

Using Figurative Language While Avoiding Clichés

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(Some of this content is borrowed from: <https://prowritingaid.com/art/2317/figurative-language.aspx> as well as other sites)

Figurative language is used to create a visual image in your reader's mind. Figurative language heightens the reader's sensory experience, adding meaning, clarity, or impact to your writing.

Think of the term *figuratively*, as opposed to *literally*.

Let's start with an overview of some of the more common types of figurative language.

Simile

Comparing two things that are unlike each other by using "as" or "like."
Helps the reader form a visual image of something.

Examples:

Her eyes sparkled like diamonds.

He was as sly as a fox.

The lights went out and I was as blind as a bat.

State Farm Insurance – "Like a good neighbor"

How to avoid cliché

Only use common similes (such as "as cold as ice") in dialog when depicting a character's personality.

Create your *own* similes:

However... don't use cringe-worthy similes ("Breasts like bronzed mangoes.") and avoid overwrought similes ("A glacial pang of pain like the stab of a dagger of ice frozen from a poisoned well.")

- When creating your own similes, watch out for clichés and try to go beyond the obvious comparisons.
- Quality examples (thanks, Google!):
- "The snow fell like billions of breadcrumbs, promising a flurry of activity and a huge pile of shit in the aftermath."
- "Her voice had a sense of menace, like the purr of a puma feasting on an elk."
- "He was dug in like a tick."
- "His belly preceded him like a cowcatcher on a locomotive."

Metaphor

This goes a step further. Instead of saying something is like something else, a metaphor says they are one and the same.

Examples:

His face was granite, unflinching.

She's the black sheep of the family.

Warrensburg was covered in a blanket of snow.

How to avoid cliché

Only use common metaphors (such as "the calm before the storm" or "a bull in a china shop") in dialog when depicting a character's personality. For example, a character who often mixes metaphors ("Piano lessons will teach your mind's eye to play by ear.")

Otherwise, avoid mixed metaphors!

Create your *own* metaphors:

1. Choose a character, object, or setting.

Example, you want to write a metaphor about someone running a marathon. What are a runner's defining characteristics? A runner should be determined to overcome pain and exhaustion. When you think about your character, object, or setting, think of it with all of your senses (sight, sound, smell, etc.).

2. Focus on a particular scene you're describing.

Your runner has given herself one chance to run a marathon. Her success or failure will stick with her the rest of her life. What is the mood you're trying to set here? Keep that in mind while describing your scene.

3. Now think of some other objects that share characteristics you identified in Step 1.

Keep in mind how the specific situation reveals your character. Is your running situation like David vs. Goliath? No, that's been done too many times. How about comparing the runner's marathon to climbing a tall mountain?

4. Take your metaphor and expand on it.

It's not enough just to compare the marathon to climbing a mountain. You need to emphasize it beyond a single word to create an image that rounds out the specific characteristics.

My example: Holding her pace steady, she stared at the distant finish line, still at least five blocks away, looming like a mountain peak. She dug deeper, pulling herself up toward the peak one agonizing step at a time, ignoring the biting pain of the climb and the lack of oxygen getting to her lungs.

Personification

Giving human qualities to inanimate objects, to help describe something.

Examples:

The wind was howling through the trees.

That last piece of pie is calling my name.

From William Shakespeare: "The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night..."

How to avoid cliché

Create your own original personification phrases.

The sheer cliff face stared down at me, taunting me with its impossible angles.

Onomatopoeia

Make a word sound like the sound you are describing.

Examples:

She hiccupped before the words came out.

When I sat down, something in the chair broke with a boing!

I went inside because too many insects were buzzing around my head.

How to avoid cliché

Create your own original words to describe sounds.

The arrow shunked into the man's chest, killing him instantly.

Or, use Onomatopoeias that are not already overused:

...like a thousand twangling instruments.

Oxymoron

Combining two words with opposite feelings to help enhance the concept.

Examples:

The classroom was controlled chaos.
That movie was seriously silly.
A deafening silence filled the next few seconds.

How to avoid cliché

Create your own original combination of words.
Andy Warhol once said: "I am a deeply superficial person."
Skyra was a fierce lover.

Allusion

A brief reference to a person, place, thing, event, or literary/poetic work that the writer assumes the reader knows.

Examples:

Chocolate is his Kryptonite.
I met a man who was romantic and a true Romeo.
I know things may seem hard, but all you need is love.

How to avoid cliché

Avoid allusions that are not already overused ("They were like Jekyll and Hyde.")

Create your own original allusions:

Internal Allusion: By bringing up words or images from earlier in your book or series

1. Observe the parallel between your idea and some earlier moment in the text.
2. Borrow the words from the first time the idea appeared.
3. Example: We're going to have to go all Detroit on them.
(from Scott Siglar, a reference to an earlier book in which Detroit had to be nuked to stop an alien invasion)

External Allusion: By bringing them in from an outside source.

1. Observe the parallel between your idea and the source material.
2. Replace the general language with an allusion.
Example: The entire forest seemed manicured and kept, like Central Park.