

Identifying Hyperbole and Understatement

To add humor to your writing or to focus your readers' attention, use hyperbole or understatement. Hyperbole and understatement are two sides of the same coin: they both use distortion to make a point. **Hyperbole** is a figure of speech that makes something seem bigger or more important than it really is. It uses exaggeration to express strong emotion, emphasize a point, or evoke humor. **Understatement** is language that makes something seem less important than it really is. Look at the following examples.

Hyperbole It rained enough yesterday to float a steel mill.

Understatement You might say Albert Einstein had a good head for numbers.

Like stand-up comics or writers of **satire**—a form of persuasion that uses humor to criticize and change society—you can use hyperbole and understatement to skewer your target, whether it be a social practice or institution, a political plan, or a human quirk. Just don't overuse these strategies, or they will lose their effectiveness.

EXERCISE A Label each item as *hyperbole* or *understatement* in the space provided.

Sample _____ *hyperbole* I've told you a million times not to call me during my favorite show.

1. _____ Sally was a tad annoyed when her brother sneaked a peak at her secret diary.
2. _____ "The weather *is* brisk," Nathan admitted, as the thermometer read minus ten degrees Fahrenheit.
3. _____ That hotel room was so small that even the mice had hunched shoulders.
4. _____ "Oh, I've been known to bang out a chord or two," said the renowned concert pianist.
5. _____ Every word Laurie says is a lie, including "a" and "the."
6. _____ You must admit, Ken isn't the most talented singer in the world.
7. _____ I've wanted to go to France since the beginning of time.
8. _____ Herbert doesn't actually brush his teeth; he just waves a toothbrush near his mouth.
9. _____ How ugly is that shirt? Well, if you paid more than a nickel for it, you were ripped off.
10. _____ Maya was somewhat pleased when she aced the calculus final.

Revising with Style

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EXERCISE B Rewrite each sentence to make it either hyperbolic or understated (your choice). Change words, phrases, or punctuation as needed.

Sample The gardens at Winterthur are beautiful.

Revision *The gardens at Winterthur are the most beautiful things I've ever seen.*
or
The gardens at Winterthur are pleasant enough.

1. I enjoy playing basketball.

2. Dave's sand castle was big.

3. Dennis was thrilled when the Steelers won the Super Bowl.

4. The Marquez family seems to have a lot of money.

5. Jessica isn't getting enough sleep; she fell asleep at the lunch table today.

6. When Amy wore her alligator shoes, she attracted attention.

7. For me, cleaning house is an unpleasant activity.

8. Video games can be time-consuming.

9. People who talk on the phone while they drive do not pay enough attention to the road.

10. Mark was very disappointed about getting a D on the test.

11. Lilacs smell sweet.

12. Books are stacked four feet high around the perimeter of Stephen's room.
