

Metaphor



DEFINITION

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

A metaphor is a [figure of speech](#) that compares two different things by saying that one thing *is* the other. The comparison in a metaphor can be stated explicitly, as in the sentence "Love is a battlefield." Other times, the writer may make this equation between two things *implicitly*, as in, "He was wounded by love." The comparisons created by metaphor are not meant to be taken literally. Rather, metaphors are [figurative](#)—they create meaning *beyond* the literal meanings of their words. For instance, these examples are, of course, not saying that love is actually a field of battle or that the person actually got a physical injury from love. Instead, they capture how love can be painful, a struggle, even a showdown between opponents, and—as many good metaphors do—through their comparison they make description more vivid, more relatable, or reveal new ways of seeing the world.

Some additional key details about metaphor:

- Metaphor is one of the most common [figures of speech](#), used by writers throughout history and across the world. They are common in everyday speech and all forms of writing, from narrative fiction, to poetry, to persuasive writing.
- Metaphor is a type of [analogy](#): a comparison between two things or ideas. Take a look at the entry that covers [analogy](#) to learn more about the difference between analogy and metaphor.
- There are actually *two* accepted definitions of metaphor: one that's quite broad, and one that's more specific. The broader definition includes any type of comparison or association, and includes under its umbrella *other* figures of speech, such as [simile](#). The other, more narrow definition is the one we focus on in this entry, and is limited to figures of speech that state one thing *is* the other.

Metaphor Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce metaphor: **met**-uh-fore

The Anatomy of a Metaphor

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 "Love is a battlefield," love is the **tenor** because it's the thing being described, while "battlefield" is the **vehicle** because it's the thing love is being compared to. The metaphor operates by borrowing key attributes from the vehicle and ascribing them to the tenor: love is violent, brutal, life-threatening.

A strong metaphor is one in which the attributes shared by the vehicle and the tenor are clear without further explanation. For example, "she's a gem" is a widely used metaphor whose meaning would probably be pretty clear even if we hadn't all heard it a thousand times: it's a way of saying someone is precious, treasured, lovely. "He's a peanut butter sandwich," on the other hand, is a pretty mystifying statement, since the vehicle—a peanut butter sandwich?—doesn't immediately call to mind any particularly vivid qualities or adjectives, let alone adjectives that would be used to describe a person. As a result, a weak metaphor such as this one leaves the mind searching for a basis of comparison between the tenor and the vehicle: is he... sticky? Unappetizing? A perfect combination of two things?

Types of Metaphors

There are a handful of varieties of metaphor that fall under the larger umbrella of "metaphor." Here are a few important ones:

- **Conventional Metaphors** are just what they sound like: metaphors that have become such a common part of speech that they no longer call attention to their status as metaphors. For instance, when we say that someone is an expert in his or her "field," field is a conventional metaphor for "area of study" or "profession," because it's been used so frequently that we don't even realize we're referencing a physical field. Some sources say that when a conventional metaphor has completely lost its "effectiveness" or ability to influence thought, it becomes a Dead Metaphor. The concept of "dead metaphors" is controversial however, because many people argue that simply because something becomes unconscious, doesn't mean it's dead.
- **Creative Metaphors**, in contrast to conventional metaphors, are novel comparisons that draw attention to their status as metaphors. The following Rita Rudner quote is a creative metaphor: "Before I met my husband, I'd never fallen in love. I'd stepped in it a few times." Rudner, here, is twisting and playing with the metaphor "falling love" to emphasize the fact that it *is* a metaphor, and then she's creating a new metaphor all her own. (Of course, she's a comedian so she's also doing it to get laughs.)
- **Mixed Metaphor** is a combination of two or more incongruous comparisons. These can occur accidentally, or a writer may string incompatible metaphors together for comedic effect. For example, the mixed metaphor, "He was born with a silver foot in his mouth" combines the metaphors "To be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth" (meaning: to be born privileged) and "To

put one's foot in one's mouth" (meaning: to say something embarrassing) to create a puzzlingly humorous hybrid. Mixed metaphor is often referred to as catachresis.

