Figures of Speech

Figures of speech or literary devices are ways of using words imaginatively to make writing more descriptive and colourful.

If you encounter a statement that does not immediately make sense, or which cannot be literally true, ask yourself if the author might be using a figure of speech. Some common techniques are listed below.

Allusion
An allusion is a reference, either direct or indirect, to a well-known person, place or event.

*I violated the Noah rule: predicting rain doesn’t count; building arks does.*
Warren Buffett
This is a direct allusion to a story in the Bible. Noah built an ark (a type of boat) to save his family from a flood. Buffett expected that his listeners would understand the comparison he was making: he needed to protect himself from a disaster, just like Noah did.

*As for old Mr. Burns, he was visited by three ghosts during the night and agreed to fund the school with some money he found in his tuxedo pants.*
The Simpsons
*The Simpsons* is a modern television cartoon that often makes allusions to books and movies. This allusion is to a famous story by Charles Dickens, in which three ghosts visit a man named Ebenezer Scrooge and frighten him into becoming more generous at Christmastime. Like Scrooge, Mr. Burns also saw three ghosts and became more generous as a result. This allusion is indirect since it does not actually name Dickens or Scrooge. The reader is expected to recognize it because of the “three ghosts” and the reference to money.

Apostrophe
Apostrophizing means addressing an object or an idea as if it were a person. Do not confuse the poetic term “apostrophe” with the punctuation mark also called “apostrophe” (‘).

*O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*
The Bible, 1 Corinthians 15:54-55
The narrator is talking to death and the grave as if they are people who can hear him.
Hyperbole
Hyperbole is an exaggeration or overstatement. It is often, but not always, used for comic effect.

“All the perfumes of Arabia / Will not sweeten this little hand.”
Shakespeare, Macbeth
The speaker is claiming that her hand is so dirty (because of the murder she committed) that it would not smell nice even if she used every perfume in Arabia.

“Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred.
Then, another thousand, and a second hundred.
Then, yet another thousand, and a hundred.”
Catullus, 5
The narrator is not literally expecting 3,300 kisses.

The opposite of hyperbole is understatement. This means using mild, gentle words to describe something dramatic, violent, or shocking.

“Last Week I saw a Woman flay’d, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse.”
Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub
To be flayed means to have your skin removed. The writer is using understatement when he suggests that a woman without her skin looks worse than she used to.

Irony
When the real meaning of a statement is different from what the statement says on the surface, the statement is ironic. Irony is a common literary technique, but it can be very difficult to detect, since the reader must understand that the speaker does not mean exactly what he or she says.

“... died two months ago and not forgotten yet?
Then there’s hope a great man’s memory may outlive his life half a year.”
Shakespeare, Hamlet
We can tell that Hamlet does not really think the dead man is “great,” because he is surprised that anyone still remembers him.
Farther down the street is the shopfront of a fortune-teller. A hand-written sign taped to the window claims to have “the best lucky numbers, the best fortune advice,” but the sign taped to the door says: “Out of business.”

Amy Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife

If the people who owned the shop really could tell fortunes, then they wouldn’t be out of business! The sign promising good advice is ironic when it is placed next to a sign that shows that the fortune-teller’s own business has failed.

Sometimes irony can be found, not only in words, but also in situations (“the police officer was robbed”) or in drama (the audience has seen the criminal hiding in the room but the characters living in the play have not).

Metaphor
A metaphor is a comparison that does not use “like” or “as.” (In this it differs from a simile.)

Metaphors can be found in every type of writing, including non-fiction writing.

In some cases, a metaphor simply asserts that two things are the same.

He was eager to help but his legs were rubber.

Raymond Chandler, The Long Goodbye

The man’s legs were not literally made out of rubber. Chandler is comparing them to rubber because they are bending in every direction.

Some metaphors are indirect: they do not actually name the object being compared. The reader must understand the comparison from the context.

She was beautiful, but rusted, as if her beauty had been abandoned, exposed to the elements.

Marisa Silver, “Temporary”

Women do not literally rust. Metal does. The author is indirectly comparing the woman to metal in order to explain how her beauty has been damaged over time. However, the word “metal” does not appear; instead, the comparison is invoked by the author’s unusual choice of verb.

Oxymoron
An oxymoron consists of two words which are opposites but which are placed next to each other, e.g., bittersweet, working vacation, open secret, freezer burn, act naturally, definite maybe. Many of these sayings have become common idioms in English.
Paradox
A paradox is a statement which seems to contradict itself but which contains a deeper truth. Paradoxes are similar to oxymorons, but where an oxymoron puts opposite words together, a paradox puts opposite ideas together.

