



Writing with Force and Flair

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OVERVIEW

Exposure to rhetorical figures, once central to writing pedagogy, has largely fallen out of favor in composition. This chapter reintroduces today's students to the stylistic possibilities of figures of speech, drawing on an analogy to figure skating to illustrate how writing communicates with an audience through stylistic moves. In an accessible discussion of how and why to use figures, it provides an overview of the most common tropes (e.g., metaphor, hyperbole) and schemes (e.g. isocolon, anaphora) and offers brief definitions and examples to illustrate their variety and ubiquity. It discusses the situated nature of writing to acknowledge that while even academic writing employs rhetorical figures, not all figures are appropriate for every genre and context. The essay concludes with a set of style-based exercises to supplement a writing course. These include maintaining a commonplace book, analyzing texts, imitating passages, and practicing techniques of *copia* for stylistic flexibility. Some resources are recommended for further study.

If you watch figure skaters in the Winter Olympics, the only time I really do, you know the athleticism and artistry of these competitors.* You see it in their faces, in their bodies, in the way they fearlessly “attack” the ice. You can only marvel at the hours of practice and the slow accumulation of technical mastery required to make it all seem so effortless. Watching figure skating on TV, I always notice the commentary. The presenters speak a language incomprehensible to me to describe what we see. A double *this*, a triple *that*, a reverse *something-or-other*. All I see is

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skaters looking elegant as they weave intricate moves into beautiful and inspiring performances.

Writing, I think, is not unlike skating (or cooking or painting or piloting an airplane). Each of these activities may be learned and taught. Writing is one skill that, with sufficient “ice time,” it is possible to do passably well. Recently, I have thought about writing’s relation to skating in another way: in the connection between figure *skating* and the so-called figures of *speech*. I believe there are useful analogies between the twists and turns that skaters perform on the ice and the moves writers perform on the page. This essay makes a case for *figurative* language as indispensable to effective writing. I hope it helps to show how you can write with force and flair.

Every field has its share of technical terms for critical tools and concepts. While outsiders are often reduced to using “doohickey” or “thingamabob,” insiders know the differences among families of related terms. Every plumber knows her wrenches (e.g., monkey, socket, Allen). Italian cooks have intimate knowledge of pasta shapes (e.g., linguine, rigatoni). The same can be said of the many rhetorical devices of style for speaking and writing, including terms you already know such as *alliteration* (repeated sounds at the beginning of words (e.g., “clear and convincing evidence”). Fortunately, you don’t need to know the name of every figure to use them well.

At the same time, even modest exposure to some as yet unfamiliar terms for quite familiar features of language can help you develop a sense of what is possible in your writing. And knowing a range of *rhetorical figures* has a tangible benefit: you allow yourself to use more “whatchamacallits” in your writing because you realize they *can* be used. Literally hundreds of rhetorical figures—from *antimetabole* to *zeugma*—have been catalogued over time, beginning in ancient Greece and Rome. However, it is unlikely you will have reason to learn many of these figures by name. But it is important to realize that you *already* use them, or at least admire them. *Antimetabole*? From the Greek, meaning a change in direction, this is a reversal of word order for instructive or ironic effect, as in “We should eat to live, not live to eat.” Or, in the words of Malcolm X, “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock... Plymouth rock landed on us.” (232). And *Zeugma*? Also from the Greek, meaning to tie together, that’s the use of a single word to join two or more unrelated words or ideas, as in “He *lost* his keys and his temper” or “You are *beautiful* inside and out.” Typically, we only notice this figure when there is a difference in how a single word is used, as here with two senses of *lost*—a literal sense and a figural sense.

When I introduce such figures to my students, they wish they had learned more about them earlier. In that spirit of curiosity, then, I offer a brief tour of rhetorical figures you might wish to incorporate into your writing, give some concrete advice to help you get started, and end with some resources to help you learn more about the figures on your own.