- **Extended Metaphors** are metaphors that get continued or drawn out across successive lines in a paragraph or verse. This type of elaborate metaphor can also be called a "[conceit](#)." The following quote from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is an example of [extended metaphor](#), as MLK builds upon the initial metaphor of "cashing a check" in each sentence of a paragraph:
 - "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..."
- **Absolute metaphors** are metaphors in which the tenor can't be distinguished from the vehicle. In other words, the content of the metaphor can't be stated explicitly, because the only way to express the content is *through the metaphor itself*. An example would be "Life is a journey." We're constantly equating life with a journey, often without realizing it, when we say things like "That kid is off to a good start" or "He's taken the road less travelled," because so much of life is unknown: *we have no other way* in our language to explain the complex, all-encompassing experience that life is. As a result, this metaphor starts to actually shape the way we see life, and the comparison it makes becomes a truth that's impossible to express without the metaphor itself.

These are the most common varieties of metaphor. Here's [a great resource](#) with information about still more types of metaphors.

The Debate Over Metaphor's Meaning

There are actually *two* accepted definitions of metaphor—one that's quite broad and one that's more specific—and people commonly confuse the two without even noticing, so it follows that there is some debate over which definition is *correct*. The truth is, *both* definitions are correct, and for that reason it's useful to have a solid understanding of both, as well as what makes them different. These are the two definitions given in the [Oxford Companion to English Language](#)—the first one broad, the other narrow:

1. **Metaphor:** All figures of speech that achieve their effect through association, comparison, and resemblance. Figures like [antithesis](#), [hyperbole](#), [metonymy](#), and [simile](#) are all species of metaphor.
2. **Metaphor:** A figure of speech which concisely compares two things by saying that one is the other.

This entry focuses on the second, narrower definition of metaphor. To read more about the broader definition of metaphor, it may help to take a look at the entry on [analogy](#)—another broad category that encompasses many of the same figures of speech as the broader definition of metaphor.

Metaphor vs. Simile

Of all the different kinds of figures of speech that fit under the broader definition of metaphor (described above), [simile](#) is the one that is most often confused with the more specific definition of metaphor that we cover in this entry, since both simile and metaphor are figures of speech that involve the comparison of unlike things. However, simile and metaphor do not make comparisons in the same way. The most obvious difference between simile and metaphor can be summed up this way:

- **Similes** use the words "like" or "as" to establish their comparison: "The world is *like* your oyster."
- **Metaphors** state the comparison without such connecting words: "The world is your oyster."

While the presence of a connecting word, such as "like" or "as," is generally a good rule of thumb to identify similes versus metaphors, it doesn't get at the *root* of the difference between these two figures of speech. A deeper way to understand the difference is through the nature of the comparison each one makes:

- **A simile makes an explicit comparison by asserting that two different things are *similar*.** A simile sets thing A and thing B *side by side* to compare them. In the sentence "The world is like your oyster," the listener is asked to mentally visualize and compare "the world" and "an oyster"—as though he or she were holding one in each hand—and draw a comparison between the two.
- **A metaphor asserts an implicit comparison by stating that one thing *is* the other thing.** Instead of setting two entities A and B side by side through the use of connecting words, metaphor *superimposes* them. The metaphor "The world is your oyster" asks the reader to imagine his or her relationship to the world as *being* the relationship of an oyster to the space inside its shell.

This isn't to say that either a simile or metaphor is stronger or better than the other, just that they are subtly different in the sort of comparison they create, and this difference affects how a reader imaginatively interacts with the text.



EXAMPLES

Examples of Metaphor in Literature

Mastering the art of metaphor is essential to writing vivid, relatable poetry and prose. Furthermore, understanding a writer's use of

metaphor will enable you to better understand the specific [themes](#) that run throughout works of literature.

