

Litotes

Definition of Litotes

Litotes, derived from a Greek word meaning “simple,” is a [figure of speech](#) that employs an [understatement](#) by using double negatives or, in other words, a positive statement expressed by negating its opposite expressions.

For example, using the expression “not too bad” for “very good” is an understatement, as well as a double negative statement that confirms a positive idea by negating the opposite (meaning it’s good, by saying it’s *not* bad). Similarly, saying “She is not a beauty queen,” means *she is ugly*, or saying “I am not as young as I used to be,” in order to avoid saying *I am old*. Litotes, therefore, is an intentional use of understatement that renders an ironic effect.

Common Litotes Examples

In everyday life, it is common to experience litotes in conversations, though not many people are aware of this term and its usage. Below are a few examples of litotes from daily conversations:

They do not seem the happiest couple around.
The ice cream was not too bad.
New York is not an ordinary city.
Your comments on politics are not useless.
You are not as young as you used to be.
I cannot disagree with your [point of view](#).
William Shakespeare was not a bad playwright at all.
He is not the cleverest person I have ever met.
She is not unlike her mother.
Ken Adams is not an ordinary man
A million dollars is no small amount.
You are not doing badly at all.
Your apartment is not unclean.

Interestingly, the use of understatement in the above litotes examples adds emphasis to the ideas, rather than decreasing their importance. This is due to the ironic effect produced by the understatement.

Examples of Litotes in Literature

In literature, writers and poets use this type of figure of speech in their texts in order to vividly communicate novel ideas to readers.

Example #1: *A Tale of a Tub* (By Jonathan Swift)

“I am **not unaware** how the productions of the Grub Street brotherhood have of late years fallen under many prejudices.”

Now just see how Swift has used double negatives to emphasize the point that he is totally aware of it. The [irony](#) is that he is aware, but he is saying it as if he is unaware that he is not.

Example #2: *Fire and Ice* (By Robert Frost)

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.”

If you read this short piece by Robert Frost very carefully, you’ll see that calling the destruction caused by ice “great” is balanced by an opposing statement “would suffice,” is an understatement.

Example #3: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave* (By Frederick Douglass)

“Indeed, it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others.”

Mr. Douglass was an African-American social reformer and a writer. He has effectively used litotes to stress his point that even slaves used to seek dominance over other slaves by holding out that their respective masters were much better than those of the other slaves.

Function of Litotes

Litotes uses ironic understatement in order to emphasize an idea or situation, rather than minimizing its importance. It rather discovers a unique way to attract people's attention to an idea, and that is by ignoring it.

J.R. Bergmann, in his book *Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings*, talks about litotes in the following words:

“I want to [claim](#) that the rhetorical figure litotes is one of those methods which are used to talk about an object in a discreet way. It clearly locates an object for the recipient, but it avoids naming it directly.”

This is the best that has ever been said about litotes – that to ignore an object and still talk about it in a negative way is the best way to make it appear important and prominent.