that ‘jump’ between time settings from chapter to chapter.

**Example:** Titanic (James Cameron) is a frame narrative, as the story is being told by ‘Old Rose’ and cuts back to her several times throughout the film. Forrest Gump (Robert Zemeckis) is another well-known frame narrative film.

## Foil

**A foil is another character in a story that specifically contrasts the main character in order to emphasise the main character’s attributes and values or compare the values of the two characters.**

Oftentimes a character’s foil will have vastly differing ideas on the same topics, share some kind of similar background or experience, deal with the same situations in different ways, etc.

Usually there are some similarities shared between the two characters, or a sense that character A is what character B ‘could have been’.

**Example:** Draco Malfoy is a foil to Harry Potter, as he represents the opposites of Harry’s values and experiences, though the two are tied together by their positions on opposite sides of the battle against Voldemort.

## Foreshadowing

**The act of hinting at or setting up a situation, event or action that will later be extremely important in the narrative but doesn’t seem important at the time.**



Audiences are usually made to notice a particular object/comment/situation/etc. as being of some level of importance, but not realise how important it will be until later in the narrative.

However some authors include foreshadowing that the audience aren't meant to pick up on until after the 'big reveal' has occurred.

**Example [Spoilers]:** Fight Club (David Fincher) features several single-frame images of 'Tyler Durden' spliced into the film before we ever meet his character, foreshadowing his introduction and the fact that he is actually the manifestation of the Narrator's Multiple Personality Disorder.

## Form

**The construction and structure of a text based on the text type, the context and the author's personal stylistic choices.**

This can include language choices, sentence structures, film choices, poetic styles (limerick, free verse, etc.) and is often influenced by the context and literary styles of the time it was written.

**Example:** Lord of the Rings (J. R. R. Tolkien) and Game of Thrones (George R. R. Martin) are both epic novels with similar genre, subject matter and concept, however their forms are incredibly different due to the time in which they were written and the authors' stylistic choices.

## Figurative Language

**Language, words and/or expressions that have meaning beyond their literal interpretation, often used to express links between ideas, characters and concepts or subtly tie into overall themes.**

Figurative language includes metaphors, similes, hyperbole, metonymy, personification, etc. and are also frequently used to describe characters and things. Common in poetry.



**Example:** *“A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive.”* (J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows)

## Fractured Sentences

**Incomplete or broken off sentences used most commonly in dialogue to replicate regular speech patterns and being cut off or trailing off while speaking.**

Also used outside of dialogue to build suspense, tension or a sense of urgency. English literary techniques such as fractured sentences are very common in poetry.

**Example:** *“Wait, what are you-” he began, but she cut him off. “I know what I’m doing.”*

## Hyperbole

**The purposeful over-exaggeration of a statement in order to create a more intense or over-the-top effect.**

Hyperbole can be paired with similes or metaphors and are most commonly used in highly emotive situations or dialogue to create an even greater emotional reaction. Can also be humorous if used in mundane settings.

**Example:** *“I’m so exhausted I couldn’t move if I tried.”* is hyperbole in itself, but if said by a character who has done nothing to warrant being tired it can also add a level of humour.

## Icons

**An object, image or person that symbolises something larger, usually a complex concept or theme.**

This is most often seen in ‘hero’ characters, as they are intended to symbolise certain ideas and values.



**Example:** Katniss Everdeen (The Hunger Games) is an icon to the audience of strength, survival and perseverance, but is also an icon within the world of the novel as 'The Mockingjay', a symbol of revolution and rebellion.

## Imagery

**Words used to create an idea or mental image of something, most often found in descriptions or created through descriptive language.**

Imagery is generally focused on settings, objects and characters to ensure audiences have a very clear idea of what is happening and how it all looks. Common in poetry.

**Example:** *"It was in appearance a tall spacious tree of graceful form, with thin unwrinkled bark over white wood."* (J. R. R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings)

## Intertextuality

**This occurs when one text makes reference to another text, either obviously or in a more subtle way (e.g. allusions) in order to make a point or draw links between the two.**

**Example:** Frankenstein (Mary Shelley) makes subtle intertextual references throughout the text to the Greek myth of Prometheus in order to better express her warning against 'playing God'.

## Irony

**A disconnect between what is said and what is meant, usually with the words said having a second insulting, humorous or satirical meaning.**

Nothing like the Alanis Morissette song.

