

Additional Vocabulary for Literary Studies

This guide introduces some additional words and concepts that new students of literary studies ought to know. In fact, they are quite fundamental to literary studies. Imagine you understand every word in a sentence, but you still don't understand the sentence. This happens a lot in literary studies. A professor might say: "This is a formalist reading that ignores the historical context, but a more biographical approach might reveal the author's intention." If you don't know what "formalist," "historical context," "biographical approach," or "author's intention" mean as technical terms, even though they look like ordinary English words, this sentence is very hard to follow. This guide explains words exactly like these.

Part 1: Words about the activity of studying literature

Literature: This word has a special meaning in literary studies. In everyday English, "literature" can mean any written material (even a pamphlet or a manual). But in your course, literature usually means creative written work: poems, novels, short stories, and plays that a group of people consider important, skillful, or worth studying carefully.

Literary criticism: This does not mean "saying negative things about literature." This is a common misunderstanding for new students. In this subject, criticism means the careful, serious study and explanation of a literary work: figuring out how it works, what it means, and why it matters. A piece of literary criticism can praise a work highly. It can also be very positive and still be called "criticism."

Literary theory: This is a bigger, more abstract word than "criticism." Theory means a general set of ideas or principles about how literature works, how it should be read, or what its purpose is. Criticism is often the practice, actually analyzing one specific poem or novel. Theory is more often the set of principles behind that practice. Different theories lead people to read the same poem in very different ways.

Text: In literary studies, "text" does not only mean a written message on your phone. A text simply means any written work being studied: a poem, a play, a novel, an essay. Your professor might say "let's look at the text" and mean the poem you're holding in your hand.

Canon: The canon is the group of literary works that a culture, or an academic field, has widely agreed are important and worth teaching. When people say a book "entered the canon," they mean it became widely accepted as a serious, important work that students should study. The canon is not static as it has changed over time, and scholars still argue about which books belong in it.

Analysis: To analyze a text means to break it down into smaller parts, and carefully examine how each part works and how the parts connect. This is different from just summarizing a text (retelling what happens) or just reacting to it (saying whether you liked it). Analysis asks: how does this work? why does it work this way?

Interpretation: An interpretation is your explanation of what a text means. Two readers can interpret the same poem differently, and both interpretations can be reasonable, as long as each is supported by evidence from the text.

Argument (in an essay): In everyday English, "argument" often means a fight or disagreement between people. In academic writing, an argument means something

different: it is the main claim or main point you are trying to prove in an essay, supported by evidence and reasoning. When your professor asks, "What is your argument?" they are asking, "What is the main point you are trying to prove, and why should I believe it?"

Close reading: You may have already seen this term in your introduction guide. Close reading means paying very careful, detailed attention to the exact words, sentences, and structure of a small piece of text, instead of just reading quickly for the general story. This is the most basic and most important skill in your whole degree.

Part 2: Words about the structure of literature

Every text has a shape, a way it is physically organized on the page. Before you can talk about deeper meaning, you need words for this basic shape. This section covers the difference between prose and verse, and the smaller building blocks each one is made of.

Prose: Prose is ordinary written language, organized into sentences and paragraphs, the way this guide itself is written. It does not follow a fixed rhythm or a regular pattern of line breaks. Novels, short stories, essays, and most plays' dialogue are written in prose. If you are simply writing the way you'd naturally speak or explain something, you are writing in prose.

Verse: Verse is language deliberately arranged into lines, often (though not always) following a rhythmic pattern. Most poetry is written in verse. The key difference from prose is that a line of verse ends where the poet chooses to end it — not simply where the sentence runs out of space, the way a line of prose does. This choice itself can create meaning or emphasis.

A simple way to remember the difference: In prose, the line breaks happen automatically, wherever the page runs out of room. In verse, the poet decides exactly where each line breaks, on purpose.

Stanza: A stanza is a group of lines in a poem, set apart from other groups by a blank space, similar to how a paragraph groups sentences together in prose. Stanzas often (though not always) share a similar length or pattern. Some common stanza types have their own names, based on how many lines they contain:

- Couplet: a two-line stanza (or a pair of two lines that rhyme together)
- Tercet (or triplet): a three-line stanza
- Quatrain: a four-line stanza (this is the most common stanza length in English poetry)
- Sestet: a six-line stanza
- Octave: an eight-line stanza

Enjambment: Enjambment happens when a sentence or phrase continues from one line of a poem into the next, without a pause (such as a comma or period) at the end of the first line. This creates a feeling of movement or continuation, pulling the reader forward to the next line. The opposite, when a line ends at a natural pause, like the end of a sentence, is sometimes called an end-stopped line.

