Figure of Speech

DEFINITION

What is a figure of speech? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A figure of speech is a literary device in which language is used in an unusual—or "figured"—way in order to produce a stylistic effect. Figures of speech can be broken into two main groups: figures of speech that play with the ordinary meaning of words (such as metaphor, simile, and hyperbole), and figures of speech that play with the ordinary arrangement or pattern in which words are written (such as alliteration, ellipsis, and antithesis).

Some additional key details about figures of speech:

- The ancient Greeks and Romans exhaustively listed, defined, and categorized figures of speech in order to better understand how to effectively use language. The names of most figures of speech derive from the original Greek or Latin.
- Figures of speech that play with the literal meaning of words are called tropes, while figures of speech that play with the order or pattern of words are called schemes.
- Figures of speech can take many forms. A figure of speech can involve a single word, a phrase, an omission of a word or phrase, a repetition of words or sounds, or specific sentence structures.

Figure of Speech Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce figure of speech: **fig**-yer of **speech**

Figures of Speech vs. Figurative Language

There's a lot of confusion about the difference between the terms "figures of speech" and "figurative language." Most of the confusion stems from the fact that different people often use "figurative language" to mean slightly different things. The two most common (and most acceptable) definitions of figurative language are:

- **Figurative language refers to any language that contains figures of speech.** According to this definition, figurative language and figures of speech are not quite the same thing, but it's pretty darn close. The only difference is that figures of speech refer to each specific type of a figure of speech, while figurative language refers more generally to any language that contains any kind of figures of speech.
- **Figurative language refers to words or expressions that have non-literal meanings**: This definition associates figurative language only with the category of figures of speech called tropes (which are figures of speech that play with the literal meaning of words). So according to this definition, figurative language would be any language that contains tropes, but not language that contains the figures of speech called schemes.

You might encounter people using figurative speech to mean either of the above, and it's not really possible to say which is correct. But if you know about these two different ways of relating figurative language and figures of speech, you'll be in pretty good shape.

Figures of Speech, Tropes, and Schemes

The oldest and still most common way to organize figures of speech is to split them into two main groups: tropes and schemes.

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

The scheme/trope classification system is by no means the only way to organize figures of speech (if you're interested, you can find all sorts of different categorization methods for figures of speech here). But it *is* the most common method, and is both simple and structured enough to help you understand figures of speech.

Tropes

Generally, a trope uses comparison, association, or wordplay to play with the literal meaning of words or to layer another meaning on top of a word's literal meaning. Some of the most commonly used tropes are explained briefly below, though you can get even more detail on each from its specific LitCharts entry.

- **Metaphor:** A metaphor is 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, if someone says "it's raining cats and dogs," this obviously doesn't literally mean what it says—it's a metaphor that makes a comparison between the weight of "cats and dogs" and heavy rain. Metaphors are tropes because their effect relies not on the mechanics of the sentence, but rather on the association created by the use of the phrase "cats and dogs" in a non-literal manner.
- **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. To stick with cats and dogs, 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. Oxymorons are tropes because their effect comes from a combination of the two words that goes beyond the literal meanings of those words.

- **Hyperbole:** A 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. Once again, this is a trope because its effect comes from understanding that the words mean something different from what they literally say.

Other Common Tropes

- Antanaclasis
- Anthimeria
- Irony
- Litotes
- Metonymy
- Onomatopoeia
- Paradox
- Personification
- Periphrasis
- Pun
- Rhetorical Question
- Synecdoche

Schemes

Schemes are mechanical—they're figures of speech that tinker with words, sounds, and structures (as opposed to meanings) in order to achieve an effect. Schemes can themselves be broken down in helpful ways that define the sort of tinkering they employ.

- **Repetition:** Repeating words, phrases, or even sounds in a particular way.
- **Omission:** Leaving out certain words or punctuation that would normally be expected.
- **Changes of word order:** Shifting around words or phrases in atypical ways.
- **Balance:** Creating sentences or phrases with equal parts, often through the use of identical grammatical structures.

Some of the most commonly used schemes are explained briefly below, though you can get even more detail on each from its specific LitCharts entry.

