



Glossary of literacy terms

These terms are used in literacy. You can use them as part of your preparation for the literacy professional skills test. You will not be assessed on definitions of terms during the test.

A

Abbreviation

A shortened form of a word or phrase; usually, but not always, consisting of a letter or group of letters taken from the word or phrase. For example, the word approximately can be replaced by the abbreviation 'approx'.

Acronym

An abbreviation made from the initial letters of a group of words and often pronounced as a single word, for example, RAM (random access memory).

Adjective

A word used to describe somebody or something, for example, the blue table, the happy child. An adjective phrase is a group of words built round an adjective, for example, he's a very old man. A clause which functions as an adjective is sometimes called an adjectival clause, or more often, a relative clause. Relative clauses add information to the noun or pronoun they modify.

Adverb

Adverbs are used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb:

She walked *briskly* - modifies a verb.

He is *happily* married - modifies an adjective.

He speaks *incredibly* slowly - modifies another adverb.

Luckily, all the children were happy with the arrangements - modifies a whole sentence.

Adverbs are often (but not always) formed by adding the letters 'ly' to the end of an adjective.

Adverbs of manner are used to describe the way in which something is done (slowly, noisily); adverbs of place describe where (here, home, everywhere) and adverbs of time show when an action happened (now, yesterday, later), the duration (all day, since last year) and the frequency (sometimes, never, often).

Adverbial clause

This is a clause that functions in the same way as a single adverb:

The pupils lined up *outside the door* when they saw the teacher.

Adverbial phrase

A group of words built up around an adverb by adding words before and/or after it. For example: 'as economically as possible'.

Agree/agreement

Correspondence in gender, number, case or person between words:

John plays guitar. The verb agrees with the single subject.

The children play instruments. The verb agrees with the plural subject.

Analogy

Drawing a comparison to show a similarity, for example, if you were describing the flow of electricity, you might choose to use the flow of water as an analogy.

Apostrophe

A punctuation mark that is used for 2 purposes:

to show that something belongs to someone (the possessive form), for example, 'the pupil's work'

to show that letters have been missed out (a contraction), for example, 'you've' is the shortened form of 'you have'

Attachment ambiguity

Ambiguity indicates that a grammatical structure, such as a sentence, can be interpreted in more than 1 way:

'The pupil greeted the woman with a beaming smile'. Here, it is unclear (ambiguous) who was smiling - the pupil or the woman.

Audio

Of or relating to sound.

C

Clause

A clause is a group of words that has a subject actively doing or being something:

'when the woman drank some water' ('the woman' is the subject; 'drank' is the verb);

'he likes cheese' ('he' is the subject; 'likes' is the verb).

Note how a clause differs from a phrase:

Example	Explanation
his charming smile	phrase - there is no verb saying what the charming smile did or what happened to it
his charming smile dazzled me	clause - the charming smile did something

A sentence is made up of 1 or more clauses:

Example	Explanation
He bought me coffee.	one clause
He bought me coffee and we had a chat.	two main clauses joined by and
He bought me coffee <i>when I forgot my purse.</i>	main clause containing a subordinate clause - the subordinate clause in italics

A main clause is complete on its own and can form a complete sentence. A subordinate clause - 'when I forgot my purse' - is part of the main clause and cannot exist on its own. In the following examples, the subordinate clauses are in italics:

You'll hurt yourself *if you're not careful.*

Although it was cold, the morning was bright.

Where are the biscuits *(that) I bought this morning?*

John, *who was losing his temper,* began shouting.

Although most clauses require a subject and verb, some subordinate clauses do not. In many such cases, the verb can be understood. For example:

The morning, though cold, was bright. (= though it was cold)

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. (= when you are in Rome)

Coherence/cohesion

An effective text needs to be coherent and cohesive.

The term 'coherence' refers to the underlying logic and consistency of a text. The ideas expressed should be relevant to one another so the reader can follow the meaning.

