

Figures of Speech

What are Figures of Speech?

Figures of speech are literary devices which are used to express ideas that move beyond their literal meaning.

Functions of Figures of Speech

- They impart beauty to the language by stimulating the **visual**, **aural** and **sensory** appeal of the verses.
- The reader is made to use his imagination to create rich mental pictures.
- They provide freshness of expression and clarity of meaning.
- They can be used in poetic as well as in everyday language.
- Language of speeches and debates can also be enriched with the use of figures of speech.
- In short, figures of speech make the language more colourful, descriptive and interesting.

Types of Figures of Speech

There are more than **200** types of figures of speech in English. In this chapter, we will be covering a few of them.

Simile	Metaphor	Personalisation	Synecdoche
Transferred Epithet	Metonymy	Pun	Euphemism
Tautology	Inversion	Antithesis	Irony
Oxymoron	Paradox	Repetition	Alliteration
Onomatopoeia	Apostrophe	Hyperbole	Understatement
	Climax	Anticlimax	



Simile

- **Simile** is a figure of speech which directly compares two things which may have similar qualities.
- It employs the use of words such as '**like**' or '**as**'.
 - (a) The prisoners languished **like** caged animals. (The prisoners are likened to caged animals.)
 - (b) Manish is **as** thin **as** a reed. (Manish is compared to a reed.)

Popular Examples:

"She entered with ungainly struggle **like** some huge awkward chicken, torn, squawking, out of its coop."

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Three Gables*

"In the eastern sky there was a yellow patch **like** a rug laid for the feet of the coming sun . . ."

—Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*

"O my Luve's **like** a red, red rose

That's newly sprung in June;

O my Luve's **like** the melodie

That's sweetly played in tune."

— Robert Burns, *Red Red Rose*

"The air smelled sharp **as** new-cut wood, slicing low and sly around the angles of buildings."

—Joanne Harris, *Chocolat*

Metaphor

- **Metaphor** is a figure of speech which makes a direct equation between two things which share similar qualities.
- Unlike similes, metaphors do not use words such as 'as' or 'like'.
 - (a) **My old employer was the devil incarnate.** (The old employer is equated with the devil.)
 - (b) **The pen is the tongue of the mind.** (The pen is equated with the tongue.)

Popular Examples:

"All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players"

— Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

"I fall upon the thorns of life."

— P. B. Shelly, *Ode to the West Wind*

"Entangled in the cobweb of the schools."

— William Cowper, *The Task*

We also use various metaphors in our day-to-day language.

Flogging a dead horse – It is a metaphor for a pointless argument which refuses to die.

Why does the boss have to flog the dead horse? I thought the matter is already settled.

Elephant in the room – It is a metaphor for an uncomfortable or unpleasant fact that everyone sees but no one acknowledges for the fear of causing embarrassment or awkwardness.

Mitesh's dismissal from his job is the veritable elephant in the room tonight.

A gift that keeps on giving – It is a metaphor for something will continue to be useful longer than it is intended to be.

Friendship with a good person is a gift that keeps on giving.

Music to my ears – It stands for something which brings joy to the listener.

The fact that my favourite actor has won an award is music to my ears.

Personification

- **Personification** is a figure of speech where human qualities or activities are attributed to animals, non-living things or abstract ideas.
- Through personification, writers and poets offer a fresh perspective to the reader.
- Readers relate to the inanimate as they would relate to humans.
 - (a) The skies **wept**. (The skies are given the human ability to weep.)
 - (b) Your arrogance **betrayed** you today. (Arrogance is said to have the ability to betray.)

Popular Examples:

“When well-apparelled April on the heel
Of limping winter **treads**.”

— Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

“Stormy, husky, **brawling**,
City of the big **shoulders**”

— Carl Sandberg, *Chicago*

“Ah, William, we’re **weary** of weather,
said the sunflowers, shining with dew.”

—William Blake, *Two Sunflowers Move in The Yellow Room*

“O Rose thou are **sick**”

—William Blake, *The Sick Rose*



Synecdoche

- **Synecdoche** is a figure of speech where a part is used to signify the whole.
 - (a) The family has many **mouths** to feed. (The word 'mouth' represents members of the family.)
 - (b) Two **heads** are better than one. (The word 'heads' represents people.)

Popular Examples:

"Blind **mouths**! that scarce themselves know how to hold"

—John Milton, *Lycidas*

"You run about, my little Maid,
Your **limbs** they are alive"

—William Wordsworth, *We are Seven*

"The **hand** that mocked them and the **heart** that fed."

