Figurative Language

DEFINITION

What is figurative language? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Figurative language is language that contains or uses figures of speech. When people use the term "figurative language," however, they often do so in a slightly narrower way. In this narrower definition, figurative language refers to language that uses words in ways that deviate from their literal interpretation to achieve a more complex or powerful effect. This view of figurative language focuses on the use of figures of speech that play with the meaning of words, such as metaphor, simile, personification, and hyperbole.

Some additional key details about figurative language:

- Figurative language is common in all sorts of writing, as well as in spoken language.
- Figurative language refers to language that contains figures of speech, while figures of speech are the particular techniques. If figurative speech is like a dance routine, figures of speech are like the various moves that make up the routine.
- It's a common misconception that imagery, or vivid descriptive language, is a kind of figurative language. In fact, writers can use figurative language as one tool to help create imagery, but imagery does not have to use figurative language.

Figurative Language Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce figurative language: **fig**-yer-uh-tiv **lang**-gwij

Figures of Speech and Figurative Language

To fully understand figurative language, it's helpful to have a basic understanding of figures of speech. More specifically, it's helpful to understand the two main types of figures of speech: tropes and schemes.

- **Tropes** are figures of speech that play with and shift the expected and literal meaning of words.
- **Schemes** are figures of speech that involve a change from the typical mechanics of a sentence, such as the order, pattern, or arrangement of words.

Put even more simply: tropes play with the meaning of words, while schemes play with the structure of words, phrases, and sentences.

The Different Things People Mean When They Say Figurative Language

When people say figurative language, they don't always mean the precise same thing. Here are the three different ways people usually talk about figurative language:

- **Dictionary definition of figurative language:** According to the dictionary, figurative language is simply any language that contains or uses figures of speech. This definition would mean that figurative language includes the use of both tropes and schemes.
- **Much more common real world use of figurative language:** However, when people (including teachers) refer to figurative language, they usually mean language that plays with the literal meaning of words. This definition sees figurative language as language that primarily involves the use of tropes.
- **Another common real world use of figurative language:** Some people define figurative language as including figures of speech that play with meaning *as well as* a few other common schemes that affect the rhythm and sound of text, such as alliteration and assonance.

What does all that boil down to for you? If you hear someone talking about figurative language, you can usually safely assume they are referring to language that uses figures of speech to play with the meaning of words and, perhaps, with the way that language sounds or feels.

Common Types of Figurative Language

There are many, many types of figures of speech that can be involved in figurative language. Some of the most common are:

- **Metaphor:** A figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unrelated things by stating that one thing is another thing, even though this isn't literally true. For example, the phrase "her lips are a blooming rose" obviously doesn't literally mean what it says—it's a metaphor that makes a comparison between the red beauty and promise of a blooming rose with that of the lips of the woman being described.
- **Simile:** A simile, like a metaphor, makes a comparison between two unrelated things. However, instead of stating that one thing *is* another thing (as in metaphor), a simile states that one thing is *like* another thing. An example of a simile would be to say "they fought like cats and dogs."
- **Oxymoron:** An oxymoron pairs contradictory words in order to express new or complex meanings. In the phrase "parting is such sweet sorrow" from *Romeo and Juliet*, "sweet sorrow" is an oxymoron that captures the complex and simultaneous feelings of pain and pleasure associated with passionate love.

- **Hyperbole:** Hyperbole is an intentional exaggeration of the truth, used to emphasize the importance of something or to create a comic effect. An example of a hyperbole is to say that a backpack "weighs a ton." No backpack literally weighs a ton, but to say "my backpack weighs ten pounds" doesn't effectively communicate how burdensome a heavy backpack feels.
- **Personification:** In personification, non-human things are described as having human attributes, as in the sentence, "The rain poured down on the wedding guests, indifferent to their plans." Describing the rain as "indifferent" is an example of personification, because rain can't be "indifferent," nor can it feel any other human emotion.
- **Idiom:** An idiom is a phrase that, through general usage within a particular group or society, has gained a meaning that is different from the literal meaning of the words. The phrase "it's raining cats and dogs" is known to most Americans to mean that it's raining hard, but an English-speaking foreigner in the United States might find the phrase totally confusing.
- **Onomatopoeia:** Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech in which words evoke the actual sound of the thing they refer to or describe. The “boom” of a firework exploding, the “tick tock” of a clock, and the “ding dong” of a doorbell are all examples of onomatopoeia.
- **Synecdoche:** In synecdoche, a *part* of something is used to refer to its *whole*. For example, "The captain commands one hundred sails" is a synecdoche that uses "sails" to refer to ships—ships being the thing of which a sail is a part.
- **Metonymy:** Metonymy is a figure of speech in which an object or concept is referred to not by its own name, but instead by the name of something closely associated with it. For example, in "Wall Street prefers lower taxes," the New York City street that was the original home of the New York Stock Exchange stands in for (or is a "metonym" for) the entire American financial industry.
- **Alliteration:** In alliteration, the same sound repeats in a group of words, such as the “b” sound in: “Bob brought the box of bricks to the basement.” Alliteration uses repetition to create a musical effect that helps phrases to stand out from the language around them.
- **Assonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds repeat in nearby words, such as the "ee" sound: "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." Like alliteration, assonance uses repeated sounds to create a musical effect in which words echo one another.

