

Litotes



DEFINITION

What is litotes? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Litotes is a [figure of speech](#) and a form of understatement in which a sentiment is expressed [ironically](#) by negating its contrary. For example, saying "It's [not the best weather](#) today" during a hurricane would be an example of litotes, implying through ironic understatement that the weather is, in fact, horrible.

Some additional key details about litotes:

- Litotes is pretty simple in the way it works: instead of stating something directly, you state that the contrary statement is *not* true.
- Typically, the contrary statement will be phrased as some sort of superlative (for example, "he's not the sharpest tool in the shed"). This is part of what makes litotes an example of understatement, since what's actually being expressed is "He's *far from* the sharpest tool in the shed."
- Litotes must contain a negative statement (as in, "*not* the best weather").

Litotes Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce litotes: **lie**-tuh-teez

Identifying Litotes

There are a number of things you can look for in order to identify whether or not a statement is litotes.

Litotes is Always a Form of Understatement

Litotes is a form of understatement, the intentional presentation of something as smaller, worse, or lesser than it really is. While some phrases might look like litotes at first glance, if they do not contain understatement, then they do not count as litotes. For instance, the expression "leave no stone unturned" contains a double negative and resembles certain examples of litotes (such as, "She wasn't unconvinced"). But there's actually no understatement in "leave no stone unturned," only a command to be thorough.

Litotes Always Involves Negation

If the phrase *is* an understatement, but does not contain negation, then it's not litotes. For example, if you said of a disgusting dish "it's edible," then your assessment would be understatement but not litotes ("It's not inedible" would be the litotic example).

Litotes Usually Works by Negating a Superlative or Extreme Statement

Litotes works by making its understatement obvious. It usually does this by negating a statement that is either extreme or involves words that are superlative, such as "best" or "most." For example, "[I'm not starving](#)" uses litotes by negating the extreme word "starving." It communicates that, while you may not be *starving*, you are in fact pretty hungry. In contrast, it's hard to imagine anyone ever successfully using the sentence "I'm not hungry" as a form of ironic understatement that actually communicates that they are, in fact, hungry. The presence of the extreme word, or of a superlative like "most" or "best" is usually necessary to make litotes work.

Litotes Can Depend on Context

Whether a particular sentence does or doesn't function as litotes can depend on the context in which it's said. Some negative phrases might be litotes in one context, and just a plain old sentence in a different context. For example:

- The sentence "It's not a Picasso" is just a regular sentence that contains no litotes if it's said in response to someone mistaking a Monet painting for a Picasso.
- But "it's not a Picasso" *is* litotes if someone is criticizing their badly-painted amateur artwork, with the implication being that the painting is *far from* being a Picasso.

Litotes Can Depend on Intonation and Other Quirks of Speech

Just as the context of a sentence can impact whether a statement is or isn't litotes, so can a speaker's intonation, pauses, or other features of their speech. For instance:

- That play was not the best.
- That play was... **not** the best.

The first sentence above might simply mean that the play was just okay, in which case it is not a case of litotes because it means exactly what it says—it wasn't the best. The second sentence, with its pause and emphasis on "not," though, seems to imply that the play was actually terrible. That second example would be litotes.

Litotes Can Risk Lack of Clarity

A common grievance about litotes is that, since it avoids directness, precision, and clarity, it can obscure what the writer really means to say. For instance, in the sentence, "Ten thousand dollars is [not an inconsiderable sum](#) of money," the writer seems to avoid stating that ten thousand dollars is actually a considerable sum of money. The statement might come across as timid or coy rather than direct, which can be frustrating for readers.

Similarly, negative statements in particular can lack clarity because, instead of affirming a truth, they simply negate a possibility. In other words, to say "She **wasn't unhappy** with her new car," if used as litotes, implies that the recipient of the car was, to some extent, happy. However it's unclear what her exact reaction was: was she just a bit happy, or ecstatic? Litotes, then, allows the speaker to avoid making statements with the precision of a statement in the affirmative (such as, "She was thrilled by the car," or "She was surprised to get a car").

Litotes and Verbal Irony

Litotes is a special form of [verbal irony](#). Like litotes, verbal irony is a [figure of speech](#) in which the statement expressed is contrary to what is meant (though the true meaning is typically understood by the listener/reader). However, unlike litotes verbal irony does not have to involve understatement or the affirmation of something through the negation of its contrary. For example, after a catastrophic dinner party:

- **A verbally irony statement could be:** "Well, that went smoothly."
- **A statement using litotes could be:** "Well, that wasn't the best dinner party."

Verbal irony simply has to involve a meaning other than the literal meaning of the stated phrase. Verbal irony can involve sarcasm, overstatement, or understatement. To sum up, then: litotes is a particular type of verbal irony.



EXAMPLES

Litotes is a common literary device that appears everywhere, from daily conversation and pop culture to literature and political contexts.

Litotes Examples in Literature

Litotes is more common in everyday speech than it is in literature, where examples of litotes are oftentimes so subtle that they go unnoticed.

