Developing metalanguage – a glossary of useful terms

Metalanguage is language about language and in the English course you’re expected to understand some of these words for this section of the course, and also the Context section. Below are some useful terms that might be applicable to both sections of the course. Supplement them with words you hear in your class discussions and practice using these words in your language analysis.

Some words you might find useful to have in your vocabulary for this task are listed below.

**Allegory**
Simply put, a story in which the characters or incidents symbolise key ideas, usually ethical. Allegory is usually used to describe longer versions of the ‘fable’ form.

**Alliteration**
The repetition of sounds, in headlines and news articles, most often involving the repeated first letter of each word.

**Ambiguity**
Double meaning, often used deliberately by authors.

**Anti-climax**
A sudden ‘descent’ in the excitement or effect, sometimes deliberately used by authors.

**Appeals**
Appeals to nationalism, to some set of ‘values’, to financial security, to vanity, etc. are common forms of argument construction.

**Assertion**
A statement or opinion that is clear, yet unsupported or verified conclusively with evidence.

**Audience**
The intended readership for a piece of writing. Is it for an adult audience? A specialist audience who would understand the technical terms? A younger audience?

**Autobiography**
The story of a person’s life, usually written by that person themself. Sometimes you might talk of a story or novel having ‘autobiographical elements’, pieces of personal history made into the creative work. *Romulus My Father*, from the 2008 text list, is autobiographical.

**Bias**
Ever tried lawn bowls and seen how the ball is weighted to one side so you can make it curve when you roll it? That’s called bias, a one-sidedness or a leaning to one side, which can often be quite subtle and hard to detect when it’s in written form.

**Broadsheet**
Descriptive term (from the larger paper size of a newspaper like *The Australian* or *The Age*), also often used to describe a usually more restrained and less hysterical reporting style.

**Character**
A person in a novel, short story or play.

**Characterisation**
The skill of a writer in creating a realistic or effective sounding character.

**Cliché**
An over-used or outworn phrase that has lost its effectiveness.
Connotations
The significances and associated meanings implied by the choice of a certain word.

Counterplot
A sub-plot which contrasts with the main plot, often used to add meaning to the main plot.

Dialogue
Conversation between characters in a novel or story.

Dogmatic
Writing in an arrogant or assertive manner from a somewhat limited and insistent viewpoint.

Dramatic conventions
Departures from reality which the audience is used to accepting while watching a play.

Emotional language
Language that reflects and expresses an emotional or subjective reaction rather than a logical or rational reaction.

Emotive language
Language directed to respond to or inspire an emotional response; but try to be clear about what emotion/s are involved.

Epigraph
A short quote or statement, usually at the start of a book or chapter.

Epilogue
A short final section of a novel or play.

Fable
A short narrative in which some moral truth is shown by means of a story.

Figurative language
The opposite of literal language, figurative language is the language of imagination, and which makes demands of the reader to understand the meaning.

Flash back
A very common technique in film, but also in novels (see 1984 on the 2008 list) where the narrative returns suddenly to an earlier time in the story.

Form
The overall format of your piece of writing: short story, poem, blog entry, film script, etc. Each form has a general set of expectations and conventions that have developed over time.

Genre
The ‘kind’ or ‘type’ of writing. The style within the form; ‘detective fiction’ or ‘love poetry’. Genres often have certain conventions or expectations which you can follow, or sometimes break with, to great effect. Famous genres include the detective fiction genre, the romance genre and the gothic genre.

Hyperbole
Exaggeration or extravagance for effect.

Idiom
The natural speech of the person being represented.

Imagery
Use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas or states of mind. Images are pictures in words, a common feature of poetry. Similes (‘the moon was sailing across the night sky like a balloon’) and metaphors (‘the moon was a balloon sailing across the night sky’) are typical of how images are constructed.

Imply
To suggest a conclusion that is not directly stated; to signify, to suggest, to hint.

Indirect speech
The reporting, in a story or novel, of what someone else has said.

Infer
To lead the reader to draw a conclusion.
Irony
A figure of speech in which the meaning is the opposite of what is spoken. A more subtle form of sarcasm, where the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used, usually to condemn an opposing point of view. Sometimes, the juxtaposition of two separate and apparently unrelated events can result in an ironic effect.

