

Figurative Language

Definition of Figurative Language

Figurative language uses figures of speech to be more effective, persuasive, and impactful. Figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and allusions go beyond the literal meanings of the words to give readers new insights. On the other hand, alliterations, imageries, or onomatopoeias are figurative devices that appeal to the senses of the readers.

Figurative language can appear in multiple forms with the use of different literary and rhetorical devices. According to Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia, figurative language has five different forms:

- [Understatement](#) or Emphasis
- Relationship or Resemblance
- Figures of Sound
- Errors and
- Verbal Games

Types of Figurative Language

The term *figurative language* covers a wide range of [literary devices](#) and techniques, a few of which include:

- [Simile](#)
- [Metaphor](#)
- [Personification](#)
- [Onomatopoeia](#)
- [Oxymoron](#)
- [Hyperbole](#)
- [Allusion](#)
- [Idiom](#)
- [Imagery](#)
- [Symbolism](#)
- [Alliteration](#)
- [Assonance](#)

[Consonance](#)

[Metonymy](#)

[Synecdoche](#)

[Irony](#)

[Sarcasm](#)

[Litotes](#)

Pun

[Anaphora](#)

[Tautology](#)

Understatement

Short Examples of Figurative Language

Similes

His friend is as black as coal.

He has learned gymnastics, and is as agile as a monkey.

When attacked in his home, he will fight like a caged tiger.

Can you dance like a monkey?

Even when he was told everything, he was acting like a donkey.

Metaphor

My friend is a Shakespeare when in English class.

He was a roaring lion in anger, though now he is silent.

They seem like jackals when running in fear.

Kisses are roses in the spring.

This world is a sea of anonymous faces.

Images

The house stood half-demolished and abandoned.

He left with his haunted and spell-bound face.

He did not like the odorless and colorless shape of water.

His friend was looking at spooky glissando twangs.

Zigzag fissures in the land made him look for snakes.

Assonance

He heard the sound of the fire, like wire striking the air.
This artificial stream is going to flow to the downtown of the town.
Please set the kite right.
Might of the fright seems greater than the actual fear.

Consonance

He lets the pink ball fall with a tall man.
They have not learned how to catch the cat.
Get a seat with a treat in our local hall.
Calling the cow an ox is like putting the cart before the horse.
He saw the pink kite floating past the tall trees.

Paradox

He is dying with his untrustworthy belief.
Sharply blunt razor cannot do anything to you.
Kindly cruel treatment made him flabbergasted.
Please, watch with closed eyes and you will see the heaven.
Creatively dull person cannot do anything in his life.

Metonymy

The Pentagon is located in Washington in the United States.
The Hollywood is a home of English movies.
10 Downing Street is located in London.
Buckingham Palace is world's oldest [symbol](#) of democracy.
The White House.

Synecdoche

He does not know how to behave with the special people.
He is looking at his own grey hair and his agility.
They saw a fleet of fifty.
At this time, he owns nine head of cattle.
The new generation is addicted to the use of plastic money.

Examples of Figurative Language from Literature

Example #1: *The Base Stealer* (By Robert Francis)

Simile

Poised between going on and back, pulled
Both ways taut like a tight-rope walker,

Now bouncing tiptoe like a dropped ball,
Or a kid skipping rope, come on, come on! ...

Taunts them, hovers like an ecstatic bird,
He's only flirting, crowd him, crowd him,

The similes and word choice of this poem makes it a masterpiece. The poet use similes between the lines to depict his scattered thoughts before taking action, and makes [comparison](#) as, “*like a tight-rope*,” “*like a dropped ball*,” and “*hovers like an ecstatic bird*.”

Example #2: *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings* (By Maya Angelou)

Metaphor

But a BIRD that stalks down his narrow cage
Can seldom see through his bars of rage
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
The caged bird sings with a fearful trill ...
And his tune is heard on the distant hill for
The caged bird sings of freedom.

The entire poem is rich with metaphor as a bird in a cage represents a group of people who are oppressed and cannot get freedom. The cage represents physical barriers, fear, addiction, or society; while the song of the bird represents true self yearning for something greater in life.

Example #3: *She Sweeps with Many-Colored Brooms* (By Emily Dickinson)

Personification

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms
And leaves the Shreds behind
Oh Housewife in the Evening West
Come back, and dust the Pond!

Dickinson uses personification of a housewife to describe the sunset in the very first line of this poem. She is using a sweeping housewife who does her daily work, likewise the rays of the [setting](#) sun sweep away beneath the horizon.

Example #4: The Raven (By Edgar Allen Poe)

Alliteration

*Once upon a midnight dreary while I pondered wweak and wweary;
rrare and radiant maiden;
And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain ...
Deepest into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering,
fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream
before.*

Poe uses alliteration by repeating the /w/ sound to emphasize the weariness of the narrator, and then /r/ and /s/ sounds in the second and third lines respectively. In the last two lines, the /d/ sound highlights the narrator's hopelessness.

Example #5: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (By Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

Symbolism

Ah ! well a-day ! what evil looks
Had I from old and young !
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.

In these lines, the albatross symbolizes a big mistake, or a burden of sin, just like the cross on which Christ was crucified. Therefore, all people on the ship agreed to slay that bird.

Example #6: *The Bluest Eyes* (By Toni Morrison)

Personification, Consonance, and Simile

She ran down the street, the green knee socks making her legs look like wild dandelion of stems that had somehow lost their heads. The weight of her remark stunned us.

This excerpt uses different devices that make language figurative. There is a good use of simile, “legs look like wild dandelion;” and personification, “lost their heads;” and use of consonance in “stunned us,” where the /s/ is a consonant sound.

Example #7: *The Week of Diana* (By Maya Angelou)

Metaphor, Consonance, Personification

“The dark lantern of world sadness has cast its shadow upon the land.

We stumble into our misery on leaden feet.”

In just these two lines, Maya Angelou has used a metaphor of the dark lantern, consonance of the /s/ sounds, and personification of misery.

Example #8: *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (By Langston Hughes)

Consonance, Simile

“I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

This prince of the Harlem Renaissance has beautifully used a different type of consonance with the /l/ sound and a simile of “my soul.”

Example #9: *Musée des Beaux Arts* (By W. H. Auden)

Personification, Consonance

That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy W. H. Auden life and the
torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

W. H. Auden has used a personification of the “dreadful martyrdom,” and consonances of “some untidy spot,” with the /s/ sound, and “dogs go on with their doggy life,” with the /d/ and /g/ sounds.

Function of Figurative Language

The primary function of figurative language is to force readers to imagine what a writer wants to express. Figurative language is not meant to convey literal meanings, and often it compares one concept with another in order to make the first concept easier to understand. However, it links the two ideas or concepts with the goal of influencing the [audience](#) to understand the link, even if it does not exist.

Poets and [prose](#) writers use this technique to bring out emotions and help their readers form images in their minds. Thus, figurative language is a useful way of conveying an idea that readers cannot understand otherwise, due to its complex and abstract nature. In addition, it helps in analyzing a literary text.