The term 'cohesion' refers to the grammatical features in a text which enable the parts to fit together. One way of creating cohesion is the use of connectives:

He had asked for a pay rise. Instead, he got fired.

The word 'instead' connects the 2 events.

Cohesion is achieved by the use of words (such as pronouns) that refer back to other parts of the text. In the examples below, such words are in italics:

There was a man at the door. I had never seen *him* before.

We haven't got a car. We used to have *one*, but we sold *it*.

I wonder whether Sarah will pass her driving test. I hope *she does*. (= I hope Sarah passes her driving test).

Colloquial

A colloquialism is a term used in everyday language rather than in formal speech or writing, for example, the word 'kids' instead of 'children'.

Colon

See 'punctuation'.

Comma

See 'punctuation'.

Compound word

A word made when 2 words are joined to form a new word, for example, 'headteacher'. Sometimes a hyphen is used between the 2 parts of the word.

Conjunctions (see also connectives)

These are words used to join words, phrases or clauses, for example, 'and', 'but' and 'or'. There are 2 kinds of conjunction:

Coordinating conjunctions ('and', 'but', 'or' and 'so'). These link items that have equal status grammatically, for example, 'we could fly to Paris or take the train'.

Subordinating conjunctions ('when', 'while', 'before', 'after', 'since', 'until', 'if', 'because', 'although', 'that'). If the 2 items do not have equal status, a subordinating conjunction is used. Most commonly, this happens when a main clause is joined to a subordinate clause, for example, 'I was late for the meeting because my car broke down'.

Connectives

A connective is a word that connects words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Connectives are often conjunctions, but adverbs and adverbial phrases and clauses can also work as connectives. For example, 'however, finally, in other words, that is to say'.

Consistency

Maintaining a style or pattern, for example, always spelling organise with an 's', or always writing 'headteacher' as 1 word. Other examples include not mixing a formal style and an informal one, and not mixing tenses. See 'agreement'.

Consonant

Consonants are letters and speech sounds that are not vowels. See 'vowel'.

Contraction

A shortened form of a word or phrase that is created when 2 words are combined, with some letters missing, for example, 'you've, doesn't, we're'. See 'apostrophe'.

Contradict

To contradict is to state that something is the opposite of what has been said; a contradiction is a statement that contradicts.

Convention

The accepted way of doing things. For example we follow conventions in grammar, punctuation and spelling, which are generally accepted as the way to do things.

D

Definite article

The (see 'determiner').

Determiner

These are words used with nouns to help define them, for example, *this* computer, *a* pencil, *the* book. The determiner limits, or determines, the reference of the noun in some way. Determiners include:

- articles (*a/an, the*);
- demonstratives (*this/that, these/those*);
- possessives (*my/your/his/her/its/our/their*);
- quantifiers (*some, any, no, many, few, all, either, each*);
- numbers (*one, two, and so on*); and
- some question words (*which, what, whose*).

Words that are used as determiners are followed by a noun (though not necessarily immediately):

Which black pen is mine?

This book is yours.

Many determiners can also be used as pronouns. These include demonstrative pronouns, question words, numbers and most quantifiers. When used as pronouns, determiners are not followed by a noun – their reference includes the noun:

This is for you (*this* book, *this* school, and so on).

Dialect

A version of a language spoken in a particular region or by a particular group of people. For example, the Yorkshire dialect, which contains words and phrases not used in standard English (which is in itself a dialect).

Dialogue

A conversation between 2 or more people.

Digraph

Two letters representing a single sound; for example, 'ph' in photograph or 'th' in this and thin.

Discourse marker

A word or phrase that is used to signal a pause or change of direction in conversation. For example, 'however', 'nevertheless', 'well', 'OK'.

E

Ellipsis

The omission of 1 or more words from a sentence, especially when what is omitted can be understood from the context. Ellipsis is sometimes used to avoid repetition or give emphasis and it is a common feature of everyday conversation:

Have class 4 finished in the hall?

