

Which of the following statements at the start of an essay would draw you in?

I enjoy watching movies.

Watching movies allows me to get lost in the canyons of time.

The second one is a lot more enticing, right? The first sentence consists of plain, ordinary language while the second is unique and vivid because it contains figurative language. Such language “paints a picture for readers” and allows them to better visualize what’s depicted or gain a deeper understanding of what’s being conveyed. In the above example, readers know the writer spends a lot of time watching movies. However, the writer does not actually “get lost in the canyons of time.” Figurative language is not meant to be taken literally. For example, “He is as strong as steel” conveys that he is powerful and strong, yet no human could equal the strength of steel. Even though figurative language is not factually true, it helps writers re-create an experience for readers, describe something vividly, or express a thought that literal language could never convey.

There are many kinds of figurative language, most of which are explained below. Often, these figurative language techniques are used in combination. For example, a metaphor could also contain antithesis, repetition, and parallelism. For that reason, sometimes it’s hard to identify the exact technique(s) being used. Your ability to identify the exact technique is not crucial; what is crucial is that you can use these techniques in your own writing to add some “pizz-azz.”

As you do so, avoid clichés, those common and often-repeated expressions that we Americans use, such as “He’s one in a million!” or “She wears her heart on her sleeve.” While a cliché now and again might be the clearest, most concise, and most natural way to express a thought (e.g. “She’s as quick as a whip!”), an abundance of them will detract from your writing and certainly will not have the impact on your readers that you desire.

### SIMILE

(a comparison using *like* or *as* between two seemingly dissimilar things)

- ❖ His heart was as soft as cotton balls.
- ❖ She melted like a marshmallow into his outstretched arms.
- ❖ My uncle is as faithful as the rising sun.
- ❖ Like the Twin Towers, my mother stands tall. (also contains an allusion)

A simile must compare two things that are radically different from one another – as shown in the above examples. For that reason, “She plays like a child” and “My grandpa was like a helicopter hovering over our family” are not similes – at least not effective ones.

Be careful with *like* or *as*. Because each serves as different parts of speech, just because you see *like* or *as* does not mean that there is a simile. For example, “I like M & M’s” is not comparing anything; *like* is a verb in this example, and nothing is being compared. Or, “My mom is more like a best friend than a mom” is a factual statement and is not comparing two dissimilar things; therefore, it is not a simile. “He smiles at her as if he knows his smile can change her mind” and “I smiled as I took my first bite of the king-sized Snickers bar” are also not similes. Any time *as* does not communicate a comparison, it is not creating a simile.

On occasion, a simile may not contain *like* or *as*. An example would be when Mater in the movie *Cars* says, “I’m happier than a tornado in a trailer park.” (His happiness is being compared to a tornado wiping out a trailer park.)

Many similes, such as *happy as a lark* or *busy as a bee*, are clichés, so try to create original, unique similes for the best effect.

## METAPHOR

(a comparison between two seemingly dissimilar things without the use of *like* or *as*)

A metaphor can be as brief as two words, so a metaphor can appear within a sentence or be a single sentence. A metaphor can even extend several sentences, often referred to as an analogy or an extended metaphor. Here are some examples of “brief” metaphors:

- ❖ sea of grief (Grief is being compared to troubled waters.)
- ❖ mountain of sin (Sin is being compared to a large mountain.)
- ❖ tidal wave of tears (Tears are being compared to a large body of water, or the rush of tears is being compared to the power of a tidal wave.)
- ❖ My mother was the spoonful of sugar that sweetened life’s bitter medicine. (A mother is being compared to the sweetness of sugar. Or, a mother is being compared to sweetness than can overcome bitterness.)
- ❖ Some crayons are sharp, some are pretty, some have weird names, and they are all different color. But, they all have to learn to live in the same box.” (Crayons are being compared to people – who, despite differences, must try to get along.)

A metaphor must compare two things that are radically different from one another – as shown in the above examples. For that reason, “My eight-year-old nephew has the heart of a child” and “My grandpa is my father” are not metaphors.

Also be aware that using the word “is” does not automatically create a metaphor. “She is the personification of generosity” or “Uncle John is a doer.” These are just facts about a person, not comparisons.

Like similes, metaphors that are clichés should be avoided:

- ❖ John is a night owl.
- ❖ My grandmother is the glue that held our family together.
- ❖ Life is a journey.

### ANTITHESIS

(an exact opposite OR the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas)

- ❖ I have never saved a book, but books have saved me.
- ❖ He didn't speak many words, but the words he spoke, spoke volumes.
- ❖ Time has not turned out to be my enemy, but my friend. (This may be a little cliché.)
- ❖ My mother didn't find love; love found her.
- ❖ "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." (John F. Kennedy)
- ❖ "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." (John F. Kennedy)
- ❖ "If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail." (Benjamin Franklin)
- ❖ "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." (Vince Lombardi)

As the above examples show, antithesis almost always involves the use of parallelism.

To write antitheses, fill in the "this" and the "that" in this phrase with words of your own: "It wasn't this, but it was that." Now try using some of the same words in both phrases: "My grandfather always spoke plainly. He didn't speak words of love, but there was love in his words." Or, try using words that are directly opposite in both phrases: "My education in school had ended. But, my education in life had just begun."

