

Figures of Speech

A figure is worth a thousand words
(A picture is worth a thousand words)

Figurative language:
One meaning of "figure" is "drawing" or "image" or "picture". Figurative language creates figures (pictures) in the mind of the reader or listener. These pictures help convey the meaning faster and more vividly than words alone.

③ We use figures of speech in "figurative language" to add colour and interest, and to awaken the imagination. Figurative language is everywhere, from classical works like Shakespeare or the Bible, to everyday speech, pop music and television commercials. It makes the reader or listener use their imagination and understand much more than the plain words.

③ Figurative language is the opposite of literal language. Literal language means exactly what it says. Figurative language means something different to (and usually more than) what it says on the surface:

- He ran fast. (literal)
- He ran like the wind. (figurative)

③ In the above example "like the wind" is a figure of speech (in this case, a simile). It is important to recognize the difference between literal and figurative language. There are many figures of speech that are commonly used and which you can learn by heart. At other times, writers and speakers may invent their own figures of speech. If you do not recognize them as figures of speech and think that they are literal, you will find it difficult to understand the language.

③ Four common types of figure of speech:

- Simile
- Metaphor
- Hyperbole
- Oxymoron

✈ Simile

'It's been a hard day's night,
and I've been working like a dog" ~ The Beatles

A **simile** is a figure of speech that says that one thing is like another different thing. We can use similes to make descriptions more emphatic or vivid. [C, U] (technical) a word or phrase that compares sth to sth else, using the words like or as, for example a face like a mask or as white as snow; the use of such words and phrases. [sự so sánh, ví von]

We often use the words **as...as** and **like** with similes.

Common patterns for similes, with example sentences, are:

- something [is*] AS adjective AS something
His skin was **as cold as ice**.
It felt **as hard as rock**.
She looked **as gentle as a lamb**.
- something [is*] LIKE something
My love is **like a red, red rose**.
These cookies **taste like garbage**.

He had a temper (that was) **like a volcano**.

- something [does**] LIKE something
He eats **like a pig**.
He smokes **like a chimney**.
They fought **like cats and dogs**.

* stative verb: be, feel, smell, taste etc

** action verb

Here are some more examples of well known similes:

as alike as two peas in a pod	identical or nearly so		as cunning as a fox	cunning	
as bald as a coot	completely bald		as dead as a doornail	dead	
as big as a bus	very big		as dead as the dodo	dead, extinct	the dodo is an extinct bird
as big as an elephant	very big		as deaf as a post	completely deaf	may be exaggeration
as black as a sweep	completely black	sweep = chimney sweep	as different as chalk from cheese	very different	
as black as coal	completely black		as drunk as a lord	completely drunk	
as black as pitch	completely black		as dry as a bone	very dry	
as blind as a bat	completely blind	may be exaggeration	as dry as dust	very dry	
as blind as a mole	completely blind	may be exaggeration	as dull as dishwater	dull, boring	usually said of a person
as bold as brass	very bold	usually in a negative sense	as easy as A.B.C.	very easy	
as brave as a lion	very brave		as easy as apple-pie	very easy	
as bright as a button	very bright		as flat as a pancake	completely flat	
as bright as a new pin	very bright and shiny		as free as a bird	very free to go anywhere	
as busy as a beaver	very busy		as fresh as a daisy	very fresh	
as busy as a bee	very busy		as gentle as a lamb	very gentle	usually said of a person
as busy as a cat on a hot tin roof	very busy		as good as gold	very good and obedient	usually said of a person
as calm as a millpond	very calm and still	usually said of water	as happy as a lark	very happy	usually said of a person
as clear as a bell	very clear	of a sound	as hard as nails	very tough in character	of a person
as clean as a whistle	very clean		as hot as hell	very hot	
as clear as crystal	very clear		as hungry as a bear	very hungry	
as clear as mud	not at all clear	irony/sarcasm	as hungry as a wolf	very hungry	
as cold as ice	very cold		as innocent as a lamb	innocent, not worldly-wise	usually said of a person
as common as dirt	very common, rude, vulgar	usually said of a person	as large as life	conspicuously present	
as cool as a cucumber	cool		as light as a feather	very light	

