

Devices and Techniques Guide

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Literary devices are not decorations. In an essay, a device matters because of its **effect**: what it reveals about a character, theme, conflict, setting, mood, or the writer's purpose.

In Paper 02, device questions usually reward two skills at the same time: recognising the technique and explaining how it shapes meaning. The strongest answers move from identification to effect.

One useful sentence pattern is: **The writer uses [device] when [specific example] to [effect].**

For example: Mervyn Morris uses contrast when the child's "laughter" becomes "howls" in "Little Boy Crying" to show how quickly innocence turns into distress after punishment.

Dramatic Techniques

Dramatic techniques are especially important for plays because the story is meant to be performed on a stage. When writing about drama, think about what the audience can **see**, **hear**, and **know** during the performance.

Technique	What it means	Example
Stage directions	Instructions in the script that guide movement, action, expression, entrance, exit, sound, or setting.	In Anansi, the opening performance style and movement introduce Anansi as playful, energetic, and theatrical before the audience judges his actions.
Lighting	The use of brightness, darkness, spotlight, colour, or shadow to shape mood and focus attention.	A production of Twelfth Night may use warm lighting around Orsino's opening music to suggest romance, then shift the mood when Olivia's refusal is reported.
Costume	Clothing and appearance used to reveal identity, role, status, disguise, or change.	Viola's male disguise as Cesario in Twelfth Night creates confusion because her costume allows others to misread who she really is.
Prop	A movable object used on stage that helps create meaning or action.	Malvolio's forged letter in Twelfth Night is a prop that drives the prank and exposes his ambition.

Juxtaposition	Placing two contrasting ideas, characters, moods, or scenes close together so the difference is clear.	In Twelfth Night, Orsino's exaggerated love is juxtaposed with Olivia's grief, showing two different forms of emotional excess.
Dramatic irony	When the audience knows something a character does not.	In Twelfth Night, the audience knows Cesario is Viola, but Orsino and Olivia do not, so their reactions become comic and tense.
Situational irony	When the result of a situation is the opposite of what is expected.	In Twelfth Night, Malvolio thinks the letter will help him rise in Olivia's favour, but it actually humiliates him.
Aside	A short comment spoken by a character to the audience or privately, unheard by other characters on stage.	In Shakespearean drama, an aside can reveal a character's private thoughts while other characters remain unaware.
Soliloquy	A speech in which a character, usually alone, reveals private thoughts and feelings aloud.	In Anansi, Anansi's opening self-presentation works like a soliloquy because he directly reveals his cleverness, confidence, and survival strategy.
Foil	A character who contrasts with another character to highlight important qualities.	In Twelfth Night, Viola and Olivia can be read as foils: Viola acts with self-control and loyalty, while Olivia becomes impulsive in love.

Exam Tip

Device questions are not vocabulary tests. Naming "metaphor" or "dramatic irony" is only the start. The mark-winning part is the explanation of what the device helps the audience or reader understand.

Narrative Techniques

Narrative techniques are common in novels. They shape how the reader receives information and how the writer builds meaning across the story.

Technique	What it means	Example
Rhetoric	Persuasive language designed to influence an audience through repetition, questions, emotion, logic, or direct address.	In Animal Farm, Old Major's speech uses rhetorical questions and direct address to persuade the animals that humans are the source of their suffering.

Allegory	A story in which characters, events, and settings represent larger historical, political, moral, or religious ideas.	Animal Farm is an allegory for the Russian Revolution and Stalinist dictatorship: Napoleon represents Stalin, Snowball represents Trotsky, and the dogs represent secret police.
Juxtaposition	Placing contrasting characters, ideas, scenes, or outcomes close together to make a point.	In Animal Farm, the original commandment "All animals are equal" is later juxtaposed with "but some animals are more equal than others," exposing the betrayal of the revolution.
Foil	A character whose contrast with another character reveals key traits in both.	Napoleon and Snowball are foils in Animal Farm: Snowball is energetic and idealistic, while Napoleon is secretive, forceful, and power-hungry.
Situational irony	When events turn out in a way that sharply contradicts what was expected.	The animals overthrow Mr. Jones to become free, but by the end of Animal Farm they live under rulers who resemble the humans they replaced.