Litotes in T.S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock"

In this excerpt from the iconic poem "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot, the self-conscious middle-aged man insists on his insignificance in the world by using [litotes](#):

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in
 upon a platter,
 I am **no prophet**—and here's **no great matter**

In that final sentence, the speaker is using litotes to communicate that he's an ordinary human ("I am no prophet"), and that the subject on which he fixates is insignificant ("here's no great matter"). Further,

because the poem comments on the stifled decorum of civilized society, the air of politeness that litotes brings to this passage serves the poem's tone perfectly.

Litotes in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In an extreme case of understatement, the character Mercutio in [Romeo and Juliet](#) ironically understates the size and depth of the wound he's received from Tybalt through [litotes](#).

No, 'tis **not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church-door**, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.

Litotes in Charles Wolfe's "The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna"

The first stanza from Wolfe's 1817 poem arguably contains an example of [litotes](#), depending on how it's read. The poet remarks on the absence of drums, funeral music, and soldiers' farewell shots to suggest a silent, unceremonious burial for "our hero."

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
 As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
 O'er the grave where our hero was buried.

By mentioning the absence of these specific sounds, Wolfe draws the reader's attention to them, inviting the reader to at once imagine the sounds (what could have been under different circumstances) even as he makes clear that there were no such sounds at this funeral. While this passage could be read as making an understatement about how silent the funeral was, it could also be read as a simple statement of fact (there were no drums, no music, no firing of guns), in which case it would *not* be considered an example of litotes.

Litotes in Jeanette Wall's *The Glass Castle*

This excerpt from the memoir [The Glass Castle](#) illustrates the subtle way that the irony in [litotes](#) can have a cutting, rather than polite, effect.

He looked at the dishes. I knew what he was thinking, what he thought every time he saw a spread like this one. He shook his head and said, "You know, **it's really not that hard** to put food on the table if that's what you decide to do."
 "Now, no recriminations," Lori told him.

Brian, the adult child of negligent parents, uses litotes here to reprimand his parents for failing to perform a task that he considers to be easy. Brian's tone might be less bitter or less sharp if he hadn't used litotes. For example, he could have said, more politely, "feeding a family is easy if you make it a priority."

Litotes Examples in Common Expressions

Litotes is common in daily speech and everyday expressions. Here are some examples, paired with their probable meanings.

- It's **not rocket science**. (It's about as simple as it gets.)
- He's **no spring chicken**. (He's getting older.)
- It's **not my first rodeo**. (I'm very experienced.)
- He **isn't the brightest bulb** in the box. (He's somewhat dumb.)
- You **won't be sorry** you bought this knife set. (You'll be happy you bought this knife set.)
- I **don't deny that it was wrong**. (I admit that it was wrong.)
- The trip **wasn't a total loss**. (The trip was mostly bad with some good elements.)
- He **doesn't always have the best sense** of direction. (He has a lousy sense of direction.)
- Graduating from college was **no mean feat**. (Graduating from college was a major achievement.)
- Parties just **aren't my cup of tea**. (I hate parties.)
- He's **not without his reasons** for leaving. (He has reasons for leaving.)



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use litotes to invoke the absence of a thing or quality, to soften harsh phrases, and sometimes for a bitingly ironic touch.

Litotes Describes Things by Invoking What They *Aren't*

In litotes, things are somewhat paradoxically described in terms of what they are *not*. So, when in *Beauty and the Beast* Belle says of the Beast, "He's **no Prince Charming**," that phrase conjures Prince Charming in the audience's mind. Litotes, then, involves a sort of verbal sleight of hand, since it both brings a thing to mind and emphasizes its absence. This can be useful when a writer wants to simultaneously call an image or quality into focus and dispel it through negation. For instance, when T.S. Eliot's speaker says "I am **no prophet**," Eliot intentionally leads the reader to imagine a prophet, even though that's exactly what the speaker claims he isn't.

This effect is especially useful in showing, in literature, what *could have been*. In Charles Wolfe's poem, the description, "**not a drum was heard, not a funeral note**," makes the reader see what was, presumably, expected at a British soldier's burial, therefore making vivid the reality of the soldier's fate.

Litotes Can Be Polite

Litotes is often used as a milder, gentler way of navigating requests, criticism, and conversation in general. For instance, the phrase, "**I wouldn't say no** to a drink" may seem less demanding (though more indirect) than "I'd like a drink." Further, the harsh sound of criticism can often be softened through the use of litotes. For instance, "He's **not as young** as he used to be" is more tactful than "He's gotten old," and "She **isn't exactly a world class chef**" takes the edge off the statement "She's a poor cook." This effect is related to euphemism, in which soft or indirect phrasing is used in place of blunt phrasing.

It Can Have a Comic or Snarky Effect

While litotes can be polite, it is also frequently a tool used in comic or snarky statements. "Unfortunately the senator **isn't a genius**" is an ironic way of insulting a senator's intelligence. Rather than being polite, it's a deliberately snarky and demeaning statement that uses irony and understatement to enhance its bite. So while litotes can help those who want to sound polite, it can also give a cutting edge to those who want to use it to win laughs or insult someone.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [Brigham Young University Entry on Litotes](#): A brief but clear definition of litotes.
- [Wikipedia Page on Litotes](#): An imperfect entry, but useful for a basic definition and different types of examples.
- [Guardian Article on Litotes](#): A piece about the device in the context of British politics.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Lambert-Sluder, Rose. "Litotes." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Lambert-Sluder, Rose. "Litotes." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/litotes>.