Genre fiction. Fiction written to fit into a known genre, which will appeal to fans of that genre. Examples are Crime Fiction, Chick Lit, etc.

Historicism / Historicism. Styles of criticism that highlight the importance of historical contexts in shaping the meaning of texts. For example, historicism recognizes how texts engage with historical events and ideas as well as with other texts; it also acknowledges that readers often interpret texts in ways that confirm their own experiences and ideas.

Image. This is quite a vague, but useful, term that is often used to denote the many types of language that conjure sensory perceptions in the mind of the reader. Other features – such as metaphor, simile, personification and symbol – are sometimes considered as sub-divisions within imagery.

Image patterns. Where an image or connected images are used more than once.

Imagism / Imagist. A type of poem which is concise and uses short, hard, and concentrated imagery as its main way of creating meaning and achieving effects.

Intentional fallacy. The error of basing an interpretation on assumptions about the author’s intentions, rather than what is written.

Intertextuality. This denotes the meanings that accrue when we explore the relationships between and across texts. This can be done explicitly, through direct reference, or implicitly through the use of similar content and/or techniques.

In-text attribution. This is when you include the name of a critic within your essay and this can be done very simply just by writing, for example, ‘as Kate Millett has argued…’.

Magic realism. A genre of writing where magic or unreal events impinge upon the representation of an otherwise realistic world.

Metaphor / Metaphorical. A literary technique that involves the transfer of meaning, with one thing described as being another (e.g. education is a journey, as in the metaphor ‘I’m stuck’ or ‘I am making good progress’). There are many types of metaphor, but in a broad sense metaphor involves the linking of something with something else that is otherwise not related to it.

Mimetic. A copy or imitation of something.

Modernism / Modernism. A trend in literature, the high point of which was from 1910-30. Modernist texts tend to be impressionistic and fragmentary, blurring genres and drawing attention to their own construction.

Motif. A recurring element that has symbolic significance in a text.

Octave. An eight-line verse.

Onomatopoeia. This is when the word chosen sounds like what it refers to. For example, the word plop is onomatopoeic in English.

Pantheistic / Pantheism. The belief in many gods.

Pastiche. A work which deliberately copies the style of another.

Pastoral. A mood of writing that typically presents rural people in an idealized way and uses natural imagery to create an impression of peace, innocence and contentment.

Pathetic fallacy. A form of personification, whereby things in the natural world are given human attributes. The term was coined by John Ruskin, with the ‘fallacy’ part suggesting that over-use of this device leads to poor writing.

Patriarchy / Patriarchal. A system of society or government controlled by men.

Personification. Something non-human is described as though it is human. This might be, for example, an object or an abstract idea.

Plot. The events as they are sequenced in the text (in comparison with story, which is all of the events as they happen naturally and chronologically).

Popular fiction. A genre of fiction that has wide readership and, by implication, is plot driven. It is often compared to literary fiction, which is seen as more subtle.

Postmodem / Postmodernism. This very complex term can have many definitions, but when used with regard to literature it involves notions of self-conscious playfulness resulting from the understanding that nothing, at least when represented, can be ‘real’. The pleasure of reading texts comes from the reader’s recognition of the way in which these texts are constructed, rather than what they definitively mean.

Pre-lapsarian. Before the loss of innocence.

Protagonist. The main character.

Quatrain. A four-line verse.

Satire. The mockery of various types of human behaviour, involving irony and exaggeration.

Scheme. Schemes are figures of speech, which deal with things like word order and sound, rather than the actual meanings of words.

Sensation fiction. A term given to a genre from the 1860s onwards that sends to involve crime and passion. An often-quoted example is Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White (1859–60). Although the term sounds dismissive, such fiction has had a huge influence on all sorts of literature since the 1860s.

Sestet. A six-line verse, often used to describe the second section of one form of sonnet.

Significant / Significance. This involves weighing up all of the potential contributions to how a text can be analysed (such as the way the text is constructed and written, contexts which can be applied, aspects of genre, possible theoretical approaches) and then finding potential meanings and interpretations.

Socratic dialogue. The term taken by many of Plato’s philosophical works. Plato presents his teacher Socrates – a Greek philosopher of the fourth century BC – in dialogue with some apparently intelligent but naive bystander. Socrates speaks as a simple man who confesses that he has little knowledge, but through the dialogue he shows the other person the way to real wisdom.

Speaker. The voice that speaks the poem. This is the default term to use when writing about the person speaking in a poem. It is helpful to reserve the term persona for a speaker who is a character who is clearly not the speaker; for example, Carol Ann Duffy adopts the persona of Shakespeare’s wife in ‘Anne Hathaway’.

Stanza. A stanza is a group of lines – a separate unit – that helps to break up and organize how the poem appears on the page; it is a place where the reader ‘stands’ and pauses.

Symbol. This stands for much more than its literal meaning. Unlike a metaphor (in which one thing is compared overtly to another), with a symbol the significance is left more open. For example, the flowers in Blake’s ‘The Garden of Love’ might be taken to symbolize pleasure and fulfilled desires.

Synchronic study. A study that considers texts within a narrowly defined time period.

Synchronically. Looking at something within the concept of a particular time period.

Syntactic parallelism. This is where grammatical structures in one sentence are echoed in the next.

Tercet. A three-line stanza.

Totalitarian. A system of government which has complete State control and no democratic structures.

Triplet. A stanza of three lines in which every line rhymes.

Trope. A figure of speech which deals with meaning.

Valedictory. Saying farewell.

Verse paragraph. Stanza of poetry without any patterns of rhyme or rhythm, usually separated by a blank line.

Voice. The characteristics of the speaker, or the narrative voice used; the perspective taken by the narrative.

Volta. A turning point, or shift in mood or argument, of a sonnet.

Women’s fiction. A genre fiction aimed specifically at women and dealing with issues said to be of interest to women in particular.