

Figurative language: the 22 types with definitions and examples

Figurative language means more than, or other than, its literal words: 'the classroom was a zoo' says nothing about animals. Literal language says exactly what it means. Groups: comparison (simile, metaphor, personification, analogy), exaggeration and contradiction (hyperbole, understatement, oxymoron, paradox, irony), sound (alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia), substitution (metonymy, synecdoche, euphemism, idiom, pun), reference (imagery, symbolism, allusion, apostrophe).

Type	Definition	Examples
simile	a comparison using like, as, than	as busy as a bee; her smile was like sunshine
metaphor	says one thing IS another	time is a thief; a heart of stone
personification	a non-human given human qualities	the wind whispered; the car refused to start
hyperbole	deliberate exaggeration	I've told you a million times; I could eat a horse
understatement (litotes)	deliberately saying less than is true	'a bit chilly' of a blizzard; 'not bad' of a masterpiece
idiom	a fixed phrase whose meaning is not in its words	break a leg; spill the beans; piece of cake
alliteration	repeated first consonant sounds	Peter Piper picked; the big bad wolf
assonance	repeated vowel sounds inside words	the rain in Spain; go slow over the road
consonance	repeated consonant sounds, middle or end	pitter patter; blank and think
onomatopoeia	a word that imitates its sound	buzz, crash, sizzle, hiss, murmur
oxymoron	two contradictory words together	deafening silence; bittersweet; open secret
paradox	a contradictory statement with a truth in it	less is more; cruel to be kind
verbal irony	saying the opposite of what is meant	'lovely weather' in a downpour
situational irony	the opposite of the expected happens	a fire station burns down
dramatic irony	the audience knows what a character does not	Juliet is alive when Romeo drinks the poison
pun	a play on two meanings or sounds	a boiled egg every morning is hard to beat
metonymy	a thing named by something associated	the crown; the White House said; the pen is mightier than the sword
synecdoche	a part for the whole, or whole for part	all hands on deck; nice wheels; England won
euphemism	a mild word for something blunt	passed away; let go; senior citizen
imagery	language for the senses	the sour tang of lemon; gravel crunched
symbolism	an image standing for an idea	a dove for peace; the green light in Gatsby
allusion	an indirect reference to a known story	an Achilles' heel; a Scrooge; Pandora's box
apostrophe	addressing the absent or non-human	O Romeo, Romeo; twinkle, twinkle, little star
analogy	an extended explaining comparison	a cell is like a factory; the nucleus is the office

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The confusable pairs, how to write about the effect, and practice

Pair	The difference	Test
simile / metaphor	a simile keeps the things separate with like or as; a metaphor says one is the other	Is there a like or as? Simile.
metonymy / synecdoche	synecdoche is part for whole; metonymy is an associated thing that is not a part	Is the substitute physically part of it? Synecdoche.
oxymoron / paradox	two contradictory words; a contradictory statement with a truth	Two words? Oxymoron. A sentence? Paradox.
hyperbole / idiom	invented exaggeration; a fixed phrase everyone knows	Could you change the words? Hyperbole.
personification / anthropomorphism	human qualities; acting fully as a human	Whispering wind? Personification. A talking rabbit? Anthropomorphism.
imagery / symbolism	any sensory description; an image carrying an idea beyond itself	Does it stand for something? Symbol.

Writing about the effect: three steps

- [] Name and quote the device: 'Shakespeare uses a metaphor, Juliet is the sun'
- [] Unpack it: what two things are joined, or what is literally claimed? (Juliet is compared to the source of light, warmth and life)
- [] Say what it does HERE: 'so Romeo's world now revolves around her and everything else, including the moon he linked to Rosaline, is dim by comparison.' Spotting is one mark; the effect is the rest. 'It makes the reader want to read on' earns nothing.

Practice: name the device

- [] 1. The stars danced across the sky.
- [] 2. He's as stubborn as a mule.
- [] 3. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.
- [] 4. The silence was deafening.
- [] 5. The kettle hissed and spat.
- [] 6. She has a heart of gold.
- [] 7. The pen is mightier than the sword.
- [] 8. We need more boots on the ground.
- [] 9. 'What a beautiful day,' she said, watching the hail.
- [] 10. My grandfather passed away last spring.
- [] 11. Sally sells seashells by the seashore.
- [] 12. You have to spend money to make money.
- [] 13. Time, you old thief, give me back my youth.
- [] 14. The smell of fresh bread and the crackle of its crust filled the kitchen.
- [] 15. The classroom was a zoo.

Answers

1) personification 2) simile 3) hyperbole 4) oxymoron 5) onomatopoeia 6) metaphor 7) metonymy 8) synecdoche 9) verbal irony 10) euphemism 11) alliteration 12) paradox 13) apostrophe 14) imagery 15) metaphor

Write your own: one simile, one metaphor, one personification about rain

Simile: _____

Metaphor: _____

Personification: _____