

Lesson 1: Literary Elements & Techniques Part 1

(approximately one hour)

A. Figurative Language vs. Literal 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.



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.

Exercise 1

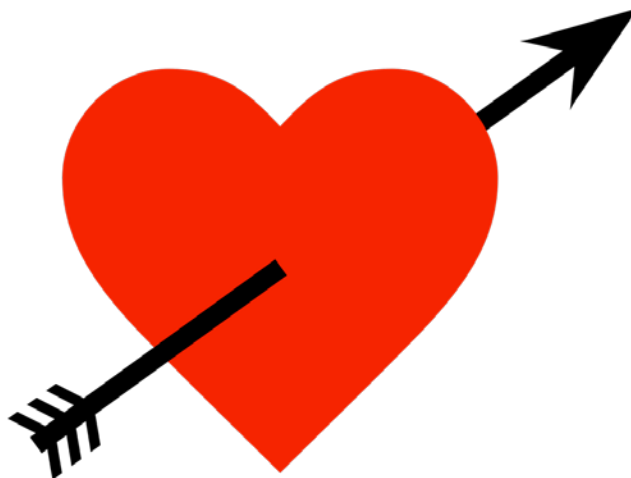
In the following table, you’ll see a couple examples of figurative language. After each phrase, the literal and figurative meaning has been explained. Working with your tutor, fill in the empty rows with examples of your own! Every language in the world makes use of figurative language, so you don’t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

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.

Phrase	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning

B. Symbolism (10 min)

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?**



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

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 are. An author will usually give the reader clues and hints when they're using something as a symbol.

C. Imagery

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

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.*

D. Characterization (10 min)

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)

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

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 5

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?