as light as air	very light		as slow as a tortoise	very slow	
as mad as a hatter	completely crazy		as smooth as silk	very smooth	
as mad as a hornet	very angry		as snug as a bug in a rug	in a very comfortable position	humorous
as nutty as a fruitcake	completely crazy		as sober as a judge	sober	
as obstinate as a mule	very obstinate, stubborn		as solid as a rock	solid	
as old as the hills	very, very old		as solid as the ground we stand on	solid	
as pale as death	very pale or white in the face	of a person	as sound as a bell	very clear	of a sound
as plain as day	very clear		as sour as vinegar	very sour	
as poor as a church mouse	poverty-stricken		as steady as a rock	very steady	
as poor as dirt	poverty-stricken		as stiff as a board	completely stiff	
as proud as a peacock	very proud		as straight as an arrow	straight	an arrow flies straight
as pure as snow	pure and innocent		as strong as an ox	very strong	
as pure as the driven snow	pure and innocent		as stubborn as a mule	very stubborn, obstinate	
as quick as a wink	very quick(ly)		as sturdy as an oak	very strong and solid	
as quick as lightning	very quick(ly)		as sure as death and taxes	absolutely certain to happen	
as quick as silver	very quick		as tall as a giraffe	very tall	
as quiet as a church mouse	very quiet		as thin as a rake	very thin	
as safe as houses	very safe, secure		as timid as a rabbit	very timid	
as scarce as hen's teeth	very, very scarce	irony (hens have no teeth)	as tough as leather	very tough	
as sharp as a razor	very sharp		as tough as nails	very tough	often said of a person
as sick as a dog	very sick		as tough as old boots	very tough	often said of a person
as sick as a parrot	very sick		as welcome as a skunk at a lawn party	not welcome at all	irony/sarcasm (skunks stink)
as silent as the dead	completely silent		as white as a ghost	very pale or white in the face	of a person
as silent as the grave	completely silent		as white as a sheet	pure white	
			as white as snow	pure white	
as slippery as an eel	slippery, evasive, not to be trusted	of a person	as wise as Solomon	very wise	King Solomon
as slow as a snail	very slow		as wise as an owl	very wise	

[is] LIKE something	possible meaning (depending on context)		
		to drink like a fish	to drink a lot
		to eat like a bird	to eat very little
like a rose	beautiful	to eat like a horse	to eat a lot
like a volcano	explosive	to eat like a pig	to eat impolitely
like garbage	disgusting	to fight like cats and dogs	to fight fiercely
like an animal	inhuman	to sing like an angel	to sing beautifully
like spaghetti	entangled	to sleep like a log	to sleep well and soundly
like dewdrops	sweet and pure	to smoke like a chimney	to smoke heavily, all the time
like gold dust	precious	to soar like an eagle	to fly high and free
like a tip	very untidy (tip = garbage dump)	to work like a dog	to work very hard
like a dream	wonderful, incredible		
like stars	bright and beautiful		

[does] LIKE something meaning

Note that with the AS...AS pattern, the first AS is sometimes suppressed, for example:

- His skin was cold **as** ice.

The above patterns of simile are the most common, but there are others made with **adverbs** or words such as **than** and **as if**, for example:

- He ran **as fast as the wind**.
- He is **larger than life**.
- They ran **as if for their lives**.

Similes can include other figures of speech. For example, "He ran like greased lightning" is a simile that includes **hyperbole** (greased lightning).