Metaphor in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

[The Great Gatsby](#) tells the story of Jay Gatsby, an ambitious young man from a poor background, and his pursuit of the wealthy, aristocratic Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby eventually amasses a fortune large enough to purchase a mansion across the water from Daisy's estate on Long Island, New York. Throughout the novel, Gatsby gazes longingly at the green light that shines from the end of Daisy's dock, and this light becomes a symbol for Gatsby's yearning for the unattainable Daisy. Fitzgerald concludes the novel by adding a further layer of meaning to the metaphor of the Green Light:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And then one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Here, the green light isn't simply a symbol for Daisy, but a metaphor for the "orgastic future that year by year recedes before us,"—for the ultimate, unattainable, and perhaps even unknowable goal of each individual's ambition. This use of metaphor is a bit subtler than an "X is Y" construction such as "she's a gem," since Fitzgerald never explicitly states that the green light *is* anything. Instead, he uses a comma to equate the green light with the "orgastic future" that he then describes in detail. He then broadens and extends the metaphor even further by introducing the image of "boats [beating on] against the current" to describe *all* people who pursue such a future, seeming to suggest that everyone experiences some version of Gatsby's struggle toward the "green light."

Metaphor in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Romeo uses the following metaphor in Act 2 Scene 2 of [Romeo and Juliet](#), after sneaking into Juliet's garden and catching a glimpse of her on her balcony:

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Romeo compares Juliet to the sun not only to describe how radiantly beautiful she is, but also to convey the full extent of her power over him. He's so taken with Juliet that her appearances and disappearances affect him like those of the sun. His life "revolves" around Juliet like the earth orbits the sun. The rest of the passage, which we haven't included here, is also an example of extended metaphor—since Romeo continues to speak about Juliet as though she were the sun throughout his brief monologue.

Metaphor in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

[Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#) is a [bildungsroman](#)—a novel that follows the journey of a young protagonist from childhood to adulthood. In *Portrait*, Joyce describes the growth and maturation of Stephen Daedalus, a young boy growing up in an impoverished Irish-Catholic household who ultimately aspires to become a writer. In Chapter 5, Stephen composes the following love poem (a [villanelle](#)) to his beloved Emma Clery (whom he actually barely knows and seldom sees):

Are you not weary of ardent ways,
Lure of the fallen seraphim?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Your eyes have set man's heart ablaze
And you have had your will of him.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

Above the flame the smoke of praise
Goes up from ocean rim to rim.
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Our broken cries and mournful lays
Rise in one eucharistic hymn.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

While sacrificing hands upraise
The chalice flowing to the brim,
Tell no more of enchanted days.

And still you hold our longing gaze
With languorous look and lavish limb!
Are you not weary of ardent ways?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Stephen's expression of love is *full* of metaphors—he likens his lovestruck heart to a "blaze," and his words of praise to "smoke." The "chalice flowing to the brim" is similarly a metaphor for the strength of Stephen's feeling—which, in the context of the novel, might be either religious or sexual in nature.

Metaphors occur frequently in love poems such as this, one reason being that the lover or narrator seeks to express the singular, unique experience of love in terms that the reader can relate to. For instance, in the example above from *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare—through Romeo—compares Juliet to the sun, in part because he recognizes that most readers are familiar with the sun's awe-inspiring beauty, and therefore will be better able to imagine Romeo's profound admiration for Juliet through this metaphorical comparison.

However, the use of metaphors can sometimes cover up *lack* of knowledge about something, and this is particularly relevant to Stephen's poem. Stephen wrote his romantic villanelle to a woman he barely knows and hasn't seen for ten years. His somewhat cliché metaphor comparing love to a "heart ablaze" emitting "smoke of

praise" may be interpreted not only as the first attempt of a young poet, but also as an indication that Stephen fully understands neither the woman to whom his poem is addressed, nor the complexity of his own feelings.