Paragraph: You likely already know this word from ordinary writing, but it is worth stating clearly here: a paragraph is the basic unit of prose, just as a stanza is the basic unit of verse. A paragraph groups related sentences together around one idea or moment.

Chapter: A chapter is a numbered or titled section that divides a longer prose work, usually a novel, into smaller, manageable parts. Chapters often mark a shift in time, place, or focus within the story.

Act and Scene: These two words apply specifically to drama (plays):

- An act is a major division of a play — similar to how a chapter divides a novel. Many classic plays (including Shakespeare's) are divided into five acts; many modern plays use fewer.
- A scene is a smaller division within an act, usually marking a change in location, time, or which characters are present on stage.

You will often see these referenced together with numbers — for example, "Act II, Scene i" — this simply means the first scene of the second act.

Dialogue: Dialogue is the words characters speak to each other within a text, in a play, in a novel, or even occasionally in a poem. In prose, dialogue is usually marked with quotation marks; in a play script, it is usually written after the speaking character's name, without quotation marks.

Monologue: A monologue is a long, uninterrupted speech given by a single character, often revealing that character's inner thoughts or feelings at length, while other characters (if present) stay silent and listen.

Soliloquy: A soliloquy is a specific and important type of monologue, found in drama: a speech in which a character, usually alone on stage, speaks their inner thoughts aloud — as if thinking out loud for the audience to hear, but not meant to be heard by any other character. Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" speech is a soliloquy.

Part 3: Words about texts and their history

Author: The author is the real person who wrote the text. This sounds simple, but remember: the author is not the same as the narrator or the speaker inside the text (see your glossary guide's *Persona* entry for more on this important difference).

Authorial intention: This means what the author meant to communicate when they wrote the work. As your introduction guide mentioned, scholars disagree about how much this should matter. Some believe understanding what the author "meant" is central to interpretation. Others believe that once a work is published, its meaning belongs to readers, whether or not it matches what the author originally intended.

Biographical context: This means using facts about an author's real life (their childhood, relationships, historical era, personal beliefs) to help explain or interpret their work. For example, knowing that a poet lost a child might help explain the sadness in one of their poems. Be careful though, biographical context is a tool for interpretation, not proof of what a text absolutely means.

Historical context: This means the events, ideas, and conditions of the time period in which a work was written or set. Understanding historical context can help explain why characters behave a certain way, or why certain themes appear in a work. For example, understanding a period of war or plague can help you understand why a play from that time is full of death and uncertainty.

Manuscript: A manuscript is a handwritten or typed early version of a text, usually before it is published. Scholars sometimes study manuscripts to see how an author changed and edited their work before it reached its final, published form.

Part 4: Words about schools of thought (approaches to reading)

You do not need to master these deeply in your first year — but you will hear these words very early, so it helps to recognize them now. Each one represents a different lens, or way of asking questions about a text.

Formalism / Formalist reading: A formalist approach focuses almost entirely on the text itself — its words, structure, imagery, and form — without paying much attention to the author's life or the historical period. A formalist reader believes the meaning of a work can be found by studying the text closely, on its own.

Historicism / Historicist reading: A historicist approach does the opposite of pure formalism: it focuses heavily on the historical period surrounding a text, arguing that a work cannot be fully understood without understanding the events, ideas, and conflicts of its time.

Biographical criticism: This approach interprets a text mainly through details of the author's real life — as described in "biographical context" above.

Feminist criticism: This approach examines how a text represents women, gender roles, and power between men and women. A feminist reading might ask: how are female characters treated in this story? Whose perspective does the narrative center, and whose does it leave out?

Postcolonial criticism: This approach examines literature in relation to colonialism (when one country ruled over another) and its lasting effects, including how colonized peoples and cultures are represented, and whose voices have historically been silenced or ignored in literature.

Marxist criticism: This approach examines literature in relation to social class, money, and power between different economic groups. A Marxist reading might ask: who has power and wealth in this story, who doesn't, and how does the story treat that inequality?

Psychoanalytic criticism: This approach uses ideas from psychology (especially the ideas of Sigmund Freud and later thinkers) to interpret characters' hidden motivations, desires, or fears — sometimes even applying these ideas to the author's own mind.

Reader-response criticism: This approach focuses on the reader's experience, arguing that meaning is not fixed permanently inside the text, it is partly created by each individual reader as they read. Two different readers, under this approach, might reasonably create two different meanings from the very same text.

You do not need to become an expert in each of these approaches yet. Just knowing they exist will help you understand why two professors, or two critics, can look at the exact same poem and write completely different essays about it. Neither is necessarily wrong, they are simply asking different kinds of questions, using a different lens.