Figurative Language vs. Imagery

Many people (and websites) argue that imagery is a type of figurative language. That is actually incorrect. Imagery refers to a writers use of vivid and descriptive language to appeal to the reader's senses and more deeply evoke places, things, emotions, and more. The following sentence uses imagery to give the reader a sense of how what is being described looks, feels, smells, and sounds:

> The night was dark and humid, the scent of rotting vegetation hung in the air, and only the sound of mosquitoes broke the quiet of the swamp.

This sentence uses *no* figurative language. Every word means exactly what it says, and the sentence is still an example of the use of imagery. That said, imagery *can* use figurative language, often to powerful effect:

> The night was dark and humid, heavy with a scent of rotting vegetation like a great-aunt's heavy and inescapable perfume, and only the whining buzz of mosquitoes broke the silence of the swamp.

In this sentence, the description has been made more powerful through the use of a simile ("like a great-aunt's..."), onomatopoeia ("whining buzz," which not only describes but actually sounds like the noise made by mosquitoes), and even a bit of alliteration in the "silence of the swamp."

To sum up: imagery is *not* a form of figurative language. But a writer can enhance his or her effort to write imagery through the use of figurative language.

EXAMPLES

Figurative language is more interesting, lively, beautiful, and memorable than language that's purely literal. Figurative language is found in all sorts of writing, from poetry to prose to speeches to song lyrics, and is also a common part of spoken speech. The examples below show a variety of different types of figures of speech. You can see many more examples of each type at their own specific LitChart entries.

Figurative Language Example: Metaphor

Metaphor in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo uses the following metaphor in Act 2 Scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet*, after sneaking into Juliet's garden and catching a glimpse of her on her balcony:

> But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Romeo compares Juliet to the sun not only to describe how radiantly beautiful she is, but also to convey the full extent of her power over him. He's so taken with Juliet that her appearances and disappearances affect him like those of the sun. His life "revolves" around Juliet like the earth orbits the sun.

Figurative Language Example: Simile

In this example of a simile from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim emerges from an underground slaughterhouse where he has been held prisoner by the Germans during the deadly World War II firebombing of Dresden:

> It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead.

Vonnegut uses simile to compare the bombed city of Dresden to the moon in order to capture the totality of the devastation—the city is so lifeless that it is like the barren moon.

Figurative Language Example: Oxymoron

These lines from Chapter 7 of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* describe an encounter between Robert Jordan, a young American soldier fighting in the Spanish Civil War, and his lover María.

> She held herself tight to him and her lips looked for his and then found them and were against them and he felt her, fresh, new and smooth and young and lovely with the warm, scalding coolness and unbelievable to be there in the robe that was as familiar as his clothes, or his shoes, or his duty and then she said, frightenedly, “And now let us do quickly what it is we do so that the other is all gone.”

The couple's relationship becomes a bright spot for both of them in the midst of war, but ultimately also a source of pain and confusion for Jordan, as he struggles to balance his obligation to fight with his desire to live happily by Maria's side. The contradiction contained within the oxymoron "scalding coolness" emphasizes the couple's conflicting emotions and impossible situation.

Figurative Language Example: Hyperbole

Elizabeth Bennet, the most free-spirited character in *Pride and Prejudice*, refuses Mr. Darcy's first marriage proposal with a string of hyperbole:

> From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immoveable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.

