

Understatement

Understatement Definition

An understatement is a [figure of speech](#) employed by writers or speakers to intentionally make a situation seem less important than it really is.

For example, you win 10 million dollars in a lottery. When you tell a news reporter “I am delighted,” you are making an understatement. Similarly, suppose a team loses to its opponent 50 to 0 in a soccer match, and the captain of the team says in a post-match ceremony, “We did not do well,” it is an understatement because he is trying to decrease the intensity of the loss.

An understatement usually has an ironic effect, as an equally intense response is expected in severe situations, but the statement in response is the opposite of what was expected. For instance, your friend returns your new coat with a large wine stain on the front of it. In response, you make an understatement, “It doesn’t look too bad.” Therefore, an understatement is opposite to another figure of speech, [hyperbole](#), which is an [overstatement](#).

Common Understatement Examples

Let us try to understand understatement better with the help of some common examples of understatement used in daily conversations:

“Deserts are sometimes hot, dry, and sandy.” – Describing deserts of the world.

“He is not too thin.” – Describing an obese person.

“It rained a bit more than usual.” – Describing an area being flooded by heavy rainfall.

“It was O.K.” – Said by the student who got the highest score on the test.

“It is a bit nippy today.” – Describing the temperature, which is 5 degrees below freezing.

Examples of Understatement in Literature

Example #1: *Catcher in the Rye* (By J. D. Salinger)

In Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield says:

“I have to have this operation. It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain.”

Having a tumor in the brain is a serious issue, which has been understated in this excerpt.

Example #2: *Emperor Mage* (By Tamora Pierce)

In *Emperor Mage*, a [fantasy](#) novel by Tamora Pierce, Daine states (as if she has done nothing wrong):

“I thought they'd killed you. I lost my temper.”

This is an understatement that Daine makes, after raising an army of dinosaur skeletons to destroy the king and later, she destroys the imperial palace in order to avenge the death of her teacher.

Example #3: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (By Mark Twain)

[Aunt Sally] “Good gracious, anybody hurt?”

[Huck] “No'm. Killed a nigger.”

This excerpt from Mark Twain's famous work provides one of the great understatement examples found in Twain's literary pieces. Huck's response, “No'm. Killed a nigger” exposes the thinking of the people of the time, who did not consider black men humans. Killing a black man was not considered something serious.

Look at the understatement in *Night's Dawn Trilogy* written by Peter F. Hamilton:

“I’ve always been a massive admirer of the Edenist ability to understate. But I think defining a chunk of land fifteen kilometers across that suddenly takes flight and wanders off into another dimension as a little problem is possibly the best example yet.”

Example #5: *The Silver Chain* (By Primula Bond)

Another example of understatement comes from Primula Bond’s novel *The Silver Chain*:

“And you, who have told me a hundred times how deeply you pitied me for the sorceries by which I was bound, will doubtless hear with joy that they are now ended forever. There was, it seems, **some small error** in your Ladyship’s way of treating them.”

The reference of “some small error” is an understatement as the error which ends somebody’s power is not small at all.

Example #6: *Consider Phlebas* (By Iain Banks)

In another fantasy novel, *Consider Phlebas*, an understatement was made about a war that lasted for 48 years, and took the lives of more than 851 billion beings.

“A small, short war that rarely extended throughout more than .02% of the galaxy and .01% by stellar population ... the galaxy’s elder civilisations rate the Idiran–Culture war as ... one of those singularly interesting Events they see so rarely these days.”

Function of Understatement

An understatement is a tool that helps to develop other figures of speech, such as [irony](#) and [sarcasm](#), by deliberately decreasing the severity of a situation, when an intense response is expected by the listeners or the readers.