Yes, break time this morning! (Yes, they finished in the hall by break time this morning.)

Ellipses also occur in writing. For example: 'The professor, although clever, was poor'. The words 'he was' are left out ('although he was clever') but the sentence is still understood.

Ellipses are also represented by 3 dots ... to show that a number of words have been deliberately left out, or at the end of a sentence to show an unfinished thought.

Evaluate

To assess. When asked to evaluate whether a statement is supported or implied by a text, you are being asked to judge how clearly the text does or does not spell out the information given in the statement.

G

Grammar

A term used to refer to various aspects and levels of language as a system. For example, the conventions which govern word formation and word order within sentences. More broadly, it covers the construction of larger units such as paragraphs and complete texts.

Grammatical relationships within and between sentences are signalled by cohesive devices (see 'cohesion'). Grammar includes syntax (the study of sentence structure) and morphology (the study of word structure).

I

Imply, implied, implicit

Something implied is hinted at without being stated explicitly. It is implicit.

Indefinite article

A or an. See 'determiner'.

Infinitive

The base form of a verb, usually used with 'to': For example, 'to read', 'to teach'.

M

Morpheme

The smallest unit of language that can convey meaning. A morpheme cannot be broken down into anything smaller that has a meaning. A word may consist of 1 morpheme ('need'), 2 morphemes ('need/less', 'need/ing') or 3 or more morphemes ('un/happi/ness'). Suffixes and prefixes are morphemes.

Morphology

See 'grammar'.

N

Noun

Words used to identify people, places, things and ideas. The suffix 's' is often added to nouns to indicate a plural (more than 1). Some nouns do not normally take a plural form, for example, 'money'.

Collective nouns

These are nouns that refer to a group of things or people, for example, 'collection', 'family'. Collective nouns may either have either singular or plural agreement with a verb, depending on the intended meaning. For example, 'his family is large' but 'his family are all elderly'.

Proper nouns

These nouns refer to the name of people, places or things that are unique and are normally written with an initial capital letter. Brand names of products and companies are proper nouns.

Noun phrases

These are groups of words doing the work of a single noun, for example: the chairman of the board of governors.

P

Paragraph

A distinct division of text that begins on a new line and consists of 1 or more sentences, usually dealing with a single thought or topic or quoting 1 speaker's continuous words.

Parenthesis

When a word or phrase is put in parenthesis it is separated from the main part of the sentence by a pair of brackets or dashes. The plural form, parentheses, is sometimes used as a synonym for brackets.

Participle

A verb form derived from its infinitive or base form and which can be used as an adjective. There are 2 participles in English, the present participle and the past participle:

The present participle is formed by adding '-ing' to the base form of a verb: 'working', 'reading', 'going', and so on. The '-ing' ending is also used for a verb functioning as a noun. For example: '*Teaching* is my chosen career'. This form is sometimes called a verbal noun or a gerund.

The past participle often ends in '-ed', but many common verbs are irregular and have other endings.

Past participles are used after 'have' to make the perfect tense (for example, 'I have taught'), and to make the passive form (for example, 'he was pushed').

Participles, present and past, are sometimes used as adjectives: 'falling leaves', 'stolen goods'. They can also be used to introduce participle verb phrases: 'Being a teacher, I work with young people'.

Phoneme

A speech sound. In writing, words are made up of letters and in speech they are made up of phonemes. There are 44 phonemes in standard English, evenly divided between vowels and consonants. Phonemes can be represented by a single letter and sometimes by a combination of letters.

Phonetic/phonetically

Phonetic/phonetically refers to the description of sounds used in speech.

Phrase

A group of words not containing a verb, that acts as 1 unit. Some phrases act as nouns, for example, 'a *newly qualified teacher*'; some as adjectives, for example, 'she is *utterly determined*'; and some as adverbs, for example, 'he goes to the gym *every now and again*'. Many phrases are prepositional phrases (see preposition).