— P. B. Shelly, *Ozymandias*

"The western **wave** was all a-flame."

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

"I should have been a pair of ragged **claws**

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

—T. S. Elliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Transferred Epithet

- **Transferred epithet** is a figure of speech where a quality of one noun is ascribed to another.
- By doing so, the adjective is transferred to a noun to which it does not belong.
 - (a) Phillip's **happy** days are here again. (Phillip is the one who is happy, but the noun '**days**' is ascribed the quality of happiness.)
 - (b) Priti has committed too many **careless** mistakes. (Here, Priti is the one who is careless. But the quality is ascribed to the noun '**mistakes**'.)

Popular Examples:

"The new man wrote a question at which I stared in **wide-eyed amazement**"

— Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

"Lord Ullin reach'd that **fatal shore**"

—Thomas Campbell, *Lord Ullin's Daughter*

"... may be completely destroyed in that second's instant of a **careless match**,"

—William Faulkner, *Golden Land*

"...until it shines, like her own **honest forehead**, with perpetual friction."

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Metonymy

- **Metonymy** is a figure of speech where the name of one thing is used for another because of their close association or recurrent relationship with each other.
- It is not to be confused with synecdoche because the term used to describe another is not a part of it.
 - (a) **Europe** has opened its doors to the immigrants. ('Europe' is the metonymy for European government or the people of Europe.)
 - (b) **The court** has issued a summon. ('The court' is the metonymy for the judge.)

Popular Examples:

"**The pen** is mightier than **the sword**,"

— Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Richelieu*

(The 'pen' stands for the intelligent and educated, while the sword stands for the brawny.)

"as **doublet** and **hose** ought to show itself courageous to **petticoat**"

—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

(The words 'doublet and hose' represent masculinity and 'petticoat' represents 'femininity'.)

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your **ears**"

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

(The word 'ears' represents 'attention'.)

"As he swung toward them holding up the hand

Half in appeal, but half as if to keep

The **life** from spilling."

—Robert Frost, *Out, Out*

(The word 'life' represents blood.)



Pun

- Pun is a figure of speech where multiple meanings of the same word are exploited for poetic or comic effect.
- It imparts a 'double meaning' to the word in a witty manner.
- It exploits both the literal and the figurative meaning of the word.
 - (a) A pessimist's blood type is always **B-negative**.
(It is a play on the word negative because pessimists always have a negative outlook towards life.)
 - (b) An elephant's opinion carries a lot of **weight**. (The word 'weight' stands for the elephant's weight in the literal sense and for its figurative sense.)

Popular Examples:

"winter of our discontent...made glorious summer by this **Son** of York."

—Shakespeare, *Richard III*

(The word 'Son' also puns on its homophone 'Sun' since summer and winter are referenced in the sentence.)

"I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was **Ernest**, didn't I? Well, it is **Ernest** after all. I mean it naturally is **Ernest**."

(The speaker puns on the word 'Earnest'. Along with stating his name, he also wants to emphasise his earnestness.)

—Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

'You see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its **axis**—'

'Talking of **axes**,' said the Duchess, 'chop off her head!'

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

"Not I, believe me. You have dancing shoes with nimble **soles**; I have a **soul** of lead"

(The words 'sole' and 'soul' are homophones.)

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Euphemism

- **Euphemism** is figure of speech where an offensive or a harsh word is substituted with a milder and a less egregious expression.
- By using a euphemism, the writer or the poet makes the unpleasant sound **poetic** and **polite**.
 - (a) The Sharma's dog was put to sleep because it was in a lot of pain.
(The term 'put to sleep' is a less offensive term used instead of 'killed' or 'euthanised'.)
 - (b) Let us offer a prayer in the memory of those **departed**.
(The term 'the departed' is a milder expression used instead of 'the dead'.)