Metaphor in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

The title "*Cat's Cradle*" refers to a children's game in which the player makes an intricate pattern of X's by weaving a piece of string between his or her fingers. It also functions as an important metaphor in Vonnegut's novel, which follows the attempts of a nameless writer to research Dr. Felix Hoenikker: a scientist who (in the story in the book) helped invent the atomic bomb. The writer reaches out to Hoenikker's son, Newt, who tells him that on the day the Americans dropped the bomb—Dr. Hoenikker's invention—on Hiroshima, his father attempted to play cat's cradle with him. For some inexplicable reason, the game terrified Newt. The adult Newt explains:

"For maybe a hundred thousand years or more, grownups have been waving tangles of string in their children's faces... No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's... *No damn cat, and no damn cradle.*"

It's clear that even as an adult, cat's cradle retains a special significance for Newt: his father used the game as a diversion, lacking in substance and meaning, to distract himself and his son from the terrible reality of the bomb. Later on in the novel, Newt discovers that his sister, Angela, is abused by her husband. Referencing the way Angela hides her unhappiness and lies about her husband's behavior, Newt asks, "See the cat? See the cradle?" In doing so, he compares Angela's efforts to hide her husband's violence to their father's efforts to hide *his own* acts of violence (using cat's cradle as a distraction). Newt insightfully connects children's games to the games adults play with themselves. In short, cat's cradle becomes an elaborate metaphor for evading the truth, and the way that people then become trapped and entangled in those evasions.

Examples of Metaphor in Song Lyrics

Metaphorical comparisons often make language more memorable and more powerful, and can capture and make vivid emotions and feelings in profound, new, arresting, and often concise ways. It's no wonder, then, that musicians across genres regularly use metaphor in their song lyrics.

Metaphor in Pat Benatar's "Love is a Battlefield"

In her most famous song, released on the album *Live from Earth* in 1983, Benatar compares love—in its dangerousness and its power—to a battlefield:

When I'm losing control
Will you turn me away

Or touch me deep inside
And when all this gets old
Will it still feel the same
There's no way this will die
But if we get much closer
I could lose control
And if your heart surrenders
You'll need me to hold

We are young
Heartache to heartache we stand
No promises
No demands
Love is a battlefield

Metaphor in Katy Perry's "Firework"

In "Firework" (*Teenage Dream*, 2010), Perry uses extended metaphor to compare a firework to her lover's 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:

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

Metaphor in The Eagles' "Life in the Fast Lane"

In the title phrase "Life in the Fast Lane" (*Hotel California*, 1976), "the Fast Lane" is a metaphor for a lawless, limitless, risky mindset. If you live life in the Fast Lane, it means that you are edgy, daring, and impulsive, like the couple described in the song:

Life in the fast lane, surely make you lose your mind
Life in the fast lane
Life in the fast lane, everything all the time
Life in the fast lane
Blowin' and burnin' blinded by thirst
They didn't see the stop sign; Took a turn for the worse
She said, "Listen, baby. You can hear the engine ring.
We've been up and down this highway; haven't seen a god-damn thing."
He said, "Call the doctor. I think I'm gonna crash."

"The doctor say he's coming but you gotta pay in cash."
They were rushing down that freeway; Messed around and
got lost
They didn't care they were just dyin' to get off.

The Eagles extend the metaphor of "the fast lane" into the verse following the chorus: the "stop sign" and "engine ring" are metaphors for warning signs suggesting the couple's way of living is unsustainable.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers, and people in general, use metaphors for countless reasons:

- They create memorable images with language.
- They help communicate personal or imaginary experiences in terms to which readers can relate.
- By connecting different spheres of experience and language, they can lead the reader to surprising and important discoveries; the [figurative](#) meaning that metaphors create can help a reader to see the world or a concept in a new way.
- They can even sometimes *hide* a person's *lack* of knowledge about the things they're discussing.

It should be noted that metaphors *aren't merely additive*—in other words, they aren't just meant to embellish language or "spice it up." Metaphors actually shape our understanding of the relationships between things in the world. Without even knowing it, we constantly speak and think in metaphors.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on 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."
- **99 Metaphors for Love:** ThoughtCo's [compendium](#) of 99 love metaphors that span genres and centuries.
- **Metaphor on Youtube:**
 - A very worthwhile, very 1980s [music video](#) of Pat Benatar singing her metaphorically-titled song "Love is a Battlefield."
 - The [opening scene](#) of Disney's Aladdin, in which Jafar learns he must find the "diamond in the rough"—a metaphorical riddle, the answer to which is Aladdin himself: a "gem" amongst the low-class riffraff.

HOW TO CITE

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