Jargon
Technical or difficult language specific to a profession or sub-culture.

Juxtaposition
The effect created by placing side-by-side specific, often contrasting, words, events or phrases.

Metaphor
A figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two things by stating one as the other. (See example in Imagery.)

Monologue
A speech by one person in a play; think of Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech.

Mood
The overall feeling of the piece.

Montage
A dramatic effect built up by a series of short scenes or impressions, often in apparently random order where the effect is more important than the content of each scene.

Narrative
Simply put: story. The events in the order they appear.

Narrative perspective
The source of the story telling, the way the story is told.

Onomatopoeia
A word that literally sounds like the thing it’s describing. Words like ‘bang’ and ‘pop’ are obvious examples, other more subtle examples could include ‘whisper’ or ‘murmur’.

Pejorative
Disparaging. A word whose meaning might not normally be associated with a put-down or negative sense, but whose use conveys that sense. The word ‘youth’, for example in the tabloid press, is almost always synonymous with ‘lout’.

Person
The authorial perspective; first person ‘I’, second person ‘You’ or third person ‘She/He/They’.

Personification
Giving human qualities to non-human objects such as animals, the sea, the wind, etc.

Plot
The framework of the story and the conscious arrangement of its events.

Point of view
Is this piece of writing told from a particular perspective or from the point of a view of a character with unique views of their own?

Prejudice
Literally to pre-judge, usually based on some personal preference, or pre-judgement of someone based on their race, gender, clothes, etc.

Prologue
Literally a ‘before speech’, a short speech or introduction before the main story begins.

Prose
The opposite of poetry, prose is direct expression without rhyme and with no regular rhythm. Almost all novels are written in prose.

Pun
A play on words, usually involving one word having two meanings.

Purpose
Often, this might be more about multiple purposes, but revolves around what the piece is trying to do: is it to persuade, to inform, to record and document, or to make the reader feel something specific?
Register
The variety and scope of language related to a specific type of communication setting, such as a formal register, or in the register of educational discourse.

Rhetorical question
A question that is supposed to be so obvious that it doesn’t require an answer. A common, if sometimes over-used, persuasive technique. For example, ‘Are we just going to sit here and let them take away our park from us?’

Sarcasm
A form of ridicule that often involves simply stating the opposite of the obvious.

Satire
Comic situation in which human frailty is held up to ridicule. It may be a light-hearted or harsh attack. Some critics see the TV series *Kath and Kim* as a satire on suburban life.

Setting
Where a novel or play takes place, often a real or historical place (the play *A Man for All Seasons* is set in historical England), but it may be imaginative (*1984* is set in an imaginary London of the future).

Simile
A form of comparison where something is described as like something else. ‘She ran like the wind at the House Athletics.’

Stance
The general viewpoint or position taken by the author, not to be confused with the more specific contention of the article.

Stage direction
An instruction, or explanation by the playwright, as to how the play should be staged. Sometimes it is more than this and involves a description of the intended mood or a character’s feelings. Arthur Miller uses long and detailed stage directions in *The Crucible*.

Style
The overall direction and voice of the piece; how the writer says things. It might be in a ‘realistic’ style or an ‘exaggerated’ style, for example.

Sub-plot
A minor or secondary story underneath the main story; very often paralleling the main story in some way.

Symbolism
The use of something simple and concrete to represent much more complex ideas or concepts. In Orwell’s *1984*, a glass paperweight comes to symbolise something about the beauty and fragility of the past.

Tabloid
This refers to the smaller paper size of newspapers such as the *Herald Sun*. Also used as a pejorative term to describe sensationalist or prurient reporting.

Tense
Is the piece set in the past, present or future? Present tense might be something like: ‘I am walking along the beach. The sun is shining.’

Tone
The sound of the voice at specific moments in the piece of writing. Of course this will change through a piece, but if you are striving for a particular or specific tone at a particular point it might be worth saying so.

Tragedy
A representation, often in plays, of a human conflict ending in defeat and suffering, often due to some weakness or flaw in the character of the main tragic hero.

Visual language
How a cartoon, photograph or a graph convinces or speaks with an opinion despite the absence of words.

Voice
The overall sound of the writing.