

## Writing Handout L-5: Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a departure from the usual form of expression for the purpose of making the meaning clearer, more forceful, or more beautiful.

Figures of speech are highly effective, for they add vividness, vigor, and beauty to our utterances. Though figures are the ornaments of speech, they should not be used unless they are natural and appropriate and increase the effectiveness of what we have to say. All men, poets and otherwise, constantly employ so-called “figurative language,” the difference being that the best people use images which are original and poetic, while ours are often overworked and commonplace.

The principal figures of speech and *examples* are listed below:

Simile – Direct comparison to unlike things – will almost always use the words “like” or “as”:

- *My daughter dances like an angel.*
- *Wandered lonely as a cloud.* Wordsworth
- *Sally whistled like a bird.*

Metaphor – An implied comparison made between two unlike things that actually have something in common. Among the most common metaphors are those that refer to our senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell.

- *‘Hunka’ hunka’ burnin’ love.’* Elvis Presley
- *An old flame.*
- *Boiling mad*
- *‘I’m so hot for her and she’s so cold.’* The Rolling Stones

Symbol – A symbol is a person, place, or thing comes to represent an abstract idea or concept -- it is anything that stands for something beyond itself. "A symbol is a repeatable concrete **image**, an object, which captures a second level of meaning from a particular experience." (Philip Ellis Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, Indiana University Press, 1962)

- *Scales of justice*
- *Lady liberty*
- *The doves of freedom*
- *The land of the free and the home of the brave.*

Personification – A figure of speech in which an inanimate object or abstraction is endowed with human qualities or abilities.

- *The ocean roared.*
- *The tea kettle screamed out in the kitchen.*
- *The lonely train whistle wailed in the distance.*

Hyperbole – A figure of speech in which exaggeration is used for emphasis or effect; an extravagant statement.

- *These books weigh a ton.*
- *She had millions of Facebook and MySpace friends.*
- *After a long day, the ASC instructor felt at least 158 years old.*

Understatement – A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker deliberately makes a situation seem less important or serious than it is.

- "I have to have this operation. It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain."  
(Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher In The Rye*, by J. D. Salinger)

Onomatopoeia – The formation or use of words that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions to which they refer.

- "I'm getting married in the morning!  
*Ding dong!* the bells are gonna chime."  
(Lerner and Loewe, "Get Me to the Church on 'Time," *My Fair Lady*)
- "One of these days, Alice. *Pow!* Right in the kisser!"  
(Jackie Gleason, *The Honeymooners*)
- "*Plop, plop, fizz, fizz*, oh what a relief it is."  
(slogan of Alka Seltzer, U.S.)

Alliteration – The repetition of an initial consonant sound.

- "*Alliteration lightly links stressed syllables with common consonants.*" (John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason*)
- "*The sibilant sermons of the snake as she discoursed upon the disposition of my sinner's soul seemed ceaseless.*"  
(Gregory Kirschling, *The Gargoyle*, 2008)
- "*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.*"  
(Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*)

Metonymy - A figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated (such as "crown" for "royalty"). Metonymy is also the rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly by referring to things around it, such as describing someone's clothing to characterize the individual.

- *The government says...*
- *The White House asked the public to remain calm during the crisis.*
- *The suits at the large investment firms will finally have their day in court.*

Synecdoche – A figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole, the whole for a part, the specific for the general, the general for the specific, or the material for the thing made from it.

- *Give us this day our daily bread.*
- *She worked two jobs because she had six hungry mouths to feed.*
- *Many hands make light work.*

Oxymoron - A figure of speech in which incongruous or contradictory terms appear side by side.

- "The phrase 'domestic cat' is an **oxymoron**." (George Will)
- the expressions "act naturally," "original copy," "found missing," "alone together," "peace force," "definite possibility," "terribly pleased," "ill health," "turn up missing," "jumbo shrimp," "alone together," "loose tights," "small crowd."