

WriteGuide.com's Letter Writing Program

Lesson Three: *Similes and Metaphors*

A **simile** is a **comparison that involves using the words “like” or “as.”** **Metaphors**, on the other hand, are much more direct: unlike **similes**, which say that something or someone is *similar* to something else, **metaphors tell us that something is something else**. For instance, if I were to use a **simile** I might say, **“Her hair is as tangled as a briar patch,”** I could change it to a metaphor by saying, **“Her hair is a briar patch.”**

Metaphors and similes are particularly useful when it comes to imagery. Imagery is used to describe things that we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. However, the world around us is filled with things that remind us of other things. Similes and metaphors allow us to describe objects and people in our lives by comparing them to other objects and people. If you got into an argument with your sister, for example, the sentence “She was incredibly angry” might not express just how angry your sister really was. You could add to the sentence, saying, “She was so angry that her face was red and her hands were balled into fists.” Still, that might not communicate the intensity of her emotion. In such a situation, a simile or a metaphor might help. Take a look:

Simile: **She was as angry as a bear caught in a trap.**
Metaphor: **She was a bonfire of rage.**

When using a simile or a metaphor, it's important to realize that you aren't limited to describing things in their entirety. That is, you don't always have to describe the “whole” thing. You might describe a runner (which is an example of a “whole person”) by saying, “He was as fast as a cheetah,” but you might also say, “His legs were like the wheels of a hotrod.” See the difference? The first example dealt with the whole person, and the second dealt with only a *part* of him: namely, his legs.

Let's take a look at some **similes and metaphors that describe whole things and some that describe parts of things**. The first three will be **similes**; the last three will be **metaphors**.

- 1. He was as quiet as a shadow.**
 His hands moved quietly, like shadows.
- 2. The tree looked like a giant, twisted skeleton.**
 The tree's branches were like the twisted hands of a skeleton.
- 3. She sang like a bird.**

- Her voice was like the voice of a bird.**
4. **When he runs he is a freight train.**
When he runs his body is a freight train.
 5. **My mother, working in the kitchen, is a whirlwind.**
My mother's arms, when she works in the kitchen, are a whirlwind.
 6. **You are a star in the sky.**
Your eyes are stars in the sky.

Notice that the sentence that involve **parts of things** tend to be considerably more descriptive. The reason for this is because when you describe parts of things you're forced to mention more images: if I talk about "my mother's arms" I generate an image of my mother, and another of her arms. If I say, "Her voice was like the voice of a bird," you picture "her" followed by "her voice."

When you write your letters there will be times when you want to include some very beautiful, vivid imagery. Those are the times when you should use **similes and metaphors that deal with parts of things**. But when creating a beautiful scene for your reader isn't necessarily very important, a **simile or metaphor that deals with a whole thing** might be more appropriate. There's nothing wrong with using one form over another; it's just a matter of picking the one that you feel suits your sentence best.

When most people use similes and metaphors they use them to describe objects. They say that one thing is similar to another, which is what we did when we said that the runner was like a cheetah. If you look at quickly at the six examples up above you'll see that they all deal with things that are physical: hands, trees, voices, bodies, arms, and eyes. All six of those things can be detected with one or more of our five senses. We can see hands and trees, we can hear someone's voice, etc. Similes and metaphors help us describe those things in a very vivid, powerful way. That's what we did when compared the runner to a cheetah. You'll find, however, that the most powerful way to use **similes and metaphors** is to use them to describe things that aren't physical at all.

Have you ever seen love? Have you ever seen pride? How about anger? Joy? Human beings are emotional creatures. Just about everything we do involves some sort of emotion or feeling. Because of this, you can bet you'll be talking about emotion quite a bit in your letters. But how do you do it? How do you describe something you can't see? How do you describe something that isn't a physical object? You can say, "I was filled with happiness," but can your reader really *see* your happiness?

No matter what we do we can't truly *see* emotions. We can't see love, and we can't see sadness. We can certainly see signs of love and sadness in the expressions and actions of the people around us, but we'll never be able to actually see the emotions themselves. The closest we can come to describing emotions is to compare them to things that we can, in fact, perceive with our five senses. And since similes and

metaphors involve comparing things, it make sense that they'll help us describe and communicate emotions. Take a look:

1. **My mother's love was like a mountain, firm and unyielding.**
2. **His sadness was like an ocean wave lapping timidly at the shore.**
3. **Her jealousy was a fire that burned her from the inside out.**
4. **The kindness he brought into my life was like putting sugar in a cup of very strong tea.**
5. **His devotion was as strong as oak, and as gentle as lamb's wool.**

See how it's done? Describing emotions is simply a matter of stating the emotion, and then finding something that it reminds you of. **Similes** and **metaphors** can be as unique as people: I might compare love to a mountain, but you might compare it to an ocean; I might compare kindness to sugar, and you might compare it to the smell of fresh flowers.

Here's part of a sample letter so you can see exactly how **similes** and **metaphors** might be used.

Dear Friend,

Today I went into the garden. Not much is growing there right now because we planted it last week. But some of the beans have broken the surface of the soil. They look like tiny loops of green yarn. Next to the beans is a row of tomato plants standing like skinny little men with crazy hair and long fingers.

I love the garden and I always have. I especially love it when it's in full bloom, and I can walk out there with a basket to pick a head of lettuce, some cucumbers, and a few onions to put in a salad. Whenever I'm in the garden, standing behind rows of corn with potatoes and radishes growing at my feet, I feel as though I'm in another world. Have you ever knelt down, and then suddenly looked up to see to see the heads of fifty or so sunflowers staring down at you? Let me tell you, it's more amazing than it sounds. Sometimes I just stand there in awe, taking in all the good smells and feeling the sun on my arms.

But right now it's only April, and so the garden is nothing more than a giant brown spot at the back of the yard...

In your next letter you should include the following items:

1. At least three examples of *imagery* that DO NOT involve similes or metaphors.
2. At least three examples of *internal dialogue* (direct or indirect – it doesn't matter which).
3. At least four *similes*.
4. At least two *metaphors*.

Remember, most of these techniques are designed to overlap, so it's OK to combine some of them into the same sentences.
