

Write Your Life Story

Create Vivid Portraits of People and Places with Figurative Language

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Rivers run, the wind howls, and trees sway. We know these statements aren't literally true. We know the writer is speaking figuratively. Specifically, the writer is using the technique of personification—attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects. When writers use figurative language, they clarify abstract or unfamiliar information, enable the reader to enter the writer's experience, and add interest.

Think about someone writing about a frightening thunderstorm. They might indicate that the wind was blowing hard, but does that really enable you to enter their experience? Can you see, hear, or feel anything specific? If we return to what we learned about engaging readers with specific, concrete, sensory words and clarifying abstract words with examples, it's clear that the wind blowing hard is general, vague, and lacking in sensory detail. Personification can make the experience of the wind blowing hard vivid and engaging.

Compare the following paragraphs:

Version One

The scariest thunderstorm, I ever lived through occurred in September of 2003. The wind was blowing hard and the rain poured down in sheets. After dinner, the lights went out. We couldn't see anything, so we went to bed.

Version Two

The scariest thunderstorm, I ever lived through occurred in September of 2003. The howling wind thrashed the trees, tearing off branches, and hurling them to the ground. The rain pounded the roof like a jackhammer. At nine o'clock the lights went out, plunging us into darkness. Unable to see our hands in front of our faces, we went to bed.

The wind is not just blowing hard; it's howling, thrashing trees, tearing off branches, and hurling them to the ground. Like a human being, the wind is alive and active. The sentence provides concrete, sensory verbs that personify the wind and the rain. This enables the reader to see and hear what's happening during the storm. Even if we've never experienced an intense storm, we've probably heard someone howl in pain, seen someone

toss, turn, and thrash in their sleep, and watched someone hurl a ball. The writer has used sights and sounds that are familiar to convey the abstraction of a frightening storm and to clarify what happens when the wind blows hard.

Metaphors and similes are figurative language techniques that also clarify unfamiliar or abstract experiences and ideas. Both compare two things. Similes state the comparison using “like” or “as.” Metaphors imply a comparison. We use similes and metaphors all the time. Some are used so frequently, they’ve become clichés:

*Marjorie hated working with rows and columns of numbers, but she had to **bite the bullet** (metaphor) and take the accounting job because it paid more than being an assistant in the small bookstore she loved.*

*He was the **black sheep** (metaphor) of the family.*

*The boy looked angelic, but I knew he was lying. He sat on the bench **cool as a cucumber** (simile) spewing his fiction **like an experienced con man** (simile).*

*She had just been promoted to manager, married her accountant, and bought a new house. She was **as happy as a clam** (simile).*

In your own writing, you’ll want to create fresh and interesting similes and metaphors and to avoid clichés. To provide some examples of these, I’ve

presented Patricia MacLachlan's use of personification, metaphors, and similes in her novel *Baby*.

Remember that memoir is a form of creative nonfiction that uses the techniques of fiction including figurative language. Like memoir, this fictional novel, *Baby*, is told from the first-person "I" point of view. The "I" in the story is Larkin a twelve-year-old girl. The plot revolves around the grief of Larkin, her parents, and her grandmother over the death of Larkin's baby brother. Healing occurs in the family when a toddler, named Sophie, is left on the family's doorstep.

Notice in the examples below how MacLachlan conveys emotions, temperament, and personality through personification and surprising similes and metaphors.

In the beginning of the novel, the family avoids discussing the loss of their baby. In one scene, Byrd, Larkin's grandmother, starts to talk about missing something and stops midsentence. Sadness momentarily engulfs everyone in the room, but dinner needs to be cooked. Notice how MacLachlan shows Larkin's mother slowly moving out of an engulfing sadness, then shaking it off using a simile.

*She got up slowly. Then with a quick smile and a **sudden shake of herself, like a wren**, she went inside.*

In a single sentence, MacLachlan conveys the family's shock, confusion and renewed grief when they discover a baby in a basket on their doorstep.

*It was quiet then, no one moving, **as if we were actors who had forgotten our lines.***

When Larkin's parents are teaching Sophie words, Larkin's mother spontaneously tells her to say, "Papa." Larkin's father becomes angry, reminding his wife that the baby is not theirs and not a substitute for their baby son that died. MacLachlan uses a simile about his voice to convey his emotion.

*He paused and when he spoke again his **voice sounded rough like rock scraping rock.***

One day, Larkin and her friend Lalo are coming home from the beach. Lalo notices a woman on the family's front porch, a woman he correctly assumes

to be Sophie's mother. Through figurative language, MacLachlan conveys Larkin's interpretation of the many feelings conveyed by the way Lalo says her name.

"Larkin," he whispered.

There was a silence. The woman on the porch didn't move.

*"Larkin," he said again. **He said it in a way I'd never heard before. It was the saddest sound, as if he was trying to say he knew how bad this was and to protect me at the same time, trying to wrap my name around me like his long wool scarf.***

When Julia, Sophie's mother hears her daughter talk, her sadness in missing her child's first words is expressed through personification.

Tears sat in the corners of her eyes.

Soon, Julia leaves on a ferry with Sophie. Larkin's family says good-bye at the dock and returns home. Byrd insists the family needs to talk. She believes that if they can talk about the loss of Sophie, they can finally talk about the baby who died and heal their grieving hearts. The sentence below uses a simile to convey Larkin's view of how difficult this will be for her mother.

*Mama was so quiet, **like a statue that might break apart if it was touched.***

The family's grief does resolve. There is one more simile, though that I would like to present because it is so striking. This is a passage that describes, Byrd, Larkin's grandmother:

*Byrd grew up in a grand house with pillars and many porches, and could have been a queen. She was seventy years old with white hair piled on her head and **rows of neck wrinkles like necklaces.***

From the examples above, I think you can grasp the power of figurative language to convey emotion, personality, and someone's physical appearance. Figurative language is equally powerful in describing and conveying the many different facets and emotional connections to places. In the document entitled *Examples of Figurative Language that create vivid Descriptions of People and Places*, you'll discover how authors of memoirs effectively use personification, similes, and metaphors to write about people and places. After the examples, there are exercises to guide you in creating your own similes and metaphors for the people and places that will be part of your life story.