Alliteration, Kenning, and Caesura

In Beowulf
Use of Sound Devices

- The Anglo-Saxon **oral tradition** is evident in *Beowulf*.
- Like other oral art, it was handed down, with changes and embellishments, from one storyteller to another.
- To aide the retelling of the story, several poetic devices are incorporated into this epic poem.
Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in words close to one another in lines of poetry.

Instead of rhyme unifying a poem, the Anglo-Saxon poet used alliteration to connect the narrative structure of the epic.

Examples:

“... A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in the hall...”

“So Hrothgar’s men lived happy in his hall”
Caesura

Often the verse line is divided into two halves separated by a rhythmical pause, or caesura.

- In one half, two words would commonly alliterate; in the other half, one word alliterates with the two from the other half.

Example:

“Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors (caesura after Herot) Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.”
The **kenning** is a specialized metaphor made of compound words.

- They are still used today (*gas guzzler* and *headhunter*).

The earliest and simplest kennings are compound words formed from two common nouns:

- “sky-candle” for sun
- “whale-road” for sea.

Later, **kennings** became much more elaborate.

- A ship became a “foamy-throated ship,” then a “foamy-throated sea-stallion,” and finally a “foamy-throated sea-stallion of the whale-road.”

Once a kenning was formed, it was used over and over by the oral poets.
Kennings continued…

**Examples:**

“So mankind’s enemy continued his crimes”  
*Grendel*

“So the living sorrow of Healfdane’s son simmered”  
*Hrothgar*

“In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac’s Follower and the strongest of the Geats”  
*Beowulf*