

Analyze Figurative Language: Metaphor and Simile

Metaphors and similes are both comparisons: They identify similarities between two things that we think of as different. For students, recognizing both the similarities and the differences presents the biggest challenge. The differences are often quite concrete, while the similarities are often very abstract. Readers must analyze both to get at the meaning. If students do not have enough practice analyzing figurative language, they are likely to have trouble comprehending text—especially fiction and poetry, which often rely heavily on figurative language. As students demonstrate understanding, introduce personification, a more sophisticated type of metaphor. Then provide abundant practice interpreting figurative language by discussing varied examples both on and below students’ reading level.

Three Ways to Teach

Share Interpretations of Figurative Language 20–30 minutes

An effective way to help students fully understand a concept is to have them explain it to others. To support students in recognizing and interpreting figurative language, have them work in pairs to find examples of figurative language they can share and interpret for the class.

- Have students read or reread poems and appropriate song lyrics to look for examples of simile, metaphor, and personification.
- Provide copies of **Figurative Language Chart** (page 3) for students to note their findings.

Text and Author	Figurative Language	Two Things Being Compared	Meaning
“Chicago,” by Carl Sandburg	Simile: “Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action”	the city of Chicago, an eager dog	The city is aggressive and intense.
“The Railway Train,” by Emily Dickinson	Personification: “Lick the valleys up”	a train, a tongue	The train covers ground as if it were eating it up.
“Growing in the Vale,” by Christina Rossetti	Metaphor: “Lady Daffadowndilly / In a golden crown”	a daffodil, a crown	A daffodil’s petals are bright yellow, almost gold. They look like a crown sitting on top of the stem.

- Have students share and explain a favorite example with the class. Use questions such as the following to prompt discussion.

- *What two things is the author comparing here?*
- *What are some ways these two things are alike?*
- *What are some ways these two things are different?*
- *How does that help you see _____ in a new way?*

Substitute Literal Meaning 10–15 minutes

Help students understand the power of figurative language by substituting it with the author’s literal meaning and then exploring the difference.

- Select a poem that employs figurative language, such as “Autumn” by Emily Dickinson.
- Display and read the poem, and guide students to interpret and replace the simile or metaphor.

Before

“The maple wears a gayer scarf, /
The field a scarlet gown.”

After

The maple tree has more colorful leaves,
The ground is covered in red leaves.

- Compare Before and After. Discuss the difference in the mood created by the figurative language choice as opposed to the literal words.
- Provide partners with accessible poems for independent practice.

Rewrite Common Similes 30–45 minutes

Connect to Writing Guide students to understand that they can make their writing new and fresh by revising similes that are overused, or cliché.

- Say, *When a simile is used over and over again, it is no longer as vivid or meaningful. But you can think of a fresh, new simile that will have the same meaning.*
- Mention a common simile, such as *quiet as a mouse*. Then model rewriting it.

When we say that a person is as “quiet as a mouse,” we know that the person and the mouse aren’t alike in most ways. They are similar only in this one way—being quiet. But “quiet as a mouse” is overused. So if I want to describe how someone is quiet, what else can I say? What other things are quiet? A student in the middle of a test is quiet. A whisper is soft and quiet. So I could write: “He was as quiet as a student in the middle of a test” or “He was as quiet as a whisper.” That will help readers imagine how quiet this person is more clearly.

- Brainstorm a list of common, overused similes, such as these.

cool as a cucumber

tough as nails

slow as a turtle

good as gold

busy as a bee

fast as a cheetah

- Have students select two or three similes from the list and rewrite them using fresh language.

Check for Understanding

If you observe...	Then try...
difficulty recognizing figurative language without signal words (<i>like</i> or <i>as</i>)	reviewing similar patterns in everyday speech. Use examples such as these: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>My legs were jelly when I climbed the ladder.</i> • <i>We’re in the same boat.</i>

Figurative Language Chart

Title

Text and Author	Figurative Language	Two Things Being Compared	Meaning