

# Extended Metaphor



## DEFINITION

What is an extended metaphor? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An extended metaphor is a [metaphor](#) that unfolds across multiple lines or even paragraphs of a text, making use of multiple interrelated metaphors within an overarching one. So while "life is a highway" is a simple metaphor, it becomes an extended metaphor when you say: "Life is a highway that takes us through green pastures, vast deserts, and rocky mountains. Sometimes your car breaks down or you run out of gas, and sometimes you get lost. Friends are the roadmaps that help you get where you're going." Now you've spread the idea of "life = highway" across multiple sentences and related ideas, and created an extended metaphor.

Some additional key details about extended metaphors:

- Extended metaphors are distinguished from regular metaphors by their complexity (or how many different metaphors they contain) as well as their length. Extended metaphors can span an entire story or poem, or just a few clauses of the same sentence.
- As in a regular metaphor, the comparisons created in an extended metaphor are not meant to be taken literally. For instance, nobody is suggesting that life is *literally* a highway when they use that common metaphor. Rather, extended metaphors are [figurative](#)—they create meaning *beyond* the literal meanings of their words.
- The terms "conceit" and "extended metaphor" can be used interchangeably, though "conceit" is also sometimes used in an even more specialized way than "extended metaphor" is.

## Extended Metaphor Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce extended metaphor: ex-**ten**-id **met**-uh-fore

## Extended Metaphors in Depth

All metaphors can be broken down into two elements: a **tenor** and a **vehicle**.

- The **tenor** is the thing a metaphor describes.
- The **vehicle** is the thing to which the tenor is compared.

For instance, in the metaphor "Life is a highway," life is the tenor because it's the thing being described, while "highway" is the vehicle because it's the thing life is being compared to. The metaphor operates by borrowing key attributes from the vehicle and attributing them to the tenor. The "Life is a highway" metaphor takes the attributes of a highway—including its association with journeys,

adventures, speed, and the fact that we all travel them side-by-side—and connects them to life.

## The Structure of Extended Metaphors

Extended metaphors have a main tenor and vehicle that make up the overarching or primary metaphor, but they also make use of other tenors and vehicles as the metaphor becomes more elaborate. Let's continue to use the example from above:

Life is a highway that takes us through green pastures, vast deserts, and rocky mountains. Sometimes your car breaks down or you run out of gas, and sometimes you get lost. Friends are the roadmaps that help you get where you're going.

Within the overarching metaphor of "life is a highway," several other metaphors make up the extended metaphor, and each one has its own **tenor** and **vehicle**: the various **stages of life** are like the **varied landscapes** of a large country; the **challenges of life** are like **car troubles**; **friends** are like **road maps**.

## Extended Metaphor and Related Terms

People often use the term extended metaphor to refer to things that aren't actually extended metaphors. Here are a couple things that people often—and understandably—confuse for extended metaphors:

- **Recurring metaphors:** An extended metaphor is not just a single metaphor that repeats throughout a text. For instance, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, the image of a monster is used several times throughout the book as a metaphor for jealousy. The repeated use of the same metaphor in multiple places throughout a text does *not* make it an example of an extended metaphor; an extended metaphor must contain different tenors and vehicles, that together fit into the metaphor of the overarching tenor and vehicle.
- **Symbolism:** [Symbolism](#) is a literary device in which a writer uses one thing—usually a physical object or phenomenon—to represent something more abstract. A famous example of a symbol in literature occurs in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when Atticus tells his children Jem and Scout that it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because mockingbirds cause no harm to anyone; they just sing. Because of these traits, mockingbirds in the novel symbolize innocence and beauty, while killing a mockingbird symbolizes an act of senseless cruelty. Although it might seem like this constitutes an extended metaphor, it doesn't. The main reason is that the story about the mockingbird is supposed to be *literally* true—it's not a [figurative](#) use of language to illustrate or describe something else. Furthermore, in stories that use symbolism,

writers don't clearly state what a symbol represents, whereas in metaphor they typically do, making it clear that the use of language is actually figurative.

- **Allegories:** An [allegory](#) is a story in which essentially every character and event have symbolic meanings. The main difference between an allegory and an extended metaphor is that, in allegories, writers don't clearly state what each character or event represents, whereas in a metaphor they typically would, making it clear that the use of language is figurative. Also, metaphors state or imply that one thing *is* another thing, while in allegories (as with symbolism more generally), one thing might *stand for* another thing, but it isn't said to actually *be* that other thing.

