

Lesson 1: Literary Elements & Techniques Part 1

(approximately one hour)

Educator Note: The goal of this lesson is to reinforce students’ understanding of the literary terms that will be most vital to their success on the exam. This topic is tackled first, before much time is devoted to the specifics of the exam, because it is foundational knowledge for the test as a whole, especially Part I & Part III. The concepts I have chosen to focus on are those that I have deemed most essential. I encourage you; however, to differentiate this lesson based on the needs of the students you’re working with. If you believe they have a good grasp on the terms below, feel free to spend the time reviewing higher-level concepts. For example, if their understanding of the general concept of *figurative language* appears sound, you could spend the time reviewing some of the various types of figurative language, such as *metaphor*, *simile*, *personification*, *hyperbole*, *irony*, etc. I encourage you to explore the resources at literaryterms.net if you want clarification on the meaning of any of these terms.

A. Figurative Language vs. Literal Language

Educator Note: A large number of the terms and concepts that figure prominently in discussions of texts fall under the umbrella of *figurative language*. Students have likely studied various forms of figurative language, such as *metaphor* and *simile*. More important than distinguishing between the various categories, however, is a firm grasp of the basic difference between figurative and literal meanings.

The literal meaning of something is its surface meaning, what the dictionary definitions (denotation) of the words communicate. Figurative language is when a speaker or writer intends to communicate something beyond this literal meaning. **Emphasize that your students use and understand figurative language every day.** Every language on Earth employs this technique. As you go through the following examples, you may have to adjust the instruction based on the native language of your students, as well as their background knowledge. If your students aren’t familiar with any examples you’re able to produce, solicit suggestions from them: what are common *figures of speech* in their language?

When we use figurative language, we don’t mean exactly what we say. The literal meaning of language is what the words mean on a surface level. The figurative meaning is what the speaker is actually trying to communicate.

Educator Note: Discuss the *Family Circle* comic with your students. Do they get the joke? Ask them to explain it to you. They may or may not be familiar with the idiom “It’s raining cats and dogs.” Regardless, the meaning should not be difficult to explain.



In the cartoon above, the father is using figurative language when he says, “It’s raining cats and dogs out there!” He, of course, doesn’t mean that there are actually terrified, furry pets falling from the sky. He just means to say that it is raining very hard.

Educator Note: As you go through the chart in [Exercise 1](#), talk about the difference between the literal and figurative meanings in the two given examples (a metaphorical idiom and hyperbole, respectively).

Exercise 1

In the following table, you’ll see a couple examples of figurative language. After each phrase, the literal and figurative meaning has been explained. Working with your tutor, fill in the empty rows with examples of your own! Every language in the world makes use of figurative language, so you don’t need to limit your examples to English.

Educator Note: As you go through the chart in Exercise 1, talk about the difference between the literal and figurative meanings in the two given examples (a metaphorical idiom and hyperbole, respectively).

Phrase	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning
<i>It’s raining cats and dogs.</i>	Small furry animals are falling from the sky.	It’s raining very hard.

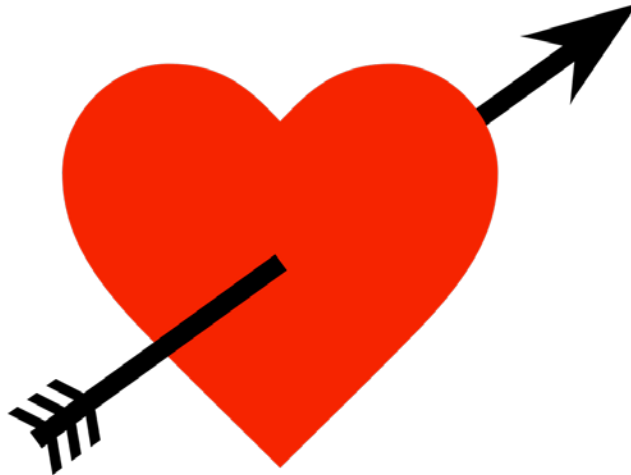
<i>I can't wait until lunch. I'm starving!</i>	I am about to die due to lack of food.	I'm very hungry.
Educator Note: Here are examples you might use.		
Phrase	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning
"Life is a highway." (metaphor)	Life is a paved roadway designed for automobiles.	Life is similar to a journey on a road.
"Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get." (simile)	Life is a container full of candy.	Life is similar to a box of chocolates because, in the same way that you don't know the filling of a chocolate, you don't know what your choices and circumstances will lead to in life.
"The sea was angry that day, my friends." (personification)	The large body of saltwater was emotionally upset for some reason.	The ocean was rough and choppy.
"It took me a million years to do that homework last night!" (hyperbole)	I worked on the homework assignment for 1,000,000 years.	It took a pretty long time to do the homework.