TRYING OUT TROPES, SORTING OUT SCHEMES

The so-called figures of speech occupy a place in oratory and in writing at once central and marginal. Today, virtually every handbook of writing recognizes three “virtues” of style: clarity, correctness, and appropriateness. In classical times, however, and well into the nineteenth century, a fourth virtue of “ornament” was also recognized. It is to this category of ornament that the figures, in all their variety, belong. We might think of ornament as decoration or adornment, but originally *ornatus* meant something closer to furnished or well-equipped. Rhetorical figures, then, may be likened to the gear one carries as if in battle, on hand for when needed. They’re a Swiss army knife for words.

For a better sense of how rhetorical figures equip you to write with force and flair, it helps to recognize that “figure” has two overlapping senses: *expression* and *pattern*. In the first sense, figures are expressions at the level of word or phrase that deviate from ordinary or expected meaning. These include figures of speech such as metaphor and irony. These types of figures are also known as *tropes*. A trope (from the Greek, meaning “turn,” hence a turn of phrase) involves a substitution of one word or phrase for another or related word play. For instance, we may use “lion-hearted” as a metaphor for courage or “chicken” as its opposite. (In fact, “courage” comes from the French for heart.) Some other tropes you have likely encountered are *personification* (assigning human qualities to animals or inanimate objects, as in “Fortune smiled on us”) and *hyperbole* (exaggerated speech, as in “I’ve told you a million times!”).

Other rhetorical figures involve language that stands out for its shape. These are called *schemes*, verbal expressions that involve repetition, contrast, omission, or reversal of typical word order. Schemes (from the Greek, for “pattern”) generally occur at levels beyond the word and sometimes the sentence. They serve to structure ideas and to strengthen arguments. Indeed, if a figure of speech isn’t serving to advance an argument, it’s not really doing its job.

We typically think of figures as verbal moves that give distinction to our prose. Consider the memorable exhortation by President Kennedy in

his inaugural address: “And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country” (270). This famous sentence once again employs the figure of *antimetabole*. One of a handful of figures that invert sentence elements, this particular instance reinforces underlying calls for a new spirit of patriotism and public service. The sentence is not just a memorable turn of phrase—one way to understand figures—here the *form* of expression argues for a different way to think about the relationship between a government and its citizens. Try to imagine other ways to state this idea, and it becomes clear how powerful Kennedy’s phrasing is. More than standing out, figures do the heavy lifting. In contemporary language, figures are like verbal “apps” we download to our stylistic repertoire.

You might notice that I used a figure to discuss figures, specifically, the device of *simile* to compare one thing (figures) with another (digital tools). *Simile* (from the Greek for “likeness”) is perhaps the most common trope, together with its cousin *metaphor* (to use a metaphor of family resemblance). Note, too, that these two figures perform basic functions of thought through analogy. In other words, *metaphor* and *simile* are not just optional add-ons expressing what might otherwise be said in a literal, as opposed to a figurative, way. Rather, they *are* the very thoughts we express to make sense of things for ourselves and for others. Because they are so basic to thinking and communicating, figures well up to the surface naturally. They are recognizable enough and common enough to be given a name and to be used intentionally. But before they become lists of devices, they are first in our minds and in our speech.

Sometimes an idea bounces around in our brains, *wanting* to be a figure. Take the scheme of *polyptoton* (Greek for “many cases”), in which the same root word is repeated in different forms or parts of speech, such as *lose* (verb), *lost* (adjective), *loser* (noun) over one or more sentences. Or in a tight expression like “*Fight* the good *fight*.” Generated more or less by accident, often, these variations can be used more or less on purpose to shape material and to move minds. Figures become a strategy where used deliberately. For example, I used a *metaphor* “well up to the surface” to understand how a thought finds expression at the level of the sentence. In fact, as I was writing this paragraph I was hoping a metaphor might suggest itself to show how figures are both *naturally discovered* as well as *deliberately employed*. (Note the scheme of *parallelism* in the previous sentence?)

