

Writing Metaphors Effectively Tip Sheet

What is a Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech. It compares things implicitly, explains the unfamiliar, and provides abstractions in images. Additionally, metaphors enhance meaning by adding aspects of feeling and thought. Metaphors are also powerful, especially at the end of the sentence where it leaves an unforgettable image in mind. Furthermore, metaphors can be extended through numerous sentences or in a full paragraph as in this example, “Time is also a nursery book in which the reader is slapped and tickled alternately. It is full of predigested pap spooned out with confidential nudges. The reader is never on his own for an instant, but, as though at his mother's knee, he is provided with the right emotions for everything he hears or sees as the pages turn.” –Marshall McLuhan.

Types of Metaphors

- **Simile**

A simile is a type of metaphor. It compares things explicitly. Usually, the sentences are introduced by like or as such as, “my words swirled around her head **like** summer flies.”

- **Implied or Fused Metaphor**

Occurs when the writer takes something that is associated with one another. For example, *highways* are associated with *cars* and fuse it with something else. **Fused Metaphors** are related to **Metonymy**. Metonymy happens when replacing one concept with another that is associated with it as in “the pen is more mighty than the sword.” The logic behind the figure is that the intellect and thought are much more influential than the physical acts of violence during battlefields.

- **Synecdoche Metaphor**

This occurs when replacing a part for the whole such as referring to a worker as a “hired hand.”

- **Personification**

It is a unique kind of metaphor. It occurs when referring to inanimate objects or abstractions as if they were human beings. For example, a fisherman speaks of the boat as *she*. “The ocean danced in the moonlight” is also another example.

How to Use Metaphors and Similes Effectively?

To use metaphors and similes effectively, think of these principles.

1. Metaphors and Similes Should Be Original and Fresh

Avoid clichéd figures such as "white as a sheet," or "a tower of strength." Brilliant writer of comedy can make such clichés work for them, but merely by playing on their own staleness. If you can think of nothing more original than "His face was white as a sheet," you would rather just say, "His face was very white".

2. The Vehicle Should Fit the Tenor

The vehicle of any metaphor or simile is likely to have various meanings. Be sure none of them are working against you. It is easy to direct focus so exclusively on the meaning that you dismiss others which may confuse the comparison and meanings.

3. Metaphors and Similes Should Be Appropriate to the Context

The figures of speech have their own level of formality and informality. Even when it does not have particularly awkward meanings, a metaphor or a simile must not be too informal or too learned from the occasion. It would not be acceptable to write in a paper for a history instructor that "Napoleon went through Russia like does of salt."

4. Metaphors and Similes Should Not Be Awkwardly Mixed

When several metaphors or similes appear in the same paragraph, they should be harmonized in thought and image. Mixtures like the following example is awkward and silly, "a silver coin hung in the draperies of the enchanted night, let fall its gaze, which gilded the rooftops with a joyful phosphorescent." This sounds remarkable until one begins to think about a picture so luxuriously described. Is the moon a "coin," how can "she" "let a fall a glaze"? Is phosphoresce really joyful?

5. Metaphors and Similes Should Not Be Overworked

Metaphors and similes should not be drizzled profusely particularly in exhibition writing. Even if they do not clash, too many are likely to cancel one or the other out. Their effectiveness relies on the fact that they are relatively different because if every other sentence includes a metaphor or a simile, readers will soon begin to ignore them.

References

Kane, T. S. (1994). *The new Oxford guide to writing*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. Pages used (218 – 223)