

# FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

## THREE QUESTIONS LITERARY NINJAS ASK

**Figurative language** is the collective term for three literary devices:

- 1) Similes
- 2) Metaphors
- 3) Personification

Learn to spot, discuss and explain these devices in the poems you read. Use the following information as your guide:

### 1. What similes are there in this poem?

A simile compares one thing with another. They are easy to spot because words such as 'like' or 'as' are used.

The poet's aim is usually to emphasise or exaggerate a point. Alternatively, poets might use a simile because there are no adjectives powerful enough to communicate how they feel.

For example, can you say why Christina Rossetti, in a poem about being in love, wrote 'My heart is like a singing bird' rather than 'My heart is really, really happy'?

### 2. What metaphors are there in this poem?

A metaphor describes something as though it is something else.

When Romeo sees Juliet through a window, he famously declares:

*'...what light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.'*

The rising sun has many connotations: renewal, optimism, a fresh start, heavenly beauty, and so on. The metaphor therefore enables Shakespeare to pack lots of meaning into a small number of words.

### 3. Are there any examples of personification in this poem?

Personification (which is actually a form of metaphor) is where an object is described as though it is behaving in a human or animalistic way.

E.g. Sassoon describes October in the trenches of World War One thus:

*'October's bellowing anger  
breaks and cleaves'*

Personification is extremely useful to poets in creating atmosphere or mood.

## REMEMBER: LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS:

**BACK UP** their points with evidence from the text and say **HOW** figurative language conveys the poet's meaning.



# IMAGERY

## FIVE QUESTIONS LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS ASK

**Imagery** is the name we give to elements in the poem which describe what can be sensed.

Although the word ‘imagery’ suggests the idea of a picture, imagery itself is not necessarily visual:

### 1. What can be touched?

Can you find any images in the poem which suggest physical sensations? Here is an example from Keats:

*‘A burning forehead, and a parching tongue’*

Keats uses these images to evoke human weakness.

### 2. What can be seen?

Visual imagery is perhaps the most common. What does the poem help you to see?

*‘The sea is calm tonight.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits;’*

Here in ‘Dover Beach’ Matthew Arnold evokes, with simple language, a still sea at night time.

### 3. What can be smelled?

Does the poet evoke any smells, pleasant or unpleasant? In ‘Blackberry Picking’, Seamus Heaney writes:

*‘The juice was stinking too.’*

He is trying to convey the sour smell of rotting blackberries.

### 4. What can be heard?

Poets go to great lengths to evoke the experience of hearing different sounds. Here is Ezra Pound:

*There I heard naught save the harsh  
sea  
And ice-cold wave...’*

Pound is using sound to help him immerse the reader in the impression of being on a ship on a stormy sea.

### 5. What can be tasted?

Finally, there is taste. Here is Heaney again:

*You ate that first one and its  
flesh was sweet  
Like thickened wine...*

The poem from which this is taken, ‘Blackberry Picking’, is a deliberate assault on all the senses, immersing the reader in a vivid, if distant, memory.

## REMEMBER: LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS:

**BACK UP** their points with evidence from the text and say **HOW** imagery conveys the poet’s meaning.



# SOUNDS

## FOUR QUESTIONS LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS ASK

Great poets choose their words extremely carefully. This means they think not only about what words mean, but how they sound.

The **sounds** of words help create mood, pace and tone in a poem. Here are the four questions:

### 1. Is there any alliteration?

Alliteration is where words that are close together begin with the same consonants. E.g.

*'...while a baleful light,  
Flame more than light, flared  
from his eyes'*

In this extract from *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney uses alliteration to convey the impression of fire leaping up repeatedly in a monster's eyes.

### 2. Is there any assonance?

Assonance is where vowel sounds are repeated for effect. E.g.

*'Beside the lake, beneath the  
trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the  
breeze.'*

Wordsworth here enhances the harmonious mood of his poem with these repeated 'ee' sounds. By linking these

words through sound, Wordsworth creates a joyous, songlike impression in keeping with his happy feelings.

### 3. Is there any sibilance?

Sibilance is when sounds creating a 'hissing' or a 'slushing' effect:

*'I must confess that in my quest  
I felt depressed and restless'*

These Thin Lizzy lyrics repeat 'ess' sounds six times to convey the circular nature of depression and restlessness.

### 4. Is there any onomatopoeia?

Onomatopoeia is when a word mimics the sound it is describing. E.g.

*'Until the tinkling bottom had  
been covered  
With green ones...'*

Here in 'Blackberry Picking', Seamus Heaney uses the word 'tinkling', which evokes perfectly the sound of blackberries hitting the bottom of a tin can.

## REMEMBER: LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS:

**BACK UP** their points with evidence from the text and say **HOW** these techniques convey the poet's meaning.



# STRUCTURE

## EIGHT QUESTIONS LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS ASK

**Structure** is the word we use to describe how poets arrange their ideas in the poem. Poets tend to think extremely carefully about the information they convey to us and the *order* in which they convey it.

The structure of a poem is very often the key to its whole meaning.

To analyse the structure of a poem, ask the following questions of yourself:

- 1) **Sequence:** Does the poem have a clear beginning, middle and end? If so, what are these?
- 2) **Subject:** Is the poem about a single idea or is it a narrative, moving backwards and/or forwards through time?
- 3) **Flow:** Does the poem move smoothly through different stages, or are there sudden pauses, breaks or shocks?
- 4) **Mood:** What changes are there in mood? Mood is another word for 'atmosphere'. Poets tend to create mood or

atmosphere through their use of images.

- 5) **Voice:** What changes are there in voice? In other words, how does the character, outlook or personality of the speaker change during the poem?
- 6) **Tense:** Is the poem about the past, present, or future? Is it a mixture of these? Are there any switches in tense?
- 7) **Rhyme scheme:** Is there a rhyme scheme? If there is, is it consistent throughout the poem or does it change?
- 8) **Rhythm / pace:** How would you describe the rhythm and/or the pace of the poem? Are these consistent throughout the poem or do they change? If they change, do they change gradually or abruptly?

## REMEMBER: LITERARY NINJAS ALWAYS:

**BACK UP** their points with evidence from the text and say **HOW** structural techniques convey the poet's meaning.

