

The Three Most Common Types of Figurative Language

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Figurative language is language that is used for descriptive effect, not to be understood in a strict literal sense. Although expressions of figurative language are not actually true, many do express some truth beyond the literal level. Many common, everyday expressions are figurative, and when used imaginatively, this language can add a special dimension of meaning to both speech and writing.

When we call a car a “lemon,” we do not mean it is a citrus fruit, but that its performance is “sour,” or defective. When we hear someone refer to another person as a clown, a brick, a prince, or an angel, we can be sure that the person is none of those things. Instead, we understand that the person shares some quality with those other things. The three most common types of figurative language are metaphors, similes, and personification.

Metaphors

Description. A metaphor is considered one of the most important forms of language, from everyday speech to formal prose and all forms of fiction and poetry. It is a comparison between two unlike things and never uses any special language to establish a comparison.

Examples. When one says, “He was a gem in helping me,” the metaphor lies in comparing a person’s value to that of a gem or jewel. Should one say, “The miser had a heart of flint,” the implication is that he had no capacity of feel emotionally for someone else. The opening stanza of Alfred Noyes’ “The Highwayman” contains a number of metaphors. The road is called “a ribbon of moonlight”; the moon “a ghostly galleon,” and the sky is referred to as “cloudy seas.” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow compares himself to a castle in “The Children’s Hour” and shows his affection for his daughters through the metaphor of imprisonment:

*I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon
In the round tower of my heart.*

Similes

Description. Similes are easier to recognize than metaphors because they do have a special language to set them off. That language is *like, as, as if, than, such as*, and other words that make a clear comparison.

Examples. When Robert Burns says, “My love is like a red, red rose,” he is using a simile. The comparison of “my love” to a rose does not necessarily mean that he loved one is thorny, nor that she lives in a garden, nor that she has a green neck. Rather, it means that “my love” is delicate, fragrant, and beautiful as the flower. Everyday examples of similes include, “He fought like a tiger”; “She was as mad as a hornet”; and “The coach was cooler than a cucumber.”

Personification

Description. Personification is a figure of speech in which an animal, object, or idea is given human form or characteristics.

Examples. William Shakespeare personified the wind in “Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind,” when he addresses it as if it were a person who could act with kindness or unkindness. He also give it teeth and breath.

*Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude.
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen,
Although thy breath be rude.*

A less poetic, yet just as descriptive use of personification can be found in the sentence, “The impatient alarm clock shook me out of bed.”

Authors and speakers use figurative language to make their writing and speech more vivid. Metaphors, similes, and personification describe and compare things in ways that people can better imagine and understand.