

Devil in the Details: Enhancing *Ethos* through Figures of Speech

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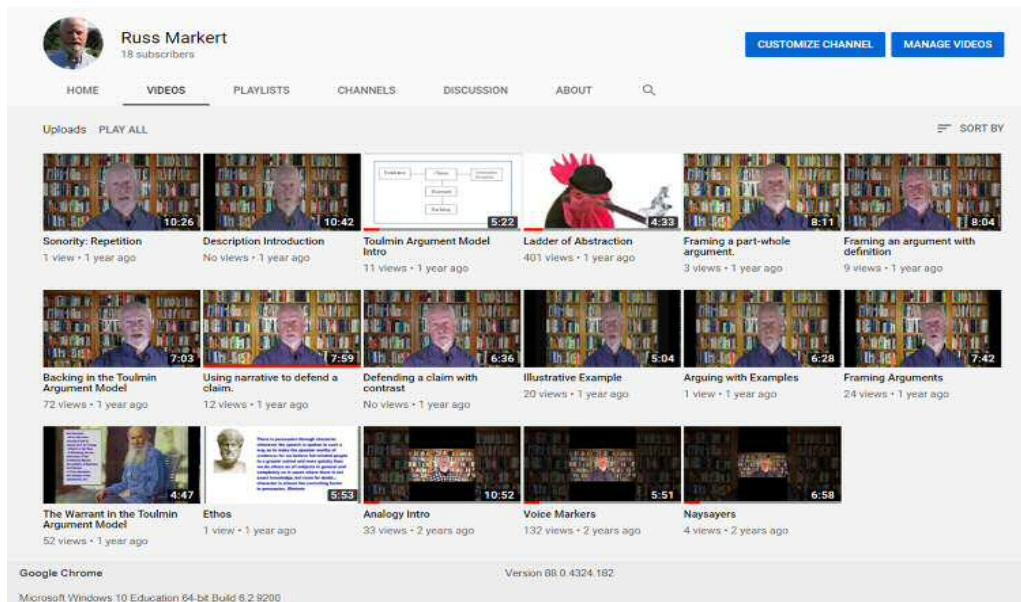
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Making Lightning: Finding the Right Words

The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

Mark Twain

Either when we're writing or revising we should always be looking for the right word to express what is in our mind. It can be a challenging task, one that can stop us in our tracks and make us too often settle for second-best.

When writing, it's probably best to put down what does come, and return later to refine our work. But being precise is a habit of mind that all good writers cultivate. Communication is difficult enough; slovenliness saves time at the cost of connecting with our reader. And if we're willing to sacrifice that, why bother writing at all?

Erasmus, a scholar who lived in 16th century Europe, developed a series of strategies for discovering the right word that he called *Copia*, or abundance. The idea is to find a multitude of ways to say the same thing, using grammar, synonyms, and other substitutions that are available in probably any language.

As an illustration of his method, he wrote 150 paraphrases of the sentence, "Your letter pleased me mightily." Here are a few of his substitutes:

- Your letter has delighted me very much.
- By your letter I have been greatly delighted.
- I have been delighted in an unusually wonderful way by your letter.
- How exceedingly your letter has delighted my spirit.
- Your epistle has imbued me with ineffable delight.
- Your epistle was very delightful.
- What you wrote has given me incredible pleasure.
- Your epistle was the keenest enjoyment for me.
- On receiving your letter I was filled with joy.
- The delight your letter gives me is equaled only by the love I bear you.
- Your pen has sated me with joys.
- Your letter afforded me much pleasure.
- After your note was brought to me, my spirit truly glowed with joy.
- The heart of Erasmus truly leaped with joy on reading your most affectionate letter.

And so on.

Now see what you can do. Vary words, grammar, and expressions, paraphrase the following sentence 15 different ways. **You can only use the word *pizza* in 10 of the paraphrases.**

I enjoy eating pizza any time of day.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

Imitate the Metaphors

One way to gain experience making metaphors is to imitate them.

Imitate the following metaphors, **replacing only the boldfaced text**. They come from Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

1. Her clothes were rich. Solid. **They were armor**, and her ringed fingers **weapons**.
2. It was not even a thought. It was a feeling, **a stab in the lungs**.
3. In the distance, traffic **growled**.
4. This little man, with his **matchstick** arms and legs, **a walking splinter**, had kidnapped a girl...
5. Nazneen **chased** the soggy mess around her plate.

Imitating the Masters: Similes

Below are some similes from Wallace Stegner's novel, *All the Little Live Things*. Replace the author's simile with one of yours.

Example

The days dripped away like honey off a spoon.

The days buzzed by like a hummingbird from a gardener.

1. He understands that his art, **like a Navaho sand painting**, should not survive the hour of its creation.
2. Quick as little crabs among seaweed and moss, his eyes went over me.
3. In silence she circled the carport and angled across the kitchen patio, me at her heels, gritting my teeth in the cold, hating myself, **yapping after her like some feisty terrier**.

