

Figures of Speech

Whenever I read something I like, I copy it down by hand into my commonplace book. I've filled six books so far.

I'll come back another time to the reason for doing this by hand.

If there's a sentence that really leaps out, I'll also write it into a (separate) collection of rhetorical figures.

These have a variety of functions and effects, but I'm going to try to keep this simple.

1. Some figures *sound* remarkable, to make words memorable

Consider John F Kennedy's much-quoted line: *Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.*

The "meaning" of this line is not particularly amazing, but the sound sticks in the mind.

2. Some figures add a sense of "drama", to capture a shifting perspective or mood

An example of this is when a writer performs a "change of mind" in mid-sentence. Obviously, it would have been possible to write only the final position, but for some reason the writer (in this case literary critic Ian Hamilton) wants to be "seen to be thinking":

I have my own ideas about who will be forgotten [by history] and who won't... I could, of course, be wrong. We'll see - or, rather, we won't see.

3. Some figures change the way people understand something

When you describe one thing in terms of another, you change the way people think about it. The transparent way to do that is to use a simile, where you openly acknowledge with words “as if” or “like” that you are drawing a comparison:

His hands twitched, like suffocating fish.

Less transparent is the metaphor, where the likeness is asserted without “like” or “as if”:

I'll stick to my alphabet piano.

(In this line, the writer is referring to his typewriter. Calling it a piano highlights the playful movement of fingers over keys, while the word alphabet makes it clear what kind of “piano” it is.)

More examples

There are absolutely hundreds of different figures. I don't want to overwhelm anybody. So here are a few, of each type.

Figures of speech (for sound)

Alliteration: a consonant that keeps repeating. Anaphora. A repeated opening, for emphasis:

I have a dream that X, I have a dream that Y, I have a dream that Z

Assonance: a repeated vowel sound.

Enallage. Words, startlingly wrong, that stick in the mind:

We was robbed

Isocolon. A pair, for contrast and comparison:

Death sat at my father's bedside, life stirred within my mother's womb

Tricolon. The reliably satisfying sound of three things listed together:

Ready, steady, go...

Friends, Romans, Countrymen

Figures for added drama (including comedy)

Climax: building up to something gradually.

The general who became a slave, the slave who became a gladiator, the gladiator who defied an emperor

Hyperbole: overstatement, often for comic effect.

Two-thirds of the planet is covered by water; the rest is covered by [Chelsea FC midfielder] N'Golo Kante

Metanoia: change of mind in mid-sentence

This man is still alive. Alive, did I say? Not only alive, but he attends the Senate

Understatement. Often used for comic effect:

If not actually disgruntled, he was far from being grunted.

Tropes (changing people's thinking)

Analogy. Spelling out a similarity by means of something quite different:

Nothing in progression can rest on its original plan. We may as well think of rocking a grown man in the cradle of an infant

Antithesis. Presenting a choice, often seemingly even-handed, though usually to favour one option:

One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak

Antonomasia. Using somebody's name to describe a type, and vice versa:

It may be that Boris Johnson will dance rings round the Labour leader, Gordon Browning him...

Adequate to Excellent

Metaphor. See definition above:

A great speech reaches inside you and rips your heart out

Metonymy. In which one thing is described in terms of something related to it:

Hit the bottle (meaning, alcohol)

Here come the suits (meaning, business people)

Simile. See definition above:

He sang like a choirboy castrated too late

Synecdoche. In which a part represents the whole, or vice versa:

Donald Trump built a wall (he didn't build it: others did)

England scored a penalty (it wasn't the whole of England, just one player)