Indeed, metaphors and other figures are hard to avoid. They come to us as much as we to them. Yet we may find ourselves pushing them away, perhaps in the belief that they are inappropriate for a given audience, pur-

pose, or genre. This is especially the case in academic writing, where we want to avoid sounding verbose or “flowery.” (The figures are also known as the “flowers of rhetoric.”) But even academic and professional writing uses tropes like *metaphor* and schemes like *parallelism* to communicate, argue, and persuade. It can be as simple as using multiple words with similar endings (e.g., *education*, *compensation*) while avoiding obvious rhymes (e.g., *rosy*, *nosy*). All writing has a context that brings creative pressure to bear on our choice of stylistic tools.

When we write, we must be open to figures that suggest themselves. Like the use of wild yeast to start a dough in artisanal baking, our use of figures is largely a matter of letting things happen naturally, at first, and later being willing to “knead the dough” with our hands. For example, in the previous paragraph, I used both balance and repetition to pair “more or less by accident” with “more or less on purpose.” In truth, I did so *more or less* by accident. Initially, the phrasing came to me. I wanted to contrast inspiration (wild yeast metaphor) and intention (kneading metaphor) by using parallel phrasing to set off contrasting ideas. (This is the scheme of *antithesis*.) After first writing “deliberately,” I later chose “on purpose” to highlight the parallelism.

I was also aware that this particular use of phrases of equal length was an instance of *isocolon* (Greek for “of same length”). These figures of parallel construction at the level of word, phrase or even clause are perhaps the most common scheme to signify relationships between two or more things. They take *some* effort but are not especially exotic. For another example of *isocolon*, refer back to the heading for this section: Trying Out Tropes, Sorting Out Schemes.) At times, balanced expressions take the form of a logical or temporal progression, as in the famous *tricolon* of Julius Caesar describing victory in the Gallic wars: “Veni, vidi, vinci” (“I came; I saw; I conquered.”). Or consider Abraham Lincoln’s immortal use of this same figure in the Gettysburg Address: “government *of the people, by the people, for the people* shall not perish from the earth” (Lincoln).

TOO NOTICEABLE? HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

As I have said, no use of figures, no aspect of writing, can be assessed apart from its context. To some audiences, a metaphor will seem far-fetched, the injection of irony ineffective. Does my analogy of writing to figure skating work for you? Does my characterization of figures as verbal “apps” strike you as appropriate for this essay? These are the kinds of questions you must consider whenever you use tropes or schemes to bring your material

to life before an audience. The better we know our audience, purpose, and genre, the more likely we are to select effective “verbal” apps. When we are less confident, we reign in our figurative imagination, choose to play it straight.

If we are not careful, writing with force and flare comes across as mere show—in the useful figure of *cliché*, all hat and no cattle. Or as any cook can tell you, a *little* nutmeg goes a long way. To extend this culinary analogy, rhetorical figures may be likened to a spice rack, without which writing cannot be anything but bland. What is needed is the right *combination* of spices as a matter of both taste and tradition. Different occasions call for different types and degrees of figuration. What may work in a personal essay does not necessarily work in a research report.

Verbal style ranges from very simple to highly ornate. Ornamental writing draws attention to itself as well as to its subject matter. In doing so, it pronounces an attitude about its subject, maybe solemn or perhaps irreverent. Our writing may risk seeming overly poetic or sounding too much like oratory.

Many students, I have noticed, are fond of the *rhetorical question* as a device for inciting a reader’s interest. It’s true that this move can be something of a crutch, since it’s easier to ask a series of questions than to state a claim outright. Despite that risk, I encourage my students to consider posing a question at times to focus their readers’ attention and to let readers know that the writer is thinking of them, interacting with them. Many scholars of rhetoric distinguish such interactive devices as *rhetorical questions* from the two categories of tropes and schemes we have already identified. These so-called *figures of thought* (in contrast to *figures of speech*) include the technique of *anticipating objections* (in Greek, *prolepsis*), such as “I know what you are going to say, but hear me out.” Most effective writing consists of well-reasoned arguments *and* a range of figurative devices to deliver those points efficiently and elegantly.