Similes without “like” or “as”

Amazingly, not all similes begin with “like” or “as.” Ask most professional writers. Nevertheless, some kind of comparative phrase substitutes for the more common entrées.

Here are some alternative introductions to similes:

is similar to
is comparable to
as though
is not unlike

may be compared to
puts one in mind of
as if
is not dissimilar to

is akin to
is a kind of
is the same as
may be seen as

Here are some real examples from Ann Patchett’s novel *State of Wonder*. Below each one, transform the unusual simile into a normal simile. Is there a difference in effect from the change?

1. There was inside of her a very modest physical collapse, not a faint but a sort of folding, *as if* she were an extension ruler and her ankles and knees and hips were all being brought together at closer angles.
2. Marina was not the kind of woman who fell in love with another woman’s husband, *any more than* she was the kind of woman who would break into the house at night and steal the grandmother’s engagement ring, the laptop, the child.
3. ...she was unsteady in her shoes, which along with the ridiculous dress, *made her the equivalent of* a bird with a broken wing to any predator who might be out trawling the streets at night...
4. She wouldn’t have noticed Marina *had* Marina *been dipped in yellow paint...*
5. They lose their skills *as fast as* the basin loses forest.
6. The child *has the lungs of* a Japanese pearl diver.
7. She excelled not through bright bursts of inspiration *but by the* hard labor of a field horse pulling a plow.
8. At dusk the insects came down in a storm... “This is *worse than a* hailstorm,” Dr. Swenson said, spitting a small winged beetle onto the deck.

9. As they treaded the water slowly, hoping not to kick up an attractive splash, the conversation turned not to the spectacular moth with wings *the size of* handkerchiefs that for a moment hovered over their heads, but to the microscopic candiru fish that were capable of swimming up the urethra with catastrophic results.

Exercise Write two sentences that contain similes lacking “like” or “as.”

1. _____

2. _____

Inventing Tropes to be *Specific*

One memory you may have of being in English classes is your teacher exhorting you to be *specific!* The only problem with this command is that *specific* is a relative term. “Bird” is more specific than “Living Things,” “Chicken” is more specific than “Bird,” “Rhode Island Red” is more specific than “Chicken,” and “Roger,” the individual chicken, is more specific yet. When I want my students to be *specific*, I want them to be “Roger-level specific.” Give me the individual thing itself, whether as description, story, fact. It turns out to be more difficult than you’d think, largely because, I think, we teach young people to constantly move up the Abstraction Ladder, conceptualizing and generalizing and evaluating. Most writers seem to feel, however, that good writing focuses on individuals. George Orwell, in “Politics and the English Language” makes this point forcefully: “The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness.” The theme of his essay is how politicians hide behind abstractions in order to “defend the indefensible.” When we forget the concrete individual, we can talk about “boots on the ground” or “collateral damage” without considering the human costs of sending Fred or Wardere to Afghanistan, say, or discovering that Fardowsa or Hafsa were killed in a drone attack. Concreteness makes your writing more visceral. It draws and keeps your readers’ attention.

Of course, to be concrete, you need to know stuff. To know stuff, you need to pay attention to the world around you. You need to see the goldfinch preen as well as the flock going south, see the scarred oak as well as the forest. That means less time staring at your smartphone, tuning the world out with earbud appendages, and more observing, more reflection on what you are noticing. And, since you have only so many hours a day to observe, you need to appropriate the observations and knowledge of others through conversation and reading—careful listening and close reading. That is, if you want to write well, which means, according to the Roman statesman and orator Cicero, “to inform, to persuade, and to delight.”

The connection between figurative language and my discussion of categories is very simple. We invent metaphors and similes and analogies and metonymies

and so on by recognizing relations *between* categories. “Dripping” applies to literally to liquids and metaphorically to time. We find our categories in our concrete experience and knowledge. One of the reasons figures of speech are powerful cognitive tools is that they make connections between seemingly unlike entities or experiences. If you struggle like many of my students do to invent appropriate figures, understand that you have to have ready categories to consult, which means you have to be aware of how your mind is organized. Do you more readily consider a chicken a bird or a farm animal or mere meat? Why?

The practical reason why this is important is that, to help direct your attention to categories that writers seem to use often for sources, I am going to adapt an ancient process from rhetoric called *Topics*. In using topics, rhetoric teachers sought to help students find arguments to use in their speeches. They included

- Testimony (quotation from experts; anecdote; maxims)
- Definition (what do you mean by “is”?)
- Division (breaking a subject into parts)
- Description (Roger level!)
- Contrast (What is something *not*? Like sculpture, it sometimes reveals more than declaring what something is.)
- Similarity (What is it like? This is where simile and analogy play.)
- Greater/Equal/Less (Are you better off today than you were four years ago?)
- Cause and Effect, Antecedent and Consequence (If we get rid of Saddam Hussein, what could possibly go wrong?)