Elizabeth's closing statement, that Darcy is the "last man in the world" whom she would ever marry, is an obvious hyperbole. It's hard to believe that Elizabeth would rather marry, say, an axe murderer or a diseased pirate than Mr. Darcy. Even beyond the obvious exaggeration, Austen's use of hyperbole in this exchange hints at the fact that Elizabeth's feelings for Darcy are more complicated than she admits, even to herself. Austen drops various hints throughout the beginning of the novel that Elizabeth feels something beyond mere dislike for Darcy. Taken together with these hints, Elizabeth's hyperbolic statements seem designed to convince not only Darcy, but also *herself,* that their relationship has no future.

Figurative Language Example: Personification

In Chapter 1 of *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a wild rose bush that grows in front of Salem's gloomy wooden jail:

> But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

In the context of the novel's setting in 17th century Boston, this rose bush, which grows wild in front of an establishment dedicated to enforcing harsh puritan values, symbolizes those elements of human nature that cannot be repressed, no matter how strict a community's moral code may be: desire, fertility, and a love of beauty. By personifying the rosebush as "offering" its blossoms to reflect Nature's pity (Nature is also personified here as having a "heart"), Hawthorne turns the *passive* coincidence of the rosebush's location into an image of human nature *actively* resisting its constraints.

Figurative Language Example: Idiom

Figurative Language Example: Onomatopoeia

In Act 3, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban uses onomatopoeia to convey the noises of the island.

> Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
> Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices...

The use of onomatopoeia makes the audience *feel* the sounds on the island, rather than just have to take Caliban's word about there being noises.

Figurative Language Example: Synecdoche

In Act 4, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, an angry Macbeth kicks out a servant by saying:

> Take thy face hence.

Here, "thy face" stands in for "you." Macbeth is simply telling the servant to leave, but his use of synecdoche makes the tone of his command more harsh and insulting because he uses synecdoche to treat the servant not as a person but as an object, a body part.

Figurative Language Example: Metonymy

In his song "Juicy," Notorious B.I.G. raps:

> Now I'm in the limelight 'cause I rhyme tight

Here he's using "limelight" as a metonymy for fame (a "limelight" was a kind of spotlight used in old theaters, and so it came to be associated with the fame of being in the spotlight). Biggie's use of metonymy here also sets him up for a sweet rhyme.

Figurative Language Example: Alliteration

In his song "Rap God," Eminem shows his incredible lyrical dexterity by loading up the alliteration:

> So I wanna make sure, somewhere in this chicken scratch I
> Scribble and doodle enough rhymes
> To maybe try to help get some people through tough times
> But I gotta keep a few punchlines
> Just in case, ‘cause even you unsigned
> Rappers are hungry looking at me like it's lunchtime…

WHY WRITERS USE IT

The term figurative language refers to a whole host of different figures of speech, so it's difficult to provide a single definitive answer to why writers use figurative language. That said, writers use figurative language for a wide variety of reasons:

- **Interest and beauty:** Figurative language allows writes to express descriptions, ideas, and more in ways that are unique and beautiful.
- **Complexity and power:** Because figurative language can create meanings that go beyond the literal, it can capture complex ideas, feelings, descriptions, or truths that cause readers to see things in a new way, or more closely mirror the complex reality of the world.
- **Visceral affect:** Because figurative language can both impact the rhythm and sound of language, and also connect the abstract (say, love) with the concrete (say, a rose), it can help language make an almost physical impact on a reader.
- **Humor:** By allowing a writer to layer additional meanings over literal meanings, or even to imply intended meanings that are the opposite of the literal meaning, figurative language gives writers all sorts of options for creating humor in their writing.
- **Realism:** People speak and even think in terms of the sorts of comparisons that underlie so much figurative language. Rather than being flowery, figurative language allows writers to describe things in ways that match how people really think about them, and to create characters who themselves feel real.

In general, figurative language often makes writing feel at once more accessible and powerful, more colorful, surprising, and deep.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The dictionary definition of figurative:** Touches on figurative language, as well as some other meanings of the word.
- **Figurative and Frost:** Examples of figurative language in the context of the poetry of Robert Frost.
- **Figurative YouTube:** A video identifying various forms of figurative language from movies and television shows.
- **Wikipedia on literal and figurative language:** A bit technical, but with a good list of examples.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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