Likewise, I encourage my students to consider the powerful scheme of *anaphora*, although sparingly. *Anaphora* (from the Greek meaning “to carry back”) is repetition at the beginning of successive phrases clauses, or sentences. Here again is Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address: “But in a larger sense, *we cannot* dedicate, *we cannot* consecrate, *we cannot* hallow this ground” (Lincoln 23). Here, Lincoln’s repeated use of “we cannot” in successive clauses gives solemnity to a speech honoring the dead, but it also reinforces his argument that “we,” the living, must turn from mourning to the task of seeing that the dead did not die in vain.

When I survey my students, they admit reluctance to use *anaphora* or other figures of repetition, worried they will be faulted for being repetitive. Given that all writing is contextual, I cannot say I blame them. But *anaphora* and related figures of repetition should always be in your toolkit of possible figures. Intentional repetition is different from haphazard redundancy. Readers like knowing they are in the good hands of writers who have thought carefully about what they want to do in their writing.

Especially, I tell my students that as we write, we must also listen. Most writing that we admire brings the immediacy of sound to the page, including through rhetorical devices that appeal as much to the ear as to the eye. The deliberate use of sound-based devices like *alliteration* (repeated sounds at the beginning of words) and, of course, *rhyme* (repeated sounds at the end of words) can be the difference between a serviceable sentence and a spectacular one. Okay, I suppose rhyme is one figure we should think twice about using in academic contexts, but we should never rule it out entirely.

On the whole, I believe that we must overcome a long-standing suspicion about the use of rhetorical figures, a suspicion that we inherited from the so-called Age of Reason. In this historical period following the Renaissance—a high-water mark for ornament—figurative language fell into disrepute. Because of their recognized effects on emotions, the figures came to be regarded as *too* persuasive, appropriate for advertising rhetoric but not academic writing, the stuff of poetry rather than prose. This bias is a major reason why the figures, although once taught to every student, are now more likely encountered in the study of literature than in the writing classroom. In general, you have not been encouraged to incorporate such devices into your writing. Perhaps it's time to try?

GO FIGURE

In a course I have taught several times entitled “Go Figure,” my students learn about style through hands-on attention to tropes and schemes. Based on my experience, I highlight four practices you can do in or out of any writing course, including first year composition. Each of these activities prepares you to write with force and flair, whether in an academic paper or in some other context.

FIELDWORK

One way to learn about something is to gather specimens. Like pressed flowers, figures found in various places can be assembled into a common-

place book or, as here, a “figure journal.” I recommend one or two entries a week in a semester-long course. Each entry, on its own page, is an example of a figure identified, defined, and analyzed for its effects. By collecting your examples, you discover just how many “real world” instances of tropes and schemes are to be found. In a classroom, each student might have a turn presenting a figure. This fun project cements knowledge of figures and their terms. It’s a fascinating way to see that figures identified more than two thousand years ago, in different languages, are alive and well today in English.

ANALYSIS

To see which figures appear in various genres and contexts, you can analyze texts of interest to you. Some may be rich in tropes, others in schemes. Comparing academic and popular writing or fiction and non-fiction can give you a perspective on tone and stylistic tools. Select several passages to analyze and try to identify as many figures as you can, looking for any patterns to emerge. You might examine several texts in the same genre or different texts by the same author. Ask yourself, what accounts for the presence or absence of particular figures? How do audience and purpose influence the use of figures? Time spent in close reading of this kind can have a very positive effect on your own writing.

IMITATION

Paying close attention to other writers can lead to outright imitation. If analysis is good, imitation is better. Since classical times, students have copied passages, word for word, to get inside writing they, or their teachers, admire. They then produce a close imitation. In my “Go Figure” course, we choose short passages to imitate, just a sentence or two, usually with a particularly distinctive or ornate style. Everyone first copies the passages, pen in hand, to get a feel for each sentence. We then attempt a phrase-by-phrase imitation, putting new content into the existing sentence structure. Comparing our individual responses to this exercise is both enlightening and entertaining. A weekly imitation exercise like this has a cumulative effect of helping you internalize figurative devices and learn the flow of sentences.