Poetic Devices

Poetic devices are common in poems, but many also appear in plays and novels. In poetry especially, pay attention to **specific words, sound, line breaks, and images**.

Device	What it means	Example
Repetition	Repeating a word, phrase, sound, line, or structure for emphasis. Anaphora repeats at the beginning; epistrophe repeats at the end.	In "This is the Dark Time, My Love", the repeated title phrase reinforces the atmosphere of fear and oppression.
Allusion	A reference to another text, person, event, myth, religion, or cultural idea. This is not the same as allegory.	In "Little Boy Crying", the child's imagined punishment of the father alludes to Jack and the Beanstalk, showing how the child interprets discipline through fairy-tale logic.

Alliteration	Repetition of consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of nearby words. Sibilance repeats s-like sounds; assonance repeats vowel sounds; consonance repeats consonant sounds anywhere nearby.	In "Little Boy Crying", the phrase "quick slap struck" uses sharp repeated consonants to echo the suddenness of the slap.
Imagery	Descriptive language that appeals to the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell.	In "An African Thunderstorm", images of wind, trees, clouds, and movement make the storm feel powerful and threatening.
Simile	A comparison using "like" or "as".	In "The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son", the woman's hope is compared to something physically heavy, showing the burden she carries as a parent.
Metaphor	A direct comparison in which one thing is described as another.	In "Little Boy Crying", the father's stern expression is called a "mask", suggesting that his real feelings are hidden.
Synecdoche	A part of something represents the whole, or the whole represents a part.	In "West Indies, USA", references to official signs and public surfaces can stand for the larger system of American power the speaker observes.
Metonymy	Something closely associated with an idea is used to represent the idea itself.	In Animal Farm, the farmhouse becomes a metonym for privilege and ruling-class comfort once the pigs move into it.
Onomatopoeia	A word whose sound imitates the sound it describes.	In "An African Thunderstorm", storm sounds can be read as onomatopoeic when the language mimics rushing wind or violent weather.
Situational irony	When the outcome is the opposite of what is expected.	In "Little Boy Crying", the child sees the father as cruel, but the poem reveals that the father is also emotionally hurt by the punishment.
Diction	The writer's choice of words.	In "Little Boy Crying", "contorting" is precise diction because it suggests both physical pain and emotional spite.

Personification	Giving human qualities to something non-human. Pathetic fallacy links nature to human emotion; apostrophe directly addresses an absent person, object, or idea.	In "An African Thunderstorm", the storm is presented almost like an attacking force, giving nature human-like aggression.
Paradox	A statement or situation that seems contradictory but reveals a truth.	In "Death Be Not Proud", the speaker argues that death will itself die, a paradox that presents death as powerful yet ultimately defeated.
Oxymoron	A compressed contradiction, usually two opposing words placed together.	In literature essays, a phrase like "cruel kindness" can describe discipline that hurts in the moment but is intended to teach.
Symbolism	When an object, person, place, colour, or action represents a larger idea.	In "Little Boy Crying", the rain symbolises the child's lesson: he must learn that play can have consequences.
Hyperbole	Deliberate exaggeration for emphasis.	In "Little Boy Crying", the child's eyes are described as "swimming" with tears, exaggerating his distress.
Enjambment	When a sentence or phrase continues across a line break without a full stop.	In "Little Boy Crying", lines run into each other as the child's crying and the father's hidden emotions unfold, creating movement and emotional pressure.

More Devices to Know

There are many more devices than any single page can cover: tone, mood, contrast, caesura, volta, symbolism, structure, setting, motif, ambiguity, satire, foreshadowing, flashback, narrative perspective, and more. The key is not to memorise a giant list. The key is to explain **how** the writer uses the device and **why** it matters.

Remember

Do not just name a device. A device only earns marks when you connect it to meaning: character, theme, atmosphere, conflict, audience response, or the writer's purpose.