- **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:** A scheme in which vowel sounds repeat in nearby words, such as the "ee" sound in the proverb: "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." Like alliteration, assonance uses repeated sounds to create a musical effect in which words echo one another—it's a scheme because this effect is achieved through repetition of words with certain sounds, not by playing with the meaning of words.
- **Ellipsis:** The deliberate omission of one or more words from a sentence because their meaning is already implied. In the example, "Should I call you, or you me?" the second clause uses ellipsis. While its implication is "or should you call me," the context of the sentence allows for the omission of "should" and "call." Ellipsis is a scheme because it involves an uncommon usage of language.
- **Parallelism:** The repetition of sentence structure for emphasis and balance. This can occur in a single sentence, such as "a penny saved is a penny earned," and it can also occur over the course of a speech, poem, or other text. Parallelism is a scheme because it creates emphasis through the mechanics of sentence structure, rather than by playing with the actual meanings of words.

Other Common Schemes

- Anadiplosis
- Anaphora
- Anastrophe
- Antanaclasis
- Antimetabole
- Antithesis
- Apostrophe
- Apposition
- Appositive
- Asyndeton
- Brachylogia
- Chiasmus
- Climax
- Consonance
- Epanalepsis
- Epistrophe
- Isocolon
- Parenthesis
- Polyptoton

- Polysyndeton
- Symploce
- Tricolon
- Zeugma

EXAMPLES

Figures of speech can make language more inventive, more beautiful, more rhythmic, more memorable, and more meaningful. It shouldn't be a surprise, then, that figures of speech are plentiful in all sorts of written language. 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.

Figures of Speech Examples in Literature

Literature is riddled with figures of speech because figures of speech make language colorful and complex.

Metaphor in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*

> On and on, now east now west, wound the poor thread that once had been our drive. Sometimes I thought it lost, but it appeared again, beneath a fallen tree perhaps, or struggling on the other side of a muddied ditch created by the winter rains.

In this quote from *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier refers to a washed-out road as "the poor thread." This is a metaphor—and a trope—because the writer indirectly compares the thread to the road and expects that readers will understand that "thread" is not used literally.

Parallelism in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

In the famous opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens uses parallelism—a scheme in which parts of a sentence repeat—in order to emphasize the contradictions of the time in which the book is set. Dickens has manipulated his sentence structure so that the parallel clauses emphasize the oppositional nature of his words ("it was the best of times, it was the worst of times"). The figure of speech doesn't play with the meaning of words, it emphasizes them through structure and repetition, which is why it is a scheme.

Alliteration in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark"

> In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight.

This passage from "The Birthmark" uses alliteration to tie together all of the things that Georgiana's birthmark is supposed to symbolize. By using words that alliterate—"sin and sorrow" and "decay and death," for example—Hawthorne is making the reader *feel* that these ideas are connected, rather than simply stating that they are connected. Alliteration is a figure of speech—a scheme—because it uses the mechanics of language to emphasize meaning.

Verbal Irony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

> For Brutus is an honorable man;
> So are they all, all honorable men,

This quote from *Julius Caesar* comes from Marc Antony's speech at Caesar's funeral. Antony needs to hold Brutus and his conspirators accountable for Caesar's death without contradicting the crowd's positive impression of Brutus, so Antony uses verbal irony to simultaneously please and trouble the crowd. On the surface, Antony says what the audience wants to hear (that Brutus is honorable), but it becomes clear over the course of his speech that he means the opposite of what he says (and over time he convinces the audience to believe this opposite meaning as well). This is a figure of speech (a trope) because it's based on a play on the meaning of Antony's words.

Figures of Speech Examples in Music

Figures of speech are also common in music. Schemes fit naturally with songs because both schemes and songs manipulate sound and rhythm to enhance the meanings of words. Music also uses many tropes, because using words that have meanings beyond their literal ones makes language more interesting, and it allows songwriters to create music that uses just a few words to imply a complex meaning.

