

Exaggeration

Definition of Exaggeration

We all exaggerate. Sometimes by spicing up stories to make them more fun, or simply to highlight our points. Exaggeration is a statement that makes something worse, or better, than it really is. In literature and oral communication, writers and speakers use exaggeration as a literary technique, to give extra stress and [drama](#) in a work or speech.

Everyday Examples of Exaggeration

This bicycle is a thousand years old.
He snores louder than a cargo train.
My dog only has cat friends.
He is drowning in his tears.
His brain is the size of a pea.

Types of Exaggeration

Overstatement

It is a statement that slightly exaggerates something to convey the meaning. Cole Porter's poem *You're the Top* provides a good example:

“You're the Nile,
You're the Tower of Pisa,
You're the smile
Of the Mona Lisa...”

Here, the poet overstates the actual truth and calls his beloved the river Nile, and the tower of Pisa. He also says that her smile like that of the Mona Lisa.

Hyperbole

[Hyperbole](#) is an extreme, extravagant, and impossible exaggeration, such as when Flannery O'Connor writes in his [essay](#), *Parker's Back*:

“And the skin on her face was thin and drawn tight like the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two ice picks.”

Examples of Exaggeration in Literature

Example #1: *A Modest Proposal* (By Jonathan Swift)

Jonathan Swift has been notorious for employing exaggeration in his writings, to provide social and political commentary. Through his peculiar story, *A Modest Proposal*, Swift elevates the politics of society to an extent of barefaced absurdity. In this essay, Swift exaggerates by suggesting that the only way to save Ireland from poverty and overpopulation is to kill the children of the poor families. He further suggests that their meat would serve as a delicacy for the nobles of Ireland. He continues to exaggerate, considering ways and recipes to make their skin into handbags and gloves by saying:

“Those who are more thrifty may flay the carcass, the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies and summer boots for fine gentleman.”

In fact, Swift exaggerates tenaciously this idea because the people of Ireland have failed to find a logical solution to reduce poverty and overpopulation.

Example #2: *Candida* (By Voltaire)

“I have wanted to kill myself a hundred times, but somehow I am still here, with life, with children, and even to make a name of

our more stupid melancholy propensities, for is there anything more stupid than to be eager to go on carrying a burden which one would gladly throw away, to loathe one's very being and yet to hold it fast, to fondle the snake that devours us until it has eaten our hearts away?"

In this example, an old woman tells her story – how she faced hard times, exaggerating that she wanted to kill herself a hundred times, calling herself a burden.

Example #3: *Song* (By John Donne)

“Go and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me where all past years are,
Or who cleft the devil's foot,
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.

If thou be'st born to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,
Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear,
No where
Lives a woman true, and fair...”

John Donne uses exaggerated expressions in this poem. The first line of this poem, “Go and catch a falling star,” employs an impossible undertaking. In the remaining stanzas, the poet urges readers to undertake more unachievable tasks, by using extreme exaggeration. These include finding a mandrake root – a mythical root in medieval lore, and hearing mermaids’

In the second [stanza](#), Donne suggests taking a journey of “ten thousand days and nights,” to find a faithful woman. In fact, the entire poem is rich with exaggeratedly doubtful tasks.

Example #4: *To His Coy Mistress* (By Andrew Marvell)

“An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast;
But thirty thousand to the rest.”

Andrew Marvell has employed exceptional exaggeration in this excerpt to praise his beloved. His purpose of using this literary device is to lay emphasis on his point, rather than deception.

Function of Exaggeration

The function of any type of exaggeration, whether it is [overstatement](#) or hyperbole, is to lay emphasis and stress on the given idea, action, feature, or feeling by overstating it. Through exaggeration, writers describe an action or a feature in a remarkable and heightened manner. Sometimes, they also use it sarcastically and ironically to bring [humor](#) to their works. In poetry, on the other hand, poets use it by adding images, similes and metaphors.