COPIA (PLENTY)

In contemporary approaches to writing and writing instruction, a certain economy of expression leaves many rhetorical options off the table. Many

of us have internalized values of brevity and efficiency that discourage letting our words run wild, even when drafting. We don't tolerate more words than are strictly necessary. But writing with a feel for figures encourages strategies of *copia* (plenty), that is, having more things to say and more ways to say a thing. The most famous account of copious writing was composed five hundred years ago by Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus in his popular textbook of 1512, *De Copia*. Erasmus championed stylistic fluency to achieve an abundant style and recommended a valuable exercise: write a sentence in many, many ways. As an example, Erasmus offers 195 variations, all in Latin, on a base sentence, "Your letter pleased me mightily" (348). To reach that high number, Erasmus employs a wide range of synonyms—*missive* or *epistle* for *letter*, *delighted* for *pleased*—but also many figures of speech, chiefly tropes that substitute one word or phrase for another. These include *metaphor*: "Your communication *poured vials of joy on my head*" (349); *synecdoche* (substituting part for whole): "Your *lines* [for entire letter] conveyed to me the greatest joy" (349); and *metonymy* (associated thing): "To be sure your letter delighted *my spirits* [for me]" (349). Another instance of *metonymy* refers to the *hand* that wrote the letter: "I was in no small measure refreshed in spirit by your grace's hand" (349). Erasmus also uses the interesting figure of *litotes*, a kind of understatement by negation: "Your epistle afforded me *no small delight*" (349). In our course, "Go Figure," we experimented with producing 50 to 100 variations of a base sentence, trying to use as many figures as we could. Try this, and there's no question you will learn the ins and outs of writing by performing these sentence sit-ups.

Each of these practices of compiling, analyzing, imitating, and varying offers something of value. They can be part of any writing class in small bursts alongside formal writing. Of course, this ongoing practice leads to a final practice: using rhetorical devices yourself in actual papers. In the past, I have asked my students to incorporate and identify figures of their own, say six or more in a four to five page paper. This expectation encourages experimentation in drafting and revising, since all texts present opportunities for ornamentation as they take shape.

Another word for experimentation is *play*. My approach recognizes the value of play. Too often, we focus on clarity and correctness to the exclusion of other virtues. Not that we shouldn't value being clear and error-free in our writing. It's just that we can also write, as I say, with force and flair. Even academic writing is not a "figure-free" zone. While I cannot guarantee that using figures will allow you to "skate through" a writing course, I

can promise that *figure* skating through composition will make your writing both more enjoyable and more impactful.

It is through ornament in your choice and arrangement of words that readers relate to your writing. It is through ornament that *you* relate to your writing. To return to the ice once more, figures are best understood as the glides, pivots, jumps, and spins by which you communicate what you really want to say to your audience. Through figures subtle and bold, you communicate attitude, passion, dedication to craft, expertise, respect for your audience and your subject.

So give it a whirl!

LEARN MORE ABOUT RHETORICAL FIGURES

Throughout this essay, I have referenced a handful or two of the most common tropes (e.g., metaphor, synecdoche) and schemes (e.g., anaphora, isocolon) to give you a sense of both how they work and how widespread they are. At the same time, I have not tried to identify *all* the figures, let alone explain them in detail. I hope I piqued your interest enough that you will learn more about them on your own or with the help of your teacher.

Just as there are dozens of figures, there are many Web sites and books that explain and catalog figures of speech. I note two Web sites in particular:

- For a clear overview and comprehensive account of figurative language from a respected academic source, consult *Silva Rhetoricae* (The Forest of Rhetoric), hosted by Gideon Burton of Brigham Young University. There you will find multiple pages breaking down figures into categories beyond just tropes and schemes.
- For a comical and quirky take on figurative language in everyday life, check out Jay Heinrich's *Figures of Speech Served Fresh*. For ten years, Heinrich (aka Figaro) posted witty essays drawing from politics, literature, and popular culture to show that figurative language is indeed everywhere.