Assonance and Metaphor in Rihanna's "Diamonds"

> So shine bright tonight, you and I
> We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky
> Eye to eye, so alive
> We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky

Rihanna uses assonance when she repeats the "eye" sound throughout the chorus of "Diamonds." This make the words echo one another, which emphasizes the similarity between the singer, the person she's talking about, and the "diamonds in the sky" to which she's comparing them both. Assonance is a scheme because it's using

the sound of words—not their meaning—to draw a parallel between different things.

Rihanna also uses the phrase "Diamonds in the sky" as a metaphor for stars. This is a trope—a phrase that means something other than what it literally says—as Rihanna obviously doesn't think that there are actually diamonds in the sky. This verse is a good example of how figures of speech can often work together and overlap. In this case, the metaphor that allows her to use "diamonds" instead of "stars" also fits into her use of assonance (because "stars" lacks the "eye" sound).

Personification in Green Day's "Good Riddance"

> Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road
> Time grabs you by the wrist, directs you where to go

While the first line of this song uses "a fork stuck in the road" as a metaphor for a choice, the more arresting figure of speech at work here is the personification of time in the second line. By giving "time" human characteristics—the ability to grab a person and tell them where to go—Green Day is helping listeners to make sense of the power that time has over people. This is a trope because the line doesn't mean what it literally says; instead, it's asking listeners to make a comparison between the characteristics of time and the characteristics of a person.

Anastrophe in Public Enemy's "Fight the Power"

> Straight up racist that sucker was
> Simple and plain

In the line "Straight up racist that sucker was," Public Enemy uses anastrophe (which is the inversion of typical word order) to preserve the rhythm of the verse. Instead of saying "That sucker was straight up racist," Public Enemy chooses an odd phrasing that has one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables— "**ra**cist that **su**cker was/**Sim**ple and **plain**." This way, the beat falls more regularly across those two lines, which allows the rapper to make his point (that Elvis was racist) without the flow sounding awkward. Since anastrophe manipulates the order of words in order to achieve a rhythmic effect, it's a scheme.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Figures of speech is a category that encompasses a broad variety of literary terms, so it's difficult to give one answer to this question. Writers use different figures of speech to achieve different effects.

Schemes (figures of speech that manipulate sound, syntax, and word order) can make language more beautiful, persuasive, or memorable. Writers can use schemes to draw attention to an important passage, to create a sound that mirrors (or contrasts with) the meaning of words, or to give language a rhythm that draws the reader in. As schemes tend to work through sound and rhythm, they generally produce a visceral effect, or an effect felt in the body—broadly speaking, schemes are more sensory than intellectual.

In contrast, writers use tropes to grab the reader intellectually by adding complexity or ambiguity to an otherwise simple word or phrase. Tropes can ask the reader to make a comparison between two unlike things, they can impose human qualities on nonhumans, and they can mean the opposite of what they say. Tropes engage the intellect because the reader has to be alert to the fact that tropes do not use language at face value—a trope never means what it literally says.

All figures of speech help a writer to communicate ideas that are difficult to say in words or that are more effectively communicated non-verbally. This could be by repeating harsh consonants to create a scary atmosphere, or by using a metaphor to impose the qualities of something concrete (say, a rose) onto something more difficult to define (say, love). In general, figures of speech attempt to bring out a reader's emotion and to capture their attention by making language more colorful, surprising, and complex.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **Silva Rhetoricae on Figures of Speech:** An excellent reference from BYU that explains the various ways that figures of speech have been categorized over history, including into schemes and tropes.
- **Silva Rhetoricae on schemes and tropes:**
- **The Oxford Reference Page for Figure of Speech:** A helpful definition of figures of speech in the context of the ancient study of rhetoric (did you know that the Roman rhetorician Quintillian defined "figure of speech" in 95 AD?)
- **What Are Tropes in Language?** Skip to the "Distinction Between Figures and Tropes" section and read to the end—full of informative and thought-provoking discussion about tropes.
- **A YouTube video about tropes and schemes** with pop culture examples.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Florman, Ben. "Figure of Speech." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Florman, Ben. "Figure of Speech." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/figure-of-speech.