



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 10

The Likening

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
CONTENT
Figurative Language

PURPOSE

To expand your ability to use Figurative Language well in your own work, and to practice creating metaphors by “likening” one thing to another.

BACKGROUND

When you describe something by comparing it with something else in some way, you are employing figurative language. To me, this Likening is magical—it heightens our senses and causes us to see the world—or anything in it—differently. Whether the writer uses [a metaphor, a simile, personification, hyperbole, or some other form of comparison](#), it’s so satisfying to hear one thing likened to another, and experience, in an aha flash, the truth of it. Yes! *This is like that.*

In that instant of recognition, we feel we’ve known it all along. As poet Richard Wilbur puts it, “Odd that a thing is most itself when likened.” Consider, for example, this metaphor by the 13th century mystic Rumi: “This being human is a guest house.” Somehow, when a strong emotion, like anger or fear, comes sweeping through me, thinking of myself as a guest house helps to keep it in perspective. Figurative language allows you to say in a few words, through a

concrete comparison, something that would take many plodding abstract words to explain.

A metaphor (from the Greek, "carry over") expresses the abstract (the *tenor*) in terms of the concrete (the *vehicle*). When Linda Ronstadt sings, "Love is a rose," *rose* is the vehicle for *love*, the tenor. When Emily Dickinson writes, "Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul,/And sings the tune—without the words,/And never stops at all," *bird* is the unnamed vehicle for *hope*, the tenor.

Effective metaphors are true, meaning that the two things being compared do have at least one element in common. And they are fresh and original, meaning that this common element is not so obvious that it is a given. A good resource for learning more about metaphor is [Richard Nordquist at about.com](#), a division of *The New York Times* Company.

There are a few considerations when it comes to using figurative language: First and foremost, no clichés or dead metaphors allowed! In other words, if you've heard it before, and especially if you've heard it repeatedly, don't use it in your poem. And be aware that a little figurative language goes a long way: If your poem were beef stew, think of figurative language as the bay leaf, not the beef or the potatoes.

Check out the beautiful figurative language in this poem by Barbara Crooker, "[Poem on a Line by Anne Sexton, 'We are All Writing God's Poem'](#)." Crooker likens the color of the sky on a particular "today" to "the soft blue of a work shirt washed/a thousand times" and redbud blossoms to "gaudy/scarves flung over bark's bare limbs." *Personification*, or attributing human qualities to something not human, is present in the words "The moon spills its milk on the black tabletop/for the thousandth time." And she also uses a form of *synesthesia*, or mixing of sensory perceptions, by speaking of how "the scent of phlox curls/in the open window."

WHAT TO DO

Play a metaphor game.

1. Make a table like the one below, with a column for words to use as your tenors, and a column for each of the five senses, plus an extra column for movement (a good way to invite strong verbs into your writing). Use the tenors I suggest and/or any of your own you'd like to play with.
2. Then fill in the boxes in the corresponding rows with concrete, sensory images, likening each tenor to something relating to your senses. (These, of course, are your vehicles.) You can skip any of the senses for which a comparison doesn't come or feels forced, or even skip a whole

row. You can also list more than one comparison when you're so inspired.

I've given you some examples to get you started. You can read the poem that resulted from the first row's images for "falling in love"—Emily Kern's delightful poem "Teen Love"—on page 147 of *Spinning Words into Gold*. And the poem that resulted from the comparisons in the next few rows, "Everything That Happens," is on the next page.

NOTE: This process works best if you think of it as a game and accept whatever comes. You can decide later which comparisons to use.

3. Once you've come up with a number of comparisons, use one or more of them in a poem. You can let your responses suggest an idea for a poem, or you can work with one or more "tenors" that relate to a poem you'd like to write. If you're not ready to write a poem now, you can come back to this tool when you're working on one and use it to brainstorm metaphors for it.

| | SIGHT | HEARING | SMELL | TASTE | TOUCH | MOVEMENT |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Falling in love | balloons | laughter | bubblegum | bubblegum | smooth | jumping on the bed |
| Surrender | falling leaves | a dirge | | | | |
| Reluctance | oak leaves that cling to trees | a fermata, an unresolved chord | | | | |
| Triumph | brilliant fall leaves | trumpets, timpani | | | gold coins | grand jetés |
| Longing | | | | | | |
| Fear | | | | | | |
| Guilt | | | | | | |
| Solitude | | | | | | |
| Happiness | | | | | | |
| Loss | | | | | | |

EXAMPLE

Once, as I was dealing with grief caused by the poor choices someone I loved was making, I attended a memorial concert for beloved choreographer Salvatore Aiello.

The words of the conductor, the music, and the season (fall) contributed metaphors that helped me express my complex thoughts and feelings.

Everything That Happens

October's half over
and the leaves have not
begun to surrender.

Sugar maples hold
silver-green, ginkgoes
hide their gold. A fermata
of warm nights, too much rain
testing my belief
in glorious endings, the word
triumphant.

Tonight trumpets
and timpani blaze for Salvatore Aiello,
dead at 53. *A fragile man*, the conductor says,
a courageous artist whose choreography
enriched us all. I clap and clap
for grand jetés and pirouettes,
his dancers
dancing on. Is this an end?
Or proof of

Rilke's words:
Do you not see how everything that happens
keeps on being a beginning?
But aren't there beginnings better left
unbegun, griefs that happy endings
won't redeem? If only,
at the plot's first vicious
twist, I could skip ahead to the final pages
the way I did in childhood

with every book I read.
As long as I knew
what was coming,
I could stand
the sadness, the suspense. How,
how to live with
the day's news echoing

like a chord unresolved
this waiting for
the leaves to fall

REFLECTION

Aristotle thought that the mastery of metaphor was “the mark of genius” in a poet. List two or three ways you could develop your metaphor-crafting skills on your journey to becoming a metaphor master. For example, you could try consciously weaving a few into your conversations each day. Any other ideas?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Start keeping a list of the similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech, that you find in the poems you read.

As you notice the many ways that fine poets use figurative language in their poems, you’ll become better and better at using it in your own work. Here are several to get your list started.

SIMILES (comparing one thing to another using wording that shows they are “similar”: “like” or “as”—or “the way” or...)

From Gary Young’s “As if the sky and high plateaus...”

“here is a canyon/colored like a child's box of crayons”

From Timothy Walsh’s “At the Goodwill”:

“Like crows tearing at roadkill,/people rummage among the/aisles and clothes bins”

From Mary Oliver’s “Some Questions You Might Ask”:

“Is the soul solid, like iron?/Or is it tender and breakable, like/the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?”

METAPHOR (transforming one thing into another using wording that says in effect, “A = B”)

From Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Doing Laundry on a Sunday”:

“...and the full-breasted tulips/Open their pink blouses”

From “Voices” by Naomi Shihab Nye:

“I will never taste cantaloupe/without tasting the summers/
you peeled for me and placed/face-up on my china breakfast plate.”

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