Either of these sites will boost your confidence to welcome the figures into your writing.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which figures in this essay or elsewhere do you want to experiment with in your writing?

2. What figures in writing by others do you admire and wish to emulate? After reading this essay, can you better recognize figurative devices, if not necessarily by name?
3. What can you learn about writing as a craft from Erasmus' exercise in *copia*? How could you push past 50, 100, or even 200 variations?
4. What rhetorical figures are appropriate for academic writing? What rhetorical figures are inappropriate for academic writing? What borderline cases can you identify for particular figures?
5. Now that you know a little more about rhetorical figures, can you identify any that seem to be part of your stylistic tool kit in your everyday writing, perhaps on social media?

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR WRITING WITH FORCE AND FLAIR BY WILLIAM T. FITZGERALD

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay on the use of rhetorical figures is ideally taught as part of a general approach to writing, and writing in college contexts, as a means for exploring attitudes, expectations, and presumed restrictions that students (and, often, teachers) may bring to the composition classroom. It is intended to start conversation and spark interest in experimenting with the resources of stylistic figuration.

Students will typically know a handful of rhetorical figures by name (alliteration, onomatopoeia) based on exposure to literary devices in previous English (literature) classes. But they are not likely to think of rhetorical figures as tools they can use in *their* writing. This chapter encourages exactly that, but unless students are given permission, encouragement even, from their instructor, they are unlikely to follow up on this invitation.

A challenge in teaching this essay is anchoring it to exercises in language exploration and play, as suggested in the section “Go Figure” and below. A second challenge is supplementing a reading of the chapter together with further discussion and examples. Figurative language is everywhere, from puns and sound-based features of spoken and written prose to punctuation effects in digital environments. Indeed, there are likely new figures.

A final challenge is one this author has wrestled with personally with his students. How much Greek and Roman nomenclature is too much? There is no question that learning a catalog of rhetorical figures is overwhelming and arguably beside the point of the essay. What’s more important is to teach patterns and options rather than assimilate a list of strange-sounding names. At the same time, it’s useful to recognize these established moves have names—and a long lineage. So long as students know they won’t be tested on their recall of specific figures, it’s useful to call the figures by their names when exploring their features and functions.

QUESTIONS

1. Which figures in this essay or elsewhere do you want to experiment with in your writing?
2. What figures in writing by others do you admire and wish to emulate? After reading this essay, can you better recognize figurative devices, if not necessarily by name?

3. What can you learn about writing as a craft from Erasmus' exercise in *copia*? How could you push past 50, 100, or even 200 variations?
4. What rhetorical figures are appropriate for academic writing? What rhetorical figures are inappropriate for academic writing? What borderline cases can you identify for particular figures?
5. Now that you know a little more about rhetorical figures, can you identify any that seem to you to be part of your stylistic tool kit in your everyday writing, perhaps on social media?

ACTIVITIES

This essay ends with brief descriptions of four exercises that have been part of courses I have taught on style or figures of speech in particular: compiling a figure journal, analyzing texts, imitating passages, practicing *copia*. It's probably not prudent to include all of these exercises in a single semester of first year writing. One or two, carefully scaffolded and sustained, seems a productive sidebar addition to a first year writing course. Those identified here are intended as models to be adapted to local situations. This essay and related exercises should be introduced early in a semester, around the time of a first paper draft or revision.

Hands-on attention to style and figuration meets students as readers and writers in unexpected ways to boost awareness of rhetorical aspects of writing. Rather than see prose as a neutral vehicle for expressing ideas, students can learn to notice elements of design and infer intended effects. Such insights can thus transfer to their own writing. But do not expect an immediate impact on the writing that students do. Confidence in employing figures does not come easily.

A final activity, then, is to encourage students to experiment with rhetorical figures in their own papers. Students might be asked, per the questions above, if there are particular figures they would want to use in a future writing project. They might also be asked to identify a handful of figures they find themselves using, whether by design or fortuitously.