B. Symbolism (10 min)

Educator Note: Symbolism is when something is used to represent something else; frequently, a concrete, tangible object stands in for an abstract idea. Authors can always use symbolism in original and unique ways, but cultures tend to have commonly agreed upon symbols that are recognizable in a variety of contexts. Once again, be sure to be conscious of your students' background knowledge, especially as it relates to their native language and culture. I have done my best to pick symbols that I believed to be widely understood, but your students may not recognize them. Adjust accordingly.

One particularly important type of figurative language is symbolism, which is where something, often an object, represents an abstract idea. Once again, don't let the fancy word intimidate you! Like many other types of figurative language, you use and understand symbolism all the time. **For instance, what does the symbol pictured below represent?**

Educator Note: Discuss the image of the arrow-pierced heart. Ask your students what the picture shows. Talk with them about the distinction between what it *literally* shows (symbolism is a form of figurative language) versus what it represents. Why does our culture use the rather gruesome image of a vital organ pierced by a medieval weapon to represent romantic attachment? Discuss the reasons that might exist behind this symbolism. Then, in Exercise 1.b, work with your students to unpack the meaning behind the other provided examples of symbols.



On a literal level, this is a picture of a heart pierced by an arrow. If you were to describe that to somebody who wasn't aware of its symbolic meaning, they might find the image pretty gruesome. They certainly would find it strange that, instead of being horrified by this picture, most people in Western culture find it romantic. This is because, to us, a heart pierced by an arrow is **symbolic** of love.

Exercise 2

What symbolic meaning is commonly attached to the following objects?

Figure 1



Figure 2



Exercise 2 Answers

Figure 1 → The crowned woman holding a torch is a symbol for liberty.

Figure 2 → Uncle Sam is a symbol for the United States of America.

These examples we've looked at are some of the most commonly used examples. However, authors can use symbolism in many different ways, and some symbols are easier to spot than others. An author will usually give the reader clues and hints when they're using something as a symbol.

C. Imagery

Educator Note: Imagery is, on its face, a relatively straightforward concept, and it is a valuable term to know for the exam because nearly every piece of descriptive writing contains multiple examples. Precisely because it is so omnipresent; however, it may take some work to help students recognize examples of it *in the wild*.

What are the five senses? **Take a moment to list them with your tutor.**

Educator Note: Have students list the five senses, writing them down on a blank piece of paper. When they read the passage in Exercise 1.c, they can write each example next to the sense it appeals to. There should be one example for each sense. The passage may have some words or concepts that students are unfamiliar with; it's important that they not let this derail them, since identifying the imagery is still possible even if they're not familiar with the Empire State Building or if they don't know what "emanating" means. They **will** encounter unfamiliar words and references on the exam, and it's important for them to learn not to be intimidated by that.

Another type of figurative language that deserves a special look is imagery. Imagery is when an author uses language that appeals to any of our five senses. An author will try to make the reader see something, hear something, taste something, feel something, or smell something.

Why do we care about imagery? Imagery is an especially useful literary technique to have in your toolkit, because nearly every piece of fiction ever written contains imagery. When you're being asked to describe how an author is using a technique, there's a very good chance you'll be able to find examples of imagery you can talk about.

Exercise 3

Identify all the examples of imagery in the passage below. What sense does each example appeal to?

5 *Looking out over the city from the top of the Empire State Building, Jen saw the glittering sunlight reflecting off the windows of skyscrapers, the tiny, darting cars and pedestrians, and the deep blue of the harbor as a backdrop to it all. She thought she could almost smell the salt from the ocean, though that might be the popcorn held by the small child next to her. The wind whistled in her ears, and she could hear the distant honking of car horns emanating from the midtown traffic jams. The frigid wind stung her cheeks as she gripped the cold, smooth metal of the soda can in her hand. Raising the can to take a sip, she savored the sweet citrus flavor of the beverage.*

Exercise 3 Answers

Looking out over the city from the top of the Empire State Building, Jen saw the glittering sunlight reflecting off the windows of skyscrapers, the tiny, darting cars and pedestrians, and the deep blue of the harbor as a backdrop to it all. **SIGHT**

She thought she could almost smell the salt from the ocean, though that might be the popcorn held by the small child next to her. **SMELL**

The wind whistled in her ears, and she could hear the distant honking of car horns emanating from the midtown traffic jams. **HEARING**

The frigid wind stung her cheeks as she gripped the cold, smooth metal of the soda can in her hand. **TOUCH**

Raising the can to take a sip, she savored the sweet citrus flavor of the beverage. **TASTE**

D. Characterization (10 min)

Educator Note: Characterization is another seemingly simple technique that is extremely useful for students to understand. When analyzing the meaning of any piece of fiction, characterization is one of the most versatile and useful tools a student can employ. Anything the reader is told about a character or their actions is characterization. There is a distinction made between *indirect* and *direct characterization*; it isn't vital for the exam that students are able to distinguish between the two, but it might be helpful to discuss the difference so that students are more likely to recognize all the examples in a passage.