**Example:** *"Well aren't I lucky!"*, when said by an unlucky character or one who has just suffered due to bad luck, is ironic.



## Juxtaposition

**Placing one character, idea, theme, object, setting, etc. parallel to another in order to compare and contrast the two.**

This is often done to encourage audiences to think about two things in relation to each other and draw conclusions about how they are similar and/or different, especially in regards to characters.

**Example:** Katniss and Peeta (The Hunger Games) are brought together in a constant juxtaposition to highlight their own personal strengths and weaknesses and ultimately show how the two character balance each other.

## Language choices

**This includes individual word choices based on connotations, as well as specific overall language choices used to characterise certain characters and develop a stronger sense of voice.**

Having a character use slang or colloquial language creates a different effect that a character who always uses formal language, allowing authors to separate and characterise through these language choices.

**Example:** *“Oi mate, who was it?”* versus *“Pardon me, who was at the door?”*. Though both sentences express the same idea, language choice give them different feelings and connotations – they would not be said by the same character.

## Linear and Non-Linear

**This describes the way in which a narrative flows or is told.**

A linear narrative moves forward in time, directly from point A to point B with events occurring in chronological order. A non-linear narrative may jump from different times, characters, etc. with events occurring out of chronological order.



**Example:** Memento (Christopher Nolan) and 500 Days of Summer (Marc Webb) are both non-linear films.

## Metaphor

**Comparing two things by saying that one 'is' the other in order to draw stronger comparisons and often add a level of figurative meaning.**

There are many cliché metaphors, but when done well, English literary techniques like metaphors can be extremely strong figurative techniques.

Extended metaphors are reoccurring metaphors or ideas that show up multiple times in a text (e.g. a woman being referred to as different flowers throughout a text). Very common in poetry.

**Example:** *"He was a crumbling ruin of a man; once great, then left to erode into dust."*

## Metonymy

**The act of referring to something not by its actual name but by a figurative name or the name of something associated with it.**

Many everyday phrases are examples of metonymy.

**Example:** *"Lend me your ears!"* (Julius Ceasar) in which 'ears' is used in place of 'attention', employing metonymy. 'Silver fox' is everyday metonymy for an attractive older man.

## Modality

**The strength or force of a word, which low modality words being passive while high modality words are forceful.**

Characters giving speeches or rallying crowds would use high modality words, as they raise the intensity and strength of the language and scene.



**Example:** “*You might want to do this.*” versus “*You must do it.*” Might is low modality, must is high modality.

## Mood or Tone

**Mood is similar to atmosphere, however it focuses more on the emotional or mental feeling the author has towards certain subjects or ideas and how they express that in the text.**

Mood can be ‘felt’ in a similar way to atmosphere through word connotations, figurative language, etc. Very common in poetry.

**Example:** “*The enemy? His sense of duty was no less than yours, I deem. You wonder what his name was, where he came from. And if he was really evil at heart. [...] War will make corpses of us all.*” (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*) This dialogue expresses a mood of distaste for war and that it only leads to death, reflecting Tolkien’s own views.

## Motifs

**A motif is an idea, symbol, object, concept or theme that is always present throughout an entire text, playing a significant and/or symbolic role in the narrative.**

Generally, English literary techniques like motifs tie into the central ideas of the narrative or reflect a certain message the author is trying to present. Common in poetry.

**Example:** [Blade Runner](#) (Ridley Scott) features an ongoing eye motif, with several close ups of different characters’ eyes used to draw comparisons between how the motif relates to each character.

## Omission

**What is left out of a text – missing scenes, fade to blacks, conversations only mentioned in passing, etc.**



Omissions lend largely to ambiguity and often leave it up to the audience to 'fill in the blank' of what may have happened with their own imagination. Sometimes a specific scenario can be implied.

**Example:** At the end of one scene character A and character B are fighting, however in the next scene they seem to be acting civilly to each other. Because audience's aren't shown why the characters' attitudes changed, they are left to try to figure it out for themselves.

## Onomatopoeia

**A word that is the 'sound' of what it represents, allowing the reader to 'hear' what is occurring.**

The words themselves are meant to represent the actual sound made, thus can often become 'made up' words.

**Example:** Bang, crash, bam, screech, eek, oof, etc.

## Oxymoron

**Two contradictory words or concepts used together to create a strange or complex thing/idea that still makes sense.**

Oxymorons, as English literary techniques, tend to add an extra level of meaning to the concepts discussed and are often used as descriptors. Common in poetry.