The child is father of the man.  
William Wordsworth, “The Rainbow”
When a man is old, his son or daughter needs to take care of him. The child thus becomes a “parent” to his or her own parent.

Cowards die many times before their death.  
Shakespeare, Julius Caesar
A person can literally die only once, but Shakespeare is saying that a coward “dies” in a way every time he or she refuses to overcome fear.

Personification
To personify something means to give human characteristics to it.

Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe.  
John Milton, Paradise Lost
Nature does not sit in a chair or make sighing noises, but Milton imagines it as a female who does these things.

Cartoons and children’s movies frequently use personification. For example, when an animal is given a human face or voice in a story, that animal is personified.

The rabbit in this famous drawing by John Tenniel is personified: he is standing up on two legs, wearing a jacket, and looking at his watch. The personification of animals is very common in children’s literature. (This drawing illustrates a scene from the story Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, which includes many personified animals and objects.)
Pun
A pun emphasizes two different meanings of a word at the same time. It is often used for humorous effect.

Ask for me tomorrow and you shall / Find me a grave man.
William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

The adjective “grave” means serious or un-funny. The noun “grave” refers to the place where the dead are buried. In this quote, Mercutio is saying that he will die tomorrow and he is quite serious about it!

[An adder is a] species of snake. So called from its habit of adding funeral outlays to the other expenses of living.
Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*

Bierce is pretending that the name of the poisonous snake, “adder,” is related to the word for adding numbers together.

Simile
A simile compares two things, using the words “like” or “as.”

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Langston Hughes, “A Dream Deferred”

Dreams cannot literally dry up, but Hughes asks the reader to imagine a dream becoming dry and hard like a raisin.

As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

The narrator is describing a ship that is damaged after a storm. He implies that it can’t move – just like a ship in a painting.
Exercise

Identify the figures of speech in the following. Some have more than one answer.

1. There was a deep boom, like the rolling of an ocean wave. The hearse door had been slammed shut. (Eudora Welty)

2. I looked into your eyes too often, and in the end became hardened; There came a day when Adam turned his back on Eve, and gardened. (R.P. Lister)

3. Why does a boy who’s fast as a jet / Take all day—and sometimes two— / To get to school? (John Ciardi)

4. When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas. (Alfred Noyes)

5. An eloquent silence greeted this question. (Diana Gabaldon)

6. She raked her fingers yet again through the bright desert grass of her hair. (Lorrie Moore)

7. Swiftly walk o’er the western wave, Spirit of the Night! (Percy Bysshe Shelley)

8. O, thou art fairer than the evening’s air / Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars. (Christopher Marlowe)

9. It’s the little things in life that are colossal. (G.K. Chesterton)

10. The injurious cannon-ball and the inconsiderate bayonet. (Ambrose Bierce)

11. Beware, O asparagus, you’ve stalked my last meal. (Wanda Fergus)

12. As I went down the hill, I cried and cried / The soft little hands of the rain stroking my cheek (Dora Sigerson Shorter)

13. I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o’er vales and hills (William Wordsworth)

14. In the desert of the heart / Let the healing fountains start / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise. (W.H. Auden)

15. Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning. (Carl Sandburg)
16. Thou art to me a delicious torment. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

17. Winter slumbering in the open air / Wears on his smiling face, a dream of spring!  
   (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

18. Roll on, thou dark and deep blue Ocean -- roll! (Lord Byron)

19. The boy stood straight, bug-eyed with fear in the firelight, a scarecrow in his too-big 
   shirt and torn trousers. (Paul Theroux)

20. I had always felt as hidden as the hull in a berry, as secret and fetal as the curled fortune 
   in a cookie. (Lorrie Moore)

21. They went and told the sexton and the sexton tolled the bell. (Thomas Hood)

22. Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me. (Emily Dickinson)

23. Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow. (William Shakespeare)

24. Do not adultery commit; / Advantage rarely comes of it: / Thou shalt not steal; an empty 
   feat, / When it’s so lucrative to cheat. (Arthur Hugh Clough)

25. ... I have no spur / To pricket the sides of my intent, but only Vaulting ambition, which o'er 
   leaps itself / And fall on the other. (William Shakespeare)
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<td>1.</td>
<td>simile</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>allusion</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>hyperbole</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>metaphor</td>
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<td>metaphor</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>apostrophe, personification</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>hyperbole</td>
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<td>paradox</td>
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<td>understatement</td>
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<td>pun</td>
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<td>oxymoron</td>
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<td>irony</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>metaphor, personification</td>
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