Popular Examples:

"For the time being," he explains, "it had been found necessary to make **a readjustment of rations**."
(The term 'a readjustment of rations' is a milder term for reduction in food supply.)
—George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

"But he could do little for them; and now **he is gone**"
(The phrase 'he is gone' stands for death.)
—Thomas Hardy, *Afterward*

"And will any say when **my bell of quittance** is heard in the gloom"
(The phrase 'my bell of quittance' stands for the death knell or a bell which is rung at the event of a person's death.)
—Thomas Hardy, *Afterward*

"The Migration or Importation of such **Persons** as any of the States...but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each **Person**."
(The term 'Persons' is a milder term used for slaves.)
— Constitution of the United States, Article 1, Section 9

Tautology

- **Tautology** is a figure of speech where the same ideas are repeated using different words.
- Another term for tautology is redundancy.
- It helps in reinforcing the idea in the mind of the reader.
- Tautology is considered faulty in modern writing.
 - (a) Will you please **repeat** the last sentence **again**.
Repeating is an action which happens again. Hence, the term 'again' is unnecessary when the word 'repeat' is use.
 - (b) I was **astonished**, **amazed** and **surprised**.
The words 'astonished', 'amazed' and 'surprised' are synonyms.

Popular Examples:

"Polonious: What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet: **Words, words, words**."
—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

"The stars, O astral bodies!"

—Anonymous

"With malice toward none, with charity for all."

—Abraham Lincoln

Inversion

- **Inversion** is a figure of speech where the order of the words in the sentence is jumbled for poetic effect.
- Through inversion, the writer uses poetic liberty to make the sentence sound more pleasing.
- Sometimes, the writer may employ inversion to make the line rhyme with the previous one.
The sun shines and the birds **tweet**,
Sing the womenfolk their songs **sweet**.
(a) Powerful you have become; the dark side I sense in you.
The order of the sentence has been changed. The correct order is 'You have become powerful; I sense the dark side in you'.
(b) Through vales and dales, blows gently the wind.
The correct order of the sentence is 'Through vales and dales, the wind blows gently'.

Popular Examples:

"There was a ship," quoth he.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

"This is the forest primaeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks"

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline*

"How many pictures of one Nymph we view, All how unlike each other, all how true!"

—Alexander Pope, *Epistle to a Lady*

Antithesis

- Antithesis is a figure of speech where opposite ideas are brought together in a sentence for poetic effect.
 - (a) He toiled all **day** and he slept all **night**.
(Contrasting words 'day' and 'night' are brought together.)
 - (b) Madhu is **disciplined** in her professional life but **disorganised** in her personal life.
(Contrasting words 'disciplined' and 'disorganised' are brought together.)

Popular Examples:

"**Love** is an **ideal** thing; **marriage** is a **real** thing."

—Goethe

"That's **one small step** for man, **one giant leap** for mankind."

—Neil Armstrong

"We must learn to **live** together as brothers or **perish** together as fools."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Give every man thy **ear**, but few thy **voice**."

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

"It was the **best** of times, it was the **worst** of times, it was the age of **wisdom**, it was the age of **foolishness**, it was the epoch of **belief**, it was the epoch of **incredulity**, it was the season of **Light**, it was the season of **Darkness**, it was the **spring** of **hope**, it was the **winter** of **despair**, we had **everything** before us, we had **nothing** before us, we were all going direct to **Heaven**, we were all going **direct the other way**."

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Irony

- Verbal irony** is a figure of speech where the speaker says the exact opposite of what he or she intends.
- Some writers employ verbal irony to indirectly criticise or to taunt.
- Dramatic irony** is a figure of speech where the spectator or the reader knows more about the outcome of the story than the character in a film, novel or play.
- Situational irony** is where there is a deviance from what is usually expected from the situation.
 - (a) **Suresh is the busiest man I know. Between gambling and sleeping, he barely finds time for work.**
(By saying he barely finds time to work, the writer intends to criticise Suresh who is whiling away his time sleeping and gambling.)
 - (b) **The most discreet person in the office is Shalini who cannot help discussing sordid details of her private life with anyone who comes her way.**
(By calling her 'The most discreet person', the speaker goes on to narrate Shalini's indiscretion.)

Popular Examples:

“Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.”

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

In Sophocles’ ‘Oedipus Rex’, the King ventures out to find the murderer of King Laius without realising he himself is the murderer.

Oxymoron

- Oxymoron is a figure of speech where two contrasting words are conjoined.
- This conjoining of contrasting words may seem ridiculous if literally interpreted, but it may be meaningful if it is figuratively understood.
 - (a) **Seriously joking** – The words ‘joking’ and ‘serious’ are contrasting, but they are brought together to mean that someone was actually joking.
 - (b) **Bittersweet** – The word is made of contrasting adjectives ‘bitter’ and ‘sweet’. Both are conjoined to refer to a taste which is both bitter and sweet.

Popular Examples:

O **heavy lightness!** **Serious vanity!**

Mis-shapen chaos of **well-seeming** forms!