**Example:** "*Eyes burning cold.*" uses oxymoron in the last two words in to contradict itself and create an extra layer of figurative meaning.

## Parallels

**This involves setting up two characters, situations, settings or ideas to be parallel to one another, reflecting each other but having different outcomes.**



Often the stories of a hero and a villain will be parallels, with the villain making the 'wrong' choices and the hero the 'right' ones.

Parallel situations are similar, with a similar setup or scenario having a different outcome to another based on characters and choices.

**Example:** Boromir and Aragorn (Lord of the Rings) face parallel situations when they are each tempted to take the ring from Frodo. While Boromir succumbs to temptation and tries to steal the ring, Aragorn resists and tells Frodo to go on alone, showing how Aragorn's choice makes him the stronger person.

## Pathetic Fallacy

**This involves giving any non-human object or nature some kind of human feelings or senses.**

It's a more specific form of personification. Very common in poetry.

**Example:** *"The willow leaves brushed forlornly at his face, the old tree trying to comfort him."*

## Person or Narrative Perspective

**First, second or third person narratives are usually categorised by their use of "I", "you", or "they" respectively.**

First person refers to themselves, second person to the audience and third person to everybody.

First person narration is seen as more personal, while third person is favoured for omniscient narration, while second person is very uncommon.

**Example:** First person = *"I broke the lamp."*, second person = *"You broke the lamp."*, third person = *"She broke the lamp."*



## Personification

**The attributing of human characteristics to non-human objects, by which inanimate objects appear to have life and/or feelings.**

This is often used in figurative descriptive language and is common in poetry.

**Example:** *“The tree branches thrashed against the window, their spindly, arthritic fingers creaking in the wind.”*

## Rhetorical question

**A question that is asked without the intent of receiving an answer because the answer itself is obvious.**

Generally rhetorical questions, as English literary techniques, are used to force audiences to come to the correct answer on their own, though sometimes they may be used to prompt audiences to think harder about a specific idea.

**Example:** A group of warriors asking *“Who will lead us?”* when the narrative has already made it obvious that the hero will lead the quest.

## Setting

**The location of a narrative – which may and often does change several times within the story.**

Settings can also often be tied to the narrative, rather than just being ‘where things happen’, and some settings are linked to certain genres.

**Example:** Abandoned castles and stormy moors are classic Gothic settings, while teen dramas are typically set in high schools and suburban towns.



## Sibilance

**A specific form of alliteration involving the repetition of 's' within a phrase or sentence.**

Depending on word connotations it can be read as soft and flowing or cold and hissing.

Most of the fictional language of Parseltongue (Harry Potter) is based on sibilant sounds.

**Example:** *"Susie sells seashells by the seashore."*

## Simile

**Comparing two objects, and object and a person, etc. using 'like' or 'as' to draw parallels between them.**

Many similes have become cliché – a good simile shouldn't be immediately obvious as a simile.

**Example:** *"He was cold as ice."* is cliché, *"He was a cold, prickly man, like the first bite of early morning winter against your cheeks."* is not.

## Sound Devices

**Any techniques that focus on the sounds produced by words and/or how they relate to one another.**

Sound devices as English techniques are incredibly common in poetry.

**Example:** onomatopoeia, resonance, rhythm, rhyme, etc.

## Symbolism

**When an object, person, etc. represents a more complex idea, concept or theme.**



Similar to icons, however symbolism doesn't always represent something larger or more important than the literal object, and can also represent relationships, interactions, etc.

**Example:** Characters shaking hands is symbolic of agreement or making a pact, but could also be symbolic of reconciling depending on the situation.

## Syntax (sentence structure)

**The way a sentence is constructed – short, long, fragmented, compound, complex, etc.**

Different sentence structures have different effects, with short and one-word sentences creating impact and urgency, while compound sentences are slower and usually found in more formal writing.

**Example:** *“District 12 only has three existing victors to choose from. Two male. One female. I am going back to the arena.”* (Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*) This features a longer sentence to give context then three successive shorter sentences to create impact and tension.

## Theme

**The overall message or moral of a narrative which is intended to cause audiences to think on real-life issues or moral questions.**

Generally themes are literary techniques that define the story and are a reoccurring feature throughout the text. There can be more than one theme.

**Example:** The themes of Harry Potter include 'love conquers all', good vs evil, death and the question of eternal life.



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