### Extended Metaphor and Conceit

[Conceit](#) is a term that is similar to extended metaphor. In fact, conceit is often used as a synonym for metaphor—and to use it in that way is perfectly correct. However, conceit also has another, slightly more complicated definition. Here's a quick run-down of the two different ways the terms can be used:

- **Conceit can be a synonym for extended metaphor:** Most often, conceit is used interchangeably with extended metaphor to describe any metaphor or analogy that spans a longer passage in a work of literature.
- **Conceit can refer to a particularly fanciful or even strained extended metaphor:** However, for some people (and literary critics in particular) the word conceit carries the connotation of a *fanciful* or elaborate extended metaphor in which an unlikely, far-fetched, or strained comparison is made between two things. The term is most often used to refer to such metaphors in Renaissance literature and the poetry of the 17th century (such as "metaphysical poetry"). To learn more about this definition, take a look at our entry on [conceit](#).



## EXAMPLES

The following examples of extended metaphors are taken from literature, music, and speeches, showing just how prevalent extended metaphors are in all sorts of writing.

### Extended Metaphor in Frost's *The Road Not Taken*

Robert Frost's famous poem is an example of an extended metaphor in which the tenor (or the thing being spoken about) is never stated explicitly—but it's clear that the poet is using the road less traveled as a metaphor for leading an unconventional way of life. The entire poem, then, is an extended metaphor.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

### Extended Metaphor in *As You Like It*

This passage, spoken by the character Jaques in Shakespeare's [As You Like It](#), has become rather famous for its initial metaphor of "All the world's a stage." But not as many people know that the famous line is just the beginning of an extended metaphor, which contains several metaphors within it, using the language of scenes, actors, and parts. Over all, the lines develop an extended metaphor of remarkable breadth.

JAQUES: All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms....

...Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

To analyze just one part of this extended metaphor, in the final sentence Jaques speaks of the "last scene of all," referencing death—when each of us "plays the part" of someone who has regressed to a childlike state, having lost everything: teeth, vision, taste, and, finally, life.

### Extended Metaphor in *Romeo and Juliet*

Romeo delivers this monologue in Act 2, Scene 2 of [Romeo and Juliet](#), after sneaking into Juliet's garden and catching a glimpse of her on her balcony. Romeo compares Juliet to a radiant sun, and then extends the metaphor by entreating her to "kill the envious moon."

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?  
 It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
 Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,  
 Who is already sick and pale with grief,  
 That thou her maid art far more fair than she:  
 Be not her maid, since she is envious;  
 Her vestal livery is but sick and green  
 And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.

The moon is used here as a symbol of virginity, so when Romeo states that Juliet is the moon's maid, he means that she's still a virgin, and when he entreats her to "kill the moon" and "cast off" its vestal livery (a garment worn by virgins), he's suggesting that she should part with her virginity. The metaphor of the sun (Juliet) killing the moon (her virginity) works because the sun can be said to "kill the moon" each day—in the sense that its bright light drowns out the light of the moon in the sky, making it invisible.

### Extended Metaphor in Katy Perry's "Firework"

In "Firework," Perry uses an extended metaphor to compare a firework to an inner "spark" of resilience which, in the context of the song, stands in opposition to the dreary experience of life and the difficulty of communicating with others. Here's an excerpt of the lyrics that captures the extended metaphor in action:

Do you know that there's still a chance for you?  
 'Cause there's a spark in you  
 You just gotta ignite the light  
 And let it shine  
 Just own the night  
 Like the Fourth of July  
 'Cause baby, you're a firework  
 C'mon, show 'em what you're worth  
 Make 'em go "Aah, aah, aah"  
 As you shoot across the sky  
 Baby, you're a firework  
 C'mon, let your colors burst  
 Make 'em go, "Aah, aah, aah"  
 You're gonna leave them all in awe, awe, awe

### Extended Metaphor in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

The following quote from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is a clear example of extended metaphor, as MLK builds upon the initial metaphor of "cashing a check" in each successive sentence:

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men,

would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use extended metaphors for many of the same reasons they use [metaphors](#) in general:

- To explain or describe an abstract concept in vivid and memorable terms.
- To help the reader make a new, insightful connection between two different entities that might not have seemed related.
- To help communicate personal or imaginary experiences in terms to which readers can relate.
- To lead the reader to surprising and important discoveries by connecting different spheres of experience and language. The [figurative](#) meaning that metaphors create can help a reader to see the world or a concept in a new way.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Extended Metaphor](#): An in-depth explanation of metaphor, its history, and how it relates to other figures of speech.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Metaphor](#): A basic definition and etymology of the term—it comes from the Greek *metaphora*, meaning "a transfer."
- [Extended Metaphors on YouTube](#): A video of Jaques' famous "seven ages" monologue, as delivered by Kevin Kline, in Kenneth Branagh's [As You Like It](#).
- [The Road not Taken aloud](#): Audio of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken."

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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