Feather of lead, **bright smoke**, **cold fire**, **sick health**

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

“I am a **deeply superficial** person.”

—Andy Warhol

“Why then, O brawling love, O **loving hate**”

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

“And lined the train with faces **grimly gay**”

—Wilfred Owen, *The Send-Off*

“And **faith unfaithful** kept him **falsely true**.”

—Alfred Tennyson

“**conventionally unconventional**, suggesting a “**tortuous* spontaneity**”

—Henry James, *The Lesson of the Master*

*tortuous – full of twists and turns

Paradox

- Paradox is a statement or a general truth which may sound absurd or illogical, but on deeper analysis, it may make complete sense.
- Paradox is similar to oxymoron because both yoke together contrasting ideas.
- But the former stands for a rule or a truth which is rooted in reality.

(a) When it comes to speaking, less is more.

(The statement 'less is more' sounds absurd. If one were to analyse it, it means brevity of speech can accomplish more than verbosity.)

(b) Child is the father of man.

(The statement sounds illogical if one were to interpret it literally. Figuratively, it means that childhood is an important stage where man imbibes qualities which will become synonymous with his personality in adulthood.)

Popular Examples:

"All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others"

—George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

"I can resist anything but temptation."

—Oscar Wilde

"To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up."

—Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

"The swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot."

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

"War is peace."

"Freedom is slavery."

"Ignorance is strength."

—George Orwell, *1984*

Repetition

- **Repetition** is a figure of speech where a word or a phrase within a sentence is repeated.
- It is done for poetic effect or for emphasis.
- It is a very commonly used figure of speech.

(a) I searched and searched and searched.

(The act of searching is highlighted and emphasised.)

(b) He came, He saw, He conquered.

(The pronoun 'He' is repeated thrice for emphasis.)

Popular Examples:

"I'm nobody! Who are you?

Are you nobody too?"

—Emily Dickinson, *I'm Nobody! Who are You?*

"If you think you can win, you can win."

—William Hazlitt

"Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn..."

—T. S. Elliot, *Ash-Wednesday*

"To the swinging and the ringing

of the bells, bells, bells-

Of the bells, bells, bells, bells

Bells, bells, bells-"

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Bells*

"And my father sold me, while yet my tongue

Could scarcely cry "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"

—William Blake, *The Chimney Sweeper*



Alliteration

- Alliteration is the repetition of sound of words which are in a sequence or which are close to each other.
- It is the repetition of the sound of the consonants in the words.
- It makes the lines sound lyrical and rhythmic.
- Alliteration also renders a pleasing flow to the verses.

(a) Susie suddenly sounds serious on the phone.

(The consonant sound 's' is repeated for a pleasing effect.)

(b) Pitter patter of petite feet

(The consonant sound 'p' is repeated for a pleasing effect.)

Popular Examples:

"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought"

—Shakespeare, *Sonnet 30*

"Once upon a midnight dreary while I pondered weak and weary"

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*

"When loosed and missioned, making wings of winds"

—P. B. Shelly, *The Witch of Atlas*

"The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,

The furrow followed free;

We were the first that ever burst

Into that silent sea."

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

"And while the world laughed outside.

Cloony the Clown sat down and cried."

— Shel Silverstein, *Clooney the Clown*

Onomatopoeia

- Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech where words resembling their actual sounds are used.
- Noises made by humans, animals, objects and natural phenomena constitute onomatopoeia.
- Like alliteration, onomatopoeia imparts a lyrical quality to the sentences or verses.

(a) The audible purr of the kitten

The word 'purr' is onomatopoeic sound because it resembles the actual purring sound made by kittens.

(b) The battleground resonated with the clanking of the swords.

The word 'clanking' resembles the sound of metal instruments clashing.

Popular Examples:

"Yet the ear it fully knows,
By the twanging
And the clanging"

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Bells*

"And murmuring of innumerable bees..."

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Come Down, O Maid*

"But just the clatter of their bones, / Rolling, rattling carefree circus"

—Ogden Nash, *Fossils*



Apostrophe

- Apostrophe is a direct address to an absent person or a non-living thing.
- The character detaches himself or herself from reality and evokes the thing or the person.

(a) **Hello darkness my old friend.**

(Here the word 'darkness' is addressed as if it were a real person.)

(b) **Dear God. Are you listening?**

(The person is addressing God directly.)

