Literary Techniques List

1. **Alliteration:** The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words. For example, I could describe a student as a “pimply perfectionist.”
2. **Allusion:** A reference within a literary work to a historical, literary, or biblical character, place, or event. For example, the title of William Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* alludes to a line from Shakespeare’s*Macbeth*..
3. **Antagonist**: A character in a story or poem who deceives, frustrates, or works again the main character, or [protagonist](http://www.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/general/glossary.htm#protagonist), in some way. The antagonist doesn’t necessarily have to be an person. It could be death, the devil, an illness, or any challenge that prevents the main character from living “happily ever after."
4. **Caricature:** A description or characterization that exaggerates or distorts a character’s prominent features, usually for purposes of mockery. For example, a cartoon of a gaunt Abraham Lincoln with a giant top hat, a very scraggly beard, and sunken eyes could be considered a caricature.
5. **Cliché:** An expression, such as “turn over a new leaf,” that has been used and reused so many times that it has lost its expressive power.
6. **Epiphany:** A sudden, powerful, and often spiritual or life changing realization that a character experiences in the middle of doing something (often in the middle of doing something that is ordinary for that character).
7. **Foreshadowing:** An author’s deliberate use of hints or suggestions to give a preview of events or themes that do not develop until later in the narrative. Images such as a storm brewing or a crow landing on a fence post often foreshadow ominous developments in a story.
8. **Hyperbole:** An excessive overstatement or conscious exaggeration of fact. “I’ve told you that a million times already” is a hyperbolic statement.
9. **Imagery:** Language that brings to mind rich sensory impressions (touch, smell, taste, sight, sound).
10. **Irony:** Broadly speaking, irony is a device that emphasizes the contrast between the way things are expected to be and the way they actually are.
11. **Metaphor:** The comparison of one thing to another that does not use the terms “like” or “as.”
12. **Motif:** A recurring structure, contrast, or other device that develops a literary work’s major themes (*see below*). For example, shadows and darkness are a motif in Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities,* a novel that contains many gloomy scenes and settings.
13. **Onomatopoeia:** The use of words like *pop, hiss,* or *boing,* in which the spoken sound resembles the actual sound.
14. **Paradox:** A statement that seems contradictory on the surface but often expresses a deeper truth. One example is the line “All men destroy the things they love” from Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.”
15. **Personification:** The use of human characteristics to describe animals, things, or ideas. For example, I often describe my cats as fat and cranky old men.
16. **Sarcasm:** A form of verbal irony (*see above*) in which it is obvious from context and tone that the speaker means the opposite of what he or she says. Saying “That was graceful” when someone trips and falls is an example of sarcasm.
17. **Simile:** A comparison of two things through the use of the words *like* or *as*. For example, I could say that my cat is dumb as a rock, or that my alarm is like a screeching harpy.
18. **Symbol:** An object, character, figure, place, or color used to represent an abstract idea or concept. For example, the two roads in Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” symbolize the choice between two paths in life.
19. **Theme:** A fundamental, universal idea explored in a literary work. Many complex novels may have more than one theme.
20. **Thesis:** The central argument that an author makes in a work.
21. **Tone:** The general atmosphere created in a story, or the author’s or narrator’s attitude toward the story or the subject. For example, the tone of American Born Chinese is humorous and confused.