Characterization is the way that an author tells us about a character in their writing. They can tell us things about a character directly, by telling the reader something about the character:

Achilles was a strong and brave warrior

Here, the narrator tells the reader directly that Achilles is (a) strong and (b) brave. An author can also tell us things about a character indirectly, through the words, thoughts, & actions of characters in the story.

When they saw him on the battlefield, Achilles’s enemies were terrified.

In this example, the narrator doesn’t actually tell us anything about Achilles, but the reader can probably figure out that he is (a) strong and (b) brave based on the reaction of his enemies.

Characterization is useful because, like imagery, it is one of the most common techniques in literature. It is almost impossible to tell a story without telling the reader something about the characters, and usually, this characterization helps communicate the message or central idea of a text.

E. Central Idea (15 min)

Educator Note: In Part 3, students will need to use a term like those reviewed above to unpack how an author develops the central idea of their writing. Central idea is the language commonly used to describe both the theme of a piece of fiction and the main idea of nonfiction. Its meaning is, mercifully, relatively self-explanatory compared to *theme*, but students still need to practice in order to both (a) identify the central idea and (b) analyze how the author conveys that idea. Students tend to underestimate their ability to do this, especially the first part. The example texts provided are meant to be approachable and familiar. If you think your students would benefit from alternative texts, feel free to seek them out. Nearly any short story would work for the first example, and any set of lyrics for the second.

The **central idea** of a text (also known as its theme) is best described as the main message or idea that the author is trying to get across. Sometimes, the author makes the message pretty obvious. This is the case with fables, like the one below. Take a look.

Exercise 4

Educator Note: For Exercise 4, students should hopefully be able to identify that the central idea or message of the story is something along the lines of **“Don’t brag about your lightning pace, for slow and steady wins the race.”** Once they identify this, ask them to rephrase it. You

should talk about how, in a fable, the central idea is usually directly stated, and that the texts on the exam are unlikely to be so forthright. If you are working with a higher-level student, selecting a text with a less explicitly spelled-out message may be more worthwhile.

The Tortoise and The Hare

There once was a speedy hare who bragged about how fast he could run. Tired of hearing him boast, Slow and Steady, the tortoise, challenged him to a race. All the animals in the forest gathered to watch.

5 *Hare ran down the road for a while and then paused to rest. He looked back at Slow and Steady and cried out, "How do you expect to win this race when you are walking along at your slow, slow pace?"*

Hare stretched himself out alongside the road and fell asleep, thinking, "There is plenty of time to relax."

10 *Slow and Steady walked and walked. He never, ever stopped until he came to the finish line. The animals who were watching cheered so loudly for Tortoise, they woke up Hare. Hare stretched and yawned and began to run again, but it was too late. Tortoise was over the line.*

After that, Hare always reminded himself, "Don't brag about your lightning pace, for Slow and Steady won the race!"

What is the central idea of this text?

Exercise 4 Answer: "Don't brag about your lightning pace, for slow and steady wins the race."

Exercise 5

Educator Note: In Exercise 5, students are asked to unpack the meaning of a song excerpt. Depending on the students' gender, musical tastes, and cultural backgrounds, alternative selections might be preferable. If you use the provided Taylor Swift song, the student should identify a central idea somewhat similar to the one identified below; remember, however, that there is usually more than one way to frame a central idea.

Songs and poems have central ideas as well. Take a look at the following lyrics for example. You might recognize this song.

*I was riding shotgun with my hair undone in the front seat of his car.
He's got a one-hand feel on the steering wheel,
The other on my heart.
I look around, turn the radio down. He says, "Baby, is something wrong?"*

5 *I say, "Nothing, I was just thinking how we don't have a song."*

*And he says, "Our song is a slamming screen door;
Sneaking out late, tapping on your window;
When we're on the phone and you talk real slow,
'Cause it's late, and your mama don't know.*

10 *Our song is the way you laugh;
The first date, man, I didn't kiss her when I should have;
And when I got home, before I said 'Amen',
Asking God if He could play it again."*

"Our Song", Taylor Swift

1. What do you think the central idea of this song is?
2. What lyrics make you think this?
3. Do any of these lyrics fit the definitions of the literary elements & techniques we discussed? Which ones?

Educator Note:

Example Central Idea: The memories shared by the narrator and her boyfriend are just as meaningful a representation of their relationship as having *a song* would be.

Students should be able to support their interpretation of the song's central idea using terms such as those reviewed above. For example, the boyfriend's description of "our song" is an example of figurative language, since he's not actually talking about a song. Additionally, Swift uses imagery ("a slamming screen door" and "tapping on your window"). She uses symbolism, when she talks about her boyfriend having one hand "on my heart"; rather than a mere description of anatomy, the author clearly means to represent the narrator and her boyfriend's romantic attachment. Nearly anything we learn about the narrator and her boyfriend constitutes characterization. Work with your student to talk about as many of these examples as you can and discuss how these techniques help communicate Swift's central idea.