Popular Examples:

"Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand?
Come, let me clutch thee!
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still."
—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

"“Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so”
—John Donne, *Death Be Not Proud*

"O holy virgin! clad in purest white,
Unlock heav'n's golden gates, and issue forth"
—William Blake, *To Morning*

"Oh! Stars and clouds and winds, ye are all about to mock me"
—Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein*

"“O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters."
—Hilda Doolittle, *Heat*

Hyperbole

- Hyperbole is a figure of speech where a statement is exaggerated for a dramatic effect.
- Another name for hyperbole is overstatement.

(a) She has been warned thousands of times before.

(A dramatic is added to the sentence by exaggerating the number of times she has been warned.)

(b) Her awful singing voice made my ears bleed.

(By saying 'my ears bleed', the speaker aims to dramatically highlight the fact that the person concerned had an awful voice.)

Popular Examples:

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you / Till China and Africa meet, / And the river jumps over the mountain / And the salmon sing in the street."

—W.H. Auden, *As I Walked Out One Evening*

"So first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

—Franklin Roosevelt

"At that time Bogota was a remote, lugubrious city where an insomniac rain had been falling since the beginning of the 16th century."

—Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*

"Here once the embattled farmers stood / And fired the shot heard round the world."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Understatement

- Understatement is the opposite of hyperbole.
- It is a figure of speech where the significance of something is downplayed or minimised.
- In other words, something is deliberately projected in a less important manner.
- By doing so, the writer accentuates the idea he wishes to deliver to the reader.
- Other figures of speech such as irony and sarcasm are highlighted through understatement.

(a) The terrorist attacks in the city spoiled the weekend plans of many a citizen.

(The terrorist attacks are projected as a minor impediment which only ruined the weekend plans of the citizens. By doing so, the writer intends to highlight the irony.)

(b) Weighing around a quintal, he is not exactly the thinnest person in the world.

(A person who weighs a quintal will be a morbidly obese person let alone the thinnest person in the world. The writer wishes to capture the attention of the reader by understating the person's obesity.)

Popular Examples:

"I have to have this operation. It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumour on the brain."

—J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

"I've got a nice place here," he said, his eyes flashing about restlessly. Turning me around by one arm, he moved a broad flat hand along the front vista, including in its sweep a sunken Italian garden, a half acre of deep, pungent roses, and a snub-nosed motor-boat that bumped the tide offshore"

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Climax

- Climax is a figure of speech where the actions start moving in the ascending order of importance.
 - (a) **He came, he saw, he conquered.**
(The actions of the person become more intense.)
 - (b) **The cat crouched on all fours, locked its target, pounced high and struck its target down in a swift move.**
(The actions of the cat are arranged in the ascending order of importance.)

Popular Examples:

"...Lost, vaded, broken, dead within an hour."

—Shakespeare, *The Passionate Pilgrim*

"Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird... it's a plane... it's Superman!"

—*The Adventures of Superman*

"Let a man acknowledge his obligations to himself, his family, his country, and his God."

—George Washington

"My brother, my captain, my king."

—J. R. R. Tolkien

Anticlimax

- Anticlimax is a figure of speech where the events or ideas in the sentence are arranged in the descending order of importance.
- The purpose of anticlimax is to first arouse the interest of the reader and then to create a trivial or an unimpressive conclusion.
 - (a) **I thought the chest contained gold coins, trinkets or jewels, but to our dismay, it was filled with rocks.**
(The writer enumerates valuables as the possible contents of the chest, but ultimately reveals that it was filled with rocks. There is an initial build-up of excitement after which there comes a fall.)
 - (b) The much-hyped event which everyone was waiting for turned out to be a boring affair with the turnout as less as 50 people.
(Here, the writer starts by describing the event as 'much-hyped' and later calls it a 'boring affair' in an anti-climatic manner.)

Popular Examples:

"Here thou, great Anna, whom three realms obey,
Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea."

—Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

"And as I'm sinkin' The last thing that I think is, did I pay my rent?"

—Jim O'Rourke, *Ghost Ship in a Storm*

"In moments of crisis I size up the situation in a flash, set my teeth, contract my muscles, take a firm grip on myself and without a tremor, always do the wrong thing."

—George Bernard Shaw

Uses of Figures of Speech

- Figures of speech lend freshness to literature by departing from the usage of plain words.
- They spur the reader to use their imaginative powers.
- They appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of the reader.
- They help the writers express themselves in a variety of ways.
- Without figures of speech, works of literature such as poems, drama, novels and speeches may sound monotonous and uninteresting.