The idea was that, presented with an oratorical task, say to write a funeral oration for a famous general, you would come to (invent=L. *invenire* “to come upon”) the Topics and determine which of them could provide useful arguments for your speech. You might start with a quote from an enemy about how fearsome a general the great man was, then you might define “great” in such a way that it fit the general like a leotard, or you might describe his upright character or his quick thinking in winning a celebrated battle, you might contrast him with less successful

generals in the past, or compare him favorably with historic battlefield commanders, or you might explain how he became so successful through his parents' influence.

If we examine a large number of figures from published writers, perhaps we can derive a set of Topics where we can find or "invent" figures more easily. Let me illustrate.

A major source of figures is the human body. See the variety of ways reference to the body informs the invention of metaphor:

- ❑ With his peculiar bifocal vision, he saw the panic as a time for both statesmanship and personal gain. Ron Chernow
- ❑ That mystical moment when East becomes West. The place where the country finally gets bored with itself and *reaches for the sky*. David Gessner
- ❑ The heroin in New Mexico [preyed] on the sorrowful, taking their victims not in years but in a few *flutters of their eyelids*. Hector Tobar
- ❑ In the next few days, reading became a sweet and melancholy secret, *caressing the phrases with her eyes...* Monica Ali
- ❑ As usual, Pa worked at the top end and I done the bottom, shining his boots, which in this case was *more toes than leather*. James McBride
- ❑ [T]hey would sit side by side in *the infinite bosom of the afternoon*. Naghib Mafouz

As you can see, there is a lot more to the body than simple head, hands, arms, torso, legs, feet. You need to be attentive to not only how your particular body works, but others as well. And you need to be attentive to bodies in health and sickness, joy and sadness, victory and defeat, youth, prime, middle and old age. All are sources of invention of figures of speech.

My tentative list of topics, each followed by an example, can be found below:

- ❑ Action: He was *mulling* over his words, *scrunching* them this way and that, into a wrinkled brow, a taut cheek. Monica Ali
- ❑ Art: On *the broad canvas* of her face nothing was written. Monica Ali

- ❑ Bible: So it was that the *Old* and *New* Nixon, *serpent and sage*, collided in a single astonishing insight... Rick Pearlstein
- ❑ Body: The cattle are turning *rib-cage skinny* and the fields are littered with the brittle stubs of cornstalks... Hector Tobar
- ❑ Buildings/Structures: Her plaits hung around her face; *rope ladders to the roof of her head*. Monica Ali
- ❑ Business: or another forty years, *blue-chip* America would agree to exclusive relations with Morgan Stanley... Ron Chernow
- ❑ Clothing: Charity and Sally are *stitched together* with a thousand threads of feeling and shared experience. Wallace Stegner
- ❑ Food: Nazma came with Sorupa and *fed* her with *choice morsels* of gossip that passed through her *undigested*. Monica Ali
- ❑ Games: Solanka cast his first wife as the one with the exit strategies, the *player most likely to resign the game*. Salman Rushdie
- ❑ Geography: The events at the heart of this book...have everything to do with *borders*; more specifically *border disputes*. Wallace Stegner
- ❑ History: With *Prussian efficiency*, aides handed out position papers Rick Pearlstein
- ❑ Science: Like him, she was a creature of moods, and he was becoming her personal *meteorologist*. Maghib Mafouz
- ❑ Technology + Nature: The next day, he regained his sangfroid...by *green-lighting* the next *rain of steel* on Cambodia, Operation Lunch. Rick Pearlstein
- ❑ Travel: his mind was always *wandering off somewhere and leaving his body behind*. Salman Rushdie
- ❑ Violence: Her clothes were rich. Solid. They were *armor*, and her ringed fingers *weapons*. Monica Ali
- ❑ Work: [His accomplishments] were his self-fashioned *tools*. With them he tried to *chisel* out a special place, where he could have peace of mind. Monica Ali

- Writing: The other woman, however, was not accustomed to being *erased* from any scene of which she was a part. Salman Rushdie

As I say, these are tentative categories, open to revision. They seem to work for the writers I have read recently and will be a sufficient starting point for you as well. To reverse-engineer the process, let us assume that when you are looking for a figure, be it a metaphor, simile, whatever, you go through the topics one-by-one and consider the options that topic gives you. Try out several possibilities in different sentence contexts. If it worked for the classical Greeks and Romans for argument, it should help you find the right figure for your intended effect.

As you use figures more frequently, you'll find yourself gravitating to particular Topics that you are intimately familiar with. As you read and learn more about the world around you, as you grow in attentiveness, your range of Topics categories will grow with you. You'll keep those connections in memory longer, and have an ever greater understanding of how the universe fits together. Or doesn't.

Most of all, have fun with this. As we begin our separate discussions of the figures that make up the content of this book, try each one out several times in the writing you do for school or work or fun. Experiment. Be fearless. Expect to goof up occasionally. It, too, is part of the fun.