Figurative Language

0:00 **Owl:** Welcome to Figurative Language, an instructional video on reading comprehension brought to you by the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab.

0:10 Sometimes authors use language to mean something other than its literal definition.

0:15 This type of language is called figurative language.

0:18 Figurative language is non-literal language that needs to be interpreted in order to understand what the author is trying to say.

0:25 Often, it is used to make comparisons or paint a picture in the reader’s mind.

0:31 Figurative language is frequently used in literature.

0:34 For instance, in the classic novel *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, Melville introduces the infamous Captain Ahab by comparing him to a man who has been burnt at the stake.

0:45 “He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness....”

0:59 Of course, Ahab wasn’t literally burnt at the stake!

1:02 The point is that his grim and wasted appearance resembles someone who has.

1:07 Melville is trying to paint a picture of Ahab by making this comparison.

1:11 This technique is called simile.

1:13 A simile is the comparison of two different things using “like” or “as.”

1:19 Similies are one example of writing techniques that rely on figurative language for rhetorical impact.

1:25 We call these techniques figures of speech.

1:29 A figure of speech is a word or phrase that has a different meaning from its literal meaning.

1:34 To help you identify and interpret figurative language, we’ll go over a dozen of the most common figures of speech in alphabetical order.

1:46 An allegory is a story or picture that has a hidden meaning, usually a political or moral one.

1:53 One example is Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from *The Republic*.

1:57 In this text, Plato describes the process of becoming educated by comparing it to a situation in which a person escapes from a dark cave, which represents ignorance and illusion, and enters the light of day, which represents truth and reason.

2:13 A euphemism is a mild, indirect, or pleasant word or phrase used in place of words that are unpleasant or offensive.

2:22 An example is “Letting someone go” instead of “firing someone.”

2:29 An hyperbole is an exaggerated statement or claim not intended to be taken literally.

2:35 An example of hyperbole is the statement, “I told you a million times not to leave your dirty socks on the floor!”

2:42 There are three types of irony.
One type is verbal irony, which is the use of words to mean the opposite of their literal meaning.

An example of verbal irony is the sarcastic statement, “That cake is as moist as paper!”

Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony.

Another type of irony is situational irony, which refers to the difference between what is expected to happen and what actually happens.

Situational irony occurs when a fire station burns down or a police station gets robbed.

Because fire stations are built to prevent fires, and police stations are built to prevent robberies, it’s ironic to see a fire station burn down and a police station get robbed.

Finally, there is dramatic irony.

This occurs when the audience is more aware of what is happening than a character.

For example, in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” the characters believe the recently bereaved wife is crying tears of sorrow because of the loss of her husband.

However, the audience knows that she is crying tears of joy because she is now free from her husband.

A metaphor is a comparison between two things that are unrelated but share common characteristics.

For example, the statement “Your voice is music to my ears” implies that the person’s voice is as pleasant as a song.

William Shakespeare’s poem “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day” is an example of an extended metaphor in which the narrator compares his beloved to a summer’s day.

Onomatopoeia refers to words that sound like the things they mean.

Examples include: bang, bark, clang, click, cuckoo, meow, moo, sizzle, tweet, and whiz.

An oxymoron is a phrase in which two words with opposite meanings appear side by side.

Examples include: act naturally, bib baby, deafening silence, jumbo shrimp, original copy, pretty ugly, and random order.

Personification is the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects.

For example, the statement “the daffodils danced and frolicked in the breeze” gives inanimate flowers the human qualities of dancing and frolicking.

A pun is a play on words that exploits the different possible meanings of a word or the fact that it sounds like another word.

The statement, “A boiled egg every morning is hard to beat,” plays on the two meanings of the phrase “hard to beat.”

Taken literally, it means that boiled eggs are literally hard to beat with a whisk.

However, taken figuratively, it means that boiled eggs are a very good breakfast option with few rivals.

In the second example, the statement, “The clown held open the door for the other passengers. It was a nice jester,” exploits the fact that the word “jester” sounds just like the word “gesture.”
A simile is like a metaphor, only it uses the words “like” or “as” to make the comparison more direct.

Examples of simile are: “my love is like a red, red rose” and “she was busy as a bee.”

Symbolism is the use of an object, person, place, or event to represent something other than its literal meaning.

Examples include:

- A dove is a symbol for peace.
- A rose is a symbol for love.
- A torch is a symbol for knowledge.
- A broken chain is a symbol for freedom from tyranny.

An example of symbolism in literature is Shakespeare’s famous monologue in As You Like It in which he compares the world to a stage where people are the actors and they play various roles throughout their lives.

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,”

– William Shakespeare, As You Like It

An understatement is a manner of presenting something as being smaller, less serious, or less important than it actually is.

For example, a person totals his car in a wreck and tells his friend it was “just a scratch.”

Interpreting figurative language, such as figures of speech, might seem difficult at first. But learning them and even practicing them yourself in conversation and writing will help you improve your reading comprehension by teaching you the difference between literal and figurative language.

To recap, literal language is language that literally means what it says, whereas figurative language, such as figures of speech, is language that is non-literal and needs to be interpreted.

By keeping this lesson in mind, as the saying goes, you’ll be as wise as an owl!

Thanks for listening to this instructional video on Figurative Language!

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