Similes often make use of irony or sarcasm. In such cases they may even mean the opposite of the adjective used. Look at these examples:

- His explanation was **as clear as mud**. (not clear at all since mud is opaque)
- The film was about **as interesting as watching a copy of Windows download**. (long and boring)
- Watching the show was **like watching paint dry**. (very boring)

Similes are often found (and they sometimes originate) in poetry and other literature. Here are a few examples:

- A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle - Irina Dunn
- Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh - Wilfred Owen
- Death has many times invited me: it was like the salt invisible in the waves - Pablo Neruda
- Guiltless forever, like a tree - Robert Browning
- Happy as pigs in mud - David Eddings
- How like the winter hath my absence been - William Shakespeare
- As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean - Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- Jubilant as a flag unfurled - Dorothy Parker
- So are you to my thoughts as food to life - William Shakespeare

- Yellow butterflies flickered along the shade like flecks of sun - William Faulkner

Popular songs, too, make use of simile:

- A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle - U2
- Cheaper than a hot dog with no mustard - Beastie Boys
- I must do what's right, as sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti - Toto
- It's been a hard day's night, and I've been working like a dog - The Beatles
- Like A Rolling Stone - Bob Dylan
- Like a bat outta [out of] hell - Meat Loaf
- My heart is like an open highway - Jon Bon Jovi
- These are the seasons of emotion and like the winds they rise and fall - Led Zeppelin
- Thick as a Brick - Jethro Tull
- You are as subtle as a brick to the small of my back - Taking Back Sunday

Caution: Many similes are clichés (phrases that are overused and betray a lack of original thought). You should use well know similes with care, but it is certainly useful to know them so that you can understand language that contains them.

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✈ Metaphor

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and their entrances" ~ William Shakespeare

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech that says that one thing is another different thing. This allows us to use fewer words and forces the reader or listener to find the similarities.[C, U] a word or phrase used to describe sb/sth else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities and to make the description more powerful, for example She has a heart of stone; the use of such words and phrases:a game of football used as a metaphor for the competitive struggle of life Ç The writer's striking use of metaphor.

The word metaphor comes from the Greek word *metapherein* (meaning "transfer").

The simplest form of metaphor is: "The [first thing] is a [second thing]."

Look at this example:

- Her **home** was a **prison**.

In the above sentence, we understand immediately that her home had some of the characteristics of a prison. Mainly, we imagine, she could not leave her home. She was trapped inside. Why it was a prison we do not know, but that would be clear from the context--perhaps her husband forced her to stay at home, perhaps she was afraid of the outside. We don't know, but the rest of the story would tell us. What is important here is that in five simple words we understand a lot about her environment, how she felt and how she behaved. In this sentence, "prison" is a metaphor.

Look at another example:

- **George** is a **sheep**.

What is one characteristic of sheep? They follow each other. So we can imagine that George is a follower, not a leader. In this sentence "sheep" is a metaphor.

Metaphors are very common in everyday language. But poets also like to use metaphors. In the following famous verse (from *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes), can you spot three metaphors in the first three lines?

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,

The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
 And the highwayman came riding--
 Riding--riding--
 The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

Look at these examples of metaphors with sample sentences and meanings:

Metaphor example	Metaphorical sense	Original sense
I'm not an angel , but I wouldn't behave like that.	exemplary person	a spiritual being believed to be a messenger of God
America is a melting pot .	place where different peoples, styles and cultures are mixed together	a container in which metals or other materials are melted and mixed
John is a real pig when he eats.	greedy person	a four-legged animal kept for meat (pork)
My father is a rock .	very strong or reliable person	a hard, mineral material made of stone
How could she marry a snake like that!	traitor	a long, limbless reptile (eg: cobra, python, viper)
The policeman let him off with a yellow card .	warning	(in soccer) a yellow card that the referee shows to players when cautioning them

All the above metaphors (the simplest form) are nouns. But there are other ways of making metaphors, for example with verbs or adjectives. Here are some examples:

Metaphor example	Original sense of the word (example)
The committee shot her ideas down one by one.	Anti-aircraft guns shoot down planes.
The private detective dug up enough evidence to convince the police to act.	Dogs like to bury bones and dig them up later.
He broke into her conversation.	Burglars break into buildings.
The new movie was very popular. People flocked to see it.	Birds flock together before they migrate.
His head was spinning with ideas.	Some computer hard drives spin at over 10,000 revolutions per minute.
Reading that book kindled my interest in politics.	You need to start with twigs and small branches when you kindle a camp fire.
Tim lost his job after a heated argument with his boss.	We have a heated swimming pool.
The new car's sexy design increased sales for the company.	Some women think that lipstick makes them look sexy.
He was dressed rather vulgarly in a loud checked suit.	I can't hear you because the radio is too loud.
It wasn't long before their relationship turned sour .	Sour food has an acid taste like lemon or vinegar.

Difference Between Metaphor and Simile

Both similes and metaphors link one thing to another. A simile usually uses "as" or "like". A metaphor is a condensed simile, a shortcut to meaning, which omits "as" or "like." A metaphor creates a relationship directly and leaves more to the imagination. With simile A is **like** B. With metaphor A **is** B.

simile	metaphor
Your eyes are like the sun.	You are my sunshine.
He eats like a pig. He lives like a pig.	He is a pig.

Dead Metaphors

In the phrase "to grasp the concept" the physical action "to grasp" is used as a metaphor for "to

understand" (which is non-physical). But this phrase has been used so often that most English speakers do not have an image of the physical action in their mind. This metaphor has died; it is a "dead metaphor".

Mixed Metaphors

The awkward use of two or more different metaphors at the same time is normally best avoided. It creates conflicting images in the reader or listener's mind, reduces each metaphor's impact, and generally causes confusion. Look at this example:

- America is a **melting pot** where new ideas are **kindled**.

✈ Hyperbole

pronounced: hy-PER-buh-lee

"Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
Then another thousand, then a second hundred,
Then still another thousand, then a hundred" ~ Catullus

Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses an exaggerated or extravagant statement to create a strong emotional response. As a figure of speech it is not intended to be taken literally. Hyperbole is frequently used for humour. hyper·bole / ˈhaɪˈpɜːbəl/; NAmE ˈ-ˈpɜːrb-/ noun. [U, C, usually sing.] a way of speaking or writing that makes sth sound better, more exciting, dangerous, etc. than it really is Examples of hyperbole are:

- They ran like **greased lightning**.
- He's got **tons of money**.
- Her brain is the size of a **pea**.
- He is **older than the hills**.
- I will **die** if she asks me to dance.
- She is as big as an **elephant**!
- I'm so hungry I could eat a **horse**.
- I have told you a **million** times not to lie!

The media and the advertising industry often use hyperbole (which may then be described as hype or media hype).

✈ Oxymoron

pronounced: ox-ee-MOR-on

plural: oxymora, oxymorons

"So fair and foul a day I have not seen!" ~ William Shakespeare

An **oxymoron** is a figure of speech that deliberately uses two contradictory ideas. This contradiction creates a paradoxical image in the reader or listener's mind that generates a new concept or meaning for the whole. Some typical oxymorons are:

- a **living death**
- sometimes you have to be **cruel** to be **kind**
- a **deafening silence**
- **bitter-sweet**
- The **Sounds of Silence** (song title)
- make **haste slowly**
- he was **conspicuous** by his **absence**

Pseudo Oxymorons

In the standard meaning of oxymoron the contradiction is deliberate. However, in popular usage oxymoron is sometimes used to mean "contradiction in terms", where the contradiction is unintentional. Such expressions, unlike real oxymorons, are commonly used without any sense of paradox in everyday language, for example:

- anecdotal evidence
- friendly fire
- pretty ugly

A common attempt at humour is to describe a certain phrase as an oxymoron, implying that the two parts of the phrase are mutually exclusive and that consequently the phrase as a whole must be nonsensical:

- airline food
- American culture
- eco-tourism
- Microsoft security
- military intelligence