

Figurative Language

Figurative language can be found in poetry where the writing appeals to the senses. Figurative language can make you look at the world differently; it can heighten your senses. It compares two things in such a way that you find the comparison interesting or even a bit surprising.

Figurative Language: Understanding the Concept

One of the best ways to really understand the concept of figurative language is to see it in action such as with these examples:

- Alright, the sky misses the sun at night.
- The poorest man is the richest, and the rich are poor.
- Hear the mellow wedding bells. - Edgar Allen Poe
- Out of reach, I pull out with a screech.
- I move fast like a cheetah on the Serengeti.
- Her head was spinning from all the new information.
- The toast jumped out of the toaster.
- I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.
- The Sea lashed out in anger at the ships, unwilling to tolerate another battle.
- The Redcoats are coming!
- I've told you a million times to clean your room!

Categories of Figurative Language

There are seven categories of figurative language. They are:

- Imagery
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Alliteration
- Personification
- Onomatopoeia
- Hyperbole

You are using figurative language any time you compare two things. When writing goes beyond the actual meanings of words, then the reader gains new insights into the objects or subjects in the work.

Following is an explanation of each category, with the examples of figurative language following each one.

Imagery

Imagery is a type of figurative language that appeals to the senses. The descriptions can be about living things or inanimate objects.

A good example is from Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

A host of golden daffodils; Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

He doesn't say "many" or "a lot of" daffodils, he uses the word "host." That means a huge number of daffodils. Later, he personifies the daffodils, and personification will be covered later on.

Another example is from "The Eagle" by Tennyson,

"He clasps the crag with crooked hands."

The hard consonant sounds add even more to the imagery here.

Simile

A simile compares two things using the words "like" and "as." Examples include:

- busy as a bee

- clean as a whistle
- brave as a lion
- stand out like a sore thumb
- as easy as shooting fish in a barrel
- as dry as a bone
- as funny as a barrel of monkeys
- they fought like cats and dogs
- like watching grass grow

Metaphor

When you use a metaphor, you make a statement that doesn't make sense literally, like "time is a thief." It only makes sense when the similarities between the two things become apparent or someone understands the connection.

Examples include:

- the world is my oyster
- you are a couch potato
- time is money
- he has a heart of stone
- America is a melting pot
- you are my sunshine

Alliteration

Alliteration is the easiest of the examples of figurative language to spot. It is a repetition of the first consonant sounds in several words. Some good examples are:

- wide-eyed and wondering while we wait for others to waken and tongue twisters like:
- Betty bought butter but the butter was bitter, so Betty bought better butter to make the bitter butter better.

Personification

Personification gives human characteristics to inanimate objects, animals, or ideas. This can really affect the way the reader imagines things. This is used in children's books, poetry, and fictional literature. Examples include:

- opportunity knocked on the door
- the sun greeted me this morning
- the sky was full of dancing stars
- the vines wove their fingers together to form a braid
- the radio stopped singing and stared at me
- the sun played hide and seek with the clouds

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is the use of words that sound like their meaning, or mimic sounds. They add a level of fun and reality to writing. Here are some examples:

- the burning wood hissed and crackled
- the words: beep, whirr, click, whoosh, swish, zap, zing, ping, clang, bong, hum, boom, munch, gobble, crunch, pow, smash, wham, quack, meow, oink, and tweet.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an outrageous exaggeration that emphasizes a point, and can be ridiculous or funny. Hyperboles can be added to fiction to add color and depth to a character. Examples are:

- You snore louder than a freight train.
- It's a slow burg. I spent a couple of weeks there one day.
- She is so dumb; she thinks Taco Bell is a Mexican phone company.

- I had to walk 15 miles to school in the snow, uphill.
- You could have knocked me over with a feather.

Regardless of the category, figurative language helps you feel like you are having the same experience as the author.