

## **Figures of Speech**

A figure of speech is a rhetorical device that achieves a special effect by using words in a distinctive way. Though there are hundreds of figures of speech, here we'll focus on 20 top examples.

You'll probably remember many of these terms from your English classes. Figurative language is often associated with literature and with poetry in particular. Whether we're conscious of it or not, we use figures of speech every day in our own writing and conversations.

For example, common expressions such as "falling in love," "racking our brains," and "climbing the ladder of success" are all metaphors—the most pervasive figure of all. Likewise, we rely on similes when making explicit comparisons ("light as a feather") and hyperbole to emphasize a point ("I'm starving!").

### **Did You Know?**

Figures of speech are also known as *figures of rhetoric*, *figures of style*, *rhetorical figures*, *figurative language*, and *schemes*.

## Top 20 Figures of Speech

Using original figures of speech in our writing is a way to convey meanings in fresh, unexpected ways. Figures can help our readers understand and stay interested in what we have to say.

1. Alliteration: The repetition of an initial consonant sound.

**Example:** She sells seashells by the seashore.

2. Anaphora: The repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or verses.

**Example:** Unfortunately, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time on the wrong day.

3. Antithesis: The juxtaposition of contrasting ideas in balanced phrases.

**Example:** As Abraham Lincoln said, "Folks who have no vices have very few virtues."

4. Apostrophe: Directly addressing a nonexistent person or an inanimate object as though it were a living being.

**Example:** "Oh, you stupid car, you never work when I need you to," Bert sighed.

5. Assonance: Identity or similarity in sound between internal vowels in neighboring words.

**Example:** How now, brown cow?

6. Chiasmus: A verbal pattern in which the second half of an expression is balanced against the first but with the parts reversed.

**Example:** The famous chef said people should live to eat, not eat to live.

7. Euphemism: The substitution of an inoffensive term for one considered offensively explicit.

**Example:** "We're teaching our toddler how to go potty," Bob said.

8. Hyperbole: An extravagant statement; the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect.

**Example:** I have a ton of things to do when I get home.

9. Irony: The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning. Also, a statement or situation where the meaning is contradicted by the appearance or presentation of the idea.

**Example:** "Oh, I love spending big bucks," said my dad, a notorious penny pincher.

10. Litotes: A figure of speech consisting of an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite.

**Example:** A million dollars is no small chunk of change.

11. Metaphor: An implied comparison between two dissimilar things that have something in common.

**Example:** "All the world's a stage."

12. Metonymy: A figure of speech in a 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.

**Example:** "That stuffed suit with the briefcase is a poor excuse for a salesman," the manager said angrily.

13. Onomatopoeia: The use of words that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to.

**Example:** The clap of thunder went bang and scared my poor dog.

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

**Example:** "He popped the jumbo shrimp in his mouth."

15. Paradox: A statement that appears to contradict itself.

**Example:** "This is the beginning of the end," said Eeyore, always the pessimist.

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

**Example:** That kitchen knife will take a bite out of your hand if you don't handle it safely.

17. Pun: A play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word and sometimes on the similar sense or sound of different words.

**Example:** Jessie looked up from her breakfast and said, "A boiled egg every morning is hard to beat."

18. Simile: A stated comparison (usually formed with "like" or "as") between two fundamentally dissimilar things that have certain qualities in common.

**Example:** Roberto was white as a sheet after he walked out of the horror movie.

19. Synecdoche: A figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole.

**Example:** Tina is learning her ABC's in preschool.

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

**Example:** "You could say Babe Ruth was a decent ballplayer," the reporter said with a wink.