### PARALLELISM

(words, phrases, or sentences that start with the same part of speech)

From writing thesis statements and from every day communications, you are already familiar with parallelism. We use parallelism each time we express a list, such as "I have to go to class, pay my Financial Aid bill, and meet with my doctor" as well as "I rushed into the grocery store to buy bread, milk, and pizza." These examples do not contain literary devices, however.

But, parallelism can create a literary devices if it adds emphasis to a thought:

- ❖ Our mission is to right wrong, to do justice, and to serve humanity.
- ❖ We are refreshed, we are renewed, and we are restored. (with alliteration)
- ❖ The task is heavy, the toil is long, and the trials will be severe. (with alliteration)

This technique is often used in conjunction with antithesis and/or repetition. Parallelism can be in the same sentence, in consecutive sentences, or interspersed throughout a document. Even Roman numerals on an outline could (and should) be parallel:

- I. She is the funniest woman I know.
- II. She is the wisest woman I know.
- III. She is the most generous woman I know.

### REPETITION

(uses the same words and/or groups of words within a sentence or passage)

While much like parallelism – and often used in conjunction with parallelism – repetition’s distinguishing feature is that it repeats the same word(s) to emphasize and/or add rhythm to an idea. Notice the highlighted words – the repeated words – in the following examples:

- ❖ He was an honest man. He was a kind man. He was a wise man. (with parallelism)
- ❖ She laughed with us. She cried with us. She prayed with us. She became part of our family. (with parallelism)
- ❖ Did she ever accuse me? No. Did she ever doubt me? No. Did she ever give up on me? No. (with parallelism)
- ❖ “If not now, when? If not us, who? If not together, how?” (Gordon Brown, United Kingdom Prime Minister) (with parallelism)
- ❖ “We do not give up. We do not quit. We do not allow fear or division to break our spirit.” (Barack Obama) (with parallelism)

### IRONY

(words that express a meaning that is opposite of the intended meaning)

His explanation was as clear as mud. (This also contains a simile, but it is ironic since mud is far from clear.)

### OXYMORON

(seemingly contradictory phrase)

- ❖ honest politician
- ❖ friendly divorce
- ❖ gentle giant
- ❖ organized chaos
- ❖ prepared impromptu

### PERSONIFICATION

(giving human characteristics to objects and non-humans)

- :
- ❖ angry sea
- ❖ blind justice
- ❖ The car spewed its last smoky breath and died by the side of the road.
- ❖ The page stared back at me, taunting me with its big words.
- ❖ The door groaned as it swung open. (also contains onomatopoeia)

### ALLITERATION

(the initial consonant sounds are the same in a group of words)

- ❖ “Nothing great is accomplished without cooperation, compromise, and common cause.” (Ban Ki-moon, United Nations General Secretary) (with parallelism)
- ❖ Live well, laugh often, and love much! (with parallelism)
- ❖ My sister can be described in three words: boisterous, believable, and beautiful – inside and out! (with parallelism)

For alliteration to be effective, the wording needs to attract attention to those words. For example, I had “many more miles” to travel is alliteration, but no listener would even detect that alliteration had been used. So, that’s why parallelism and/or repetition often accompany alliteration.

### ONOMATOPOEIA

(words that sound like the object or idea they are trying to convey)

EXAMPLES: *bang, buzz, cackle, clatter, groan, hiss, murmur, sizzle, twitter, zoom, etc.*

### RHETORICAL QUESTION

(a question that is not meant to be answered, but forces listeners to think and respond inwardly)

Here are some examples:

- ❖ “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)
- ❖ Like Mariano, we must take an active part in life. Without involvement, are we truly living?
- ❖ Who wouldn’t want to be around someone with Sam’s childlike awe of life?

### HYPERBOLE

(an extreme exaggeration)

- ❖ He ran like greased lightning. (with a simile)
- ❖ She is as dumb as a doorknob on a bathtub. (with a simile)
- ❖ I could watch that movie a million times.
- ❖ Sam could smell the popcorn from five miles away.
- ❖ The smile on his face is as big as the full moon. (with a simile)
- ❖ My grandmother has a heart the size of a watermelon.
- ❖ My mother could even make Mona Lisa laugh! (with an allusion)

Many hyperboles, such as *I could eat a horse*, *Time stood still* (with personification), or *I have a ton of homework*, are clichés. So, avoid them!

Pun  
(a play on words)

- ❖ John didn't understand fractions, so his math teacher summed up fractions for him.
- ❖ Sam is not a big fan of archery since it has many drawbacks.
- ❖ Winter is snow much fun!

ALLUSION  
(a reference to a famous person, place, event, art work, song, character, etc.)

- ❖ Unlike all the Muggles in the world, he is open to all the possibilities that life offers. (a reference to the Harry Potter series)
- ❖ She is as feisty as Pippi Longstocking. (a reference to a fictional character as well as a simile)
- ❖ He is the Goliath of charm. (a reference to the Bible and a metaphor)
- ❖ My mom is our in-house Dr. Phil. (a reference to a current popular psychologist as well as a metaphor)

The one danger of using an allusion is that your listeners may not know what the allusion is referring to. For example, would all listeners know what is meant by "When I was growing up, my sister was the Dennis the Menace of our neighborhood"?