

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.