Plural

The form taken by a word to indicate that it is referring to more than 1 item. The plural form of many nouns is indicated by the ending 's' but some plural forms are irregular.

Possessive

A word which shows the possessor (owner) of a noun. For example, 'my book' shows that I am the owner of the book, and 'the teacher's book' shows that the teacher is the owner. In these cases, the possessives are also determiners. However, if you omit the noun, you would use a possessive pronoun. For example, 'mine', 'yours'.

Predicate

The part of a sentence which is not the subject but which gives information about the subject, for example: 'the parents *attended a meeting*' - 'attended a meeting' is the predicate.

Prefix

A prefix is a morpheme which can be added to the beginning of a word to change its meaning. For example, '*un/done*', '*over/done*'.

Preposition

Prepositions are usually attached to a noun or noun phrase, showing the position or relationship of 1 thing to another and include words such as 'at', 'over', 'by' and 'with'. When a prepositional phrase is formed, it usually does the work of an adverb or adjective.

Pronoun

A word used in place of a noun, a noun phrase or several nouns. For example:

Personal pronouns: 'I/me', 'you', 'he/him', 'she/her', 'we/us', 'they/them', 'it';

Possessive pronouns: 'mine', 'yours', 'his', 'hers', 'ours', 'theirs', 'its';

Reflexive pronouns: 'myself', 'herself', 'themselves';

Indefinite pronouns: 'someone', 'anything', 'nobody', 'everything';

Interrogative pronouns (used in questions): 'who/whom', 'whose', 'which', 'what';

Relative pronouns: 'who/whom', 'whose', 'which', 'that'.

Punctuation

The standard set of marks used in written and printed texts to clarify meaning and separate sentences, words and parts of words.

S

Sentence

The items in a sentence are linked by grammatical rules concerning the order of words and the type of words included.

A 'simple sentence' contains just one clause: 'Mrs Peacock laughed.'

A 'compound sentence' contains 2 or more main clauses joined by 'and', 'or', 'but' or 'so': 'Mrs Peacock laughed but Mr Peacock smiled drily.'

A 'complex sentence' contains a main clause plus 1 or more subordinate clauses: 'Although Mrs Peacock laughed, she wasn't amused.'

Sentences can be:

- declarative: 'the lesson finished on time'
- interrogative: 'is that your book?'
- imperative: 'give me that book!'
- exclamatory : 'oh no!'

Singular

A word form used to refer to 1 of something. When more than 1 is referred to, a plural form is used. Verbs can be singular or plural (see 'agreement').

Standard English

The variety of English used in public communication, particularly in writing.

Statement

A sentence that contains a fact or proposition.

Subject

This refers to the person or thing that the sentence is about. For example, in the sentence '*His father* attended the meeting' 'his father' is the subject (see also 'predicate').

Suffix

A morpheme added to the end of a word. For example, in 'hopeless' - 'less' is a suffix.

Syntax

See 'grammar'.

T

Tautology

The unnecessary repetition of the same idea in different words in the same sentence. For example, 'the annual poetry festival is staged every year.'

V

Verb

A 'doing' or 'being' word that expresses an action or a state.

Verbs change their form, or tense, according to when the action takes place. So verbs may be in the past, present or future tense.

Modal verbs are ones such as 'can', 'may', 'might', 'will', which are used to express different degrees of certainty. See also 'participle', 'infinitive' and 'agreement'.

Voice

This refers to the way a verb is used in a sentence - to describe whether someone is doing something (active voice) or something is being done (passive voice). For example, in 'she praised the pupil' - the verb is in the active voice. In 'the pupil was praised' the verb is in the passive voice.

Verbs change their form, or tense, according to when the action takes place. So verbs may be in the past, present or future tense.

Modal verbs are ones such as 'can', 'may', 'might', 'will', which are used to express different degrees of certainty. See also 'participle', 'infinitive' and 'agreement'.

Vowel

The letters a, e, i, o, u. See also 'consonant'.

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