

The Most Common Figures of Speech — adapted from about.com except where otherwise noted

Alliteration. The repetition of an initial consonant sound. (“*deep dark dungeon*”)

Anaphora. The repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases. (“**Blessed are** the poor in spirit ... **Blessed are** they that mourn ... **Blessed are** the meek ...” – Matt. 5:3-5.) Opposite of **epiphora**, where the repetition is at the *end* of the phrases.

Antithesis. The juxtaposition of contrasting ideas in balanced phrases. (“That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” – Armstrong)

Apostrophe. Breaking off discourse to address some absent person or thing, some abstract quality, an inanimate object, or a nonexistent character. (“Why, you little brat, I’d like to — O Patience! Stop my hand!”)

Assonance. Identity or similarity in sound between internal vowels in neighboring words. (“Come on baby, *light* my fire.” – The Doors)

Chiasmus. A verbal pattern in which the second half of an expression is balanced against the first but with the parts reversed. (“Go for it! The people who matter won’t mind, and the people who mind don’t matter.” – Anon.)

Euphemism. The substitution of a polite term for one considered offensively explicit. (“He’s been known to take liberties with the truth.”)

Figurative language (figures of speech, figures). Language that expresses something more, less, or different from its ordinary meaning. “Language which departs from the standard construction, order, and significance of words in order to achieve special meaning or effect” (Abrams). (Examples are all over this page.)

Hyperbole. An extravagant statement; the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect. (“My whole life is on my phone!”)

Irony. (1) *situational*: A situation where an expectation is contradicted by actual outcome, but in a meaningful way. (from *West Side Story*: “A boy who kills cannot love. / A boy who kills has no heart. / And *he’s* the boy who gets your love / and gets your heart!” – Sondheim ... continued ↓)
(2) *verbal*: Words whose intended meaning is the opposite of their literal meaning. (continued from above: “Very *smart*, Maria, very *smart*!” – Sondheim)

(3) *dramatic*: when the audience knows something the characters don’t. (See cartoon above. ↑)



Litotes. An understatement which expresses an affirmative by negating its opposite; aka “ironic understatement.” (“That’s no ordinary rabbit!” Monty Python)

Metaphor. An *implied* comparison between two unlike ideas that actually share certain qualities. (“ironing out a problem”) Cf. **simile**, below.

Metonymy. One word or phrase is substituted for another with which it’s closely associated; also, the rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly by referring to things around it. (“The *pen* is mightier than the *sword*.”)

Onomatopoeia. Words that imitate the sounds associated with what they refer to. (“That car is a *clunker*.”)

Oxymoron. Incongruous or contradictory terms appearing side by side. (*wise fool, open secret, rolling stop*)

Paradox. A statement that appears to contradict itself. (“Youth [is] wasted on children.” – Shaw)

Personification. An inanimate object or abstraction is endowed with human qualities or abilities. (“The sky frowned on our picnic.”)

Pun. A play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word (“Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana” – Oettinger) and sometimes on the similar sense or sound of different words (“Throwing a chicken is poultry in motion”).

Simile. A *stated* comparison (usually formed with “like” or “as”) between two unlike ideas that actually share certain qualities. (“She sings like a bird!”) Cf. **metaphor**, above.

Synecdoche. A part is used to represent the whole (“Say your ABCs”) or the whole for a part (“England wins the World Cup”).

Understatement. The writer or speaker deliberately makes a situation seem less important or serious than it is.

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