ENGLISH, LITERACY, AND COMMUNICATION

Literal versus figurative language

Difficulty level: Easy

English, Literacy, and Communication

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Overview of the concept

This is how you tell when words mean exactly what they say and when they are painting a picture, like knowing it is raining cats and dogs does not mean animals are falling from the sky. Figurative language says one thing and means another, and taking it literally is how you miss the point of a poem, a song, or a joke. Knowing the difference helps you read literature properly, write descriptions that actually paint a picture, and understand everyday expressions that make no sense if you take them word for word.



Rule

If the words mean exactly what they say, the language is literal.

If the words compare, exaggerate, or paint a picture instead of meaning what they say, the language is figurative.

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Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q Classify: 'She ran as fast as a cheetah.' Literal or figurative?

SOLUTION

Ask: did she really run at cheetah speed? No.

It compares her speed to a cheetah to paint a picture.

So it is figurative.

EXAMPLE 2

Q Classify: 'She ran to the bus stop.' Literal or figurative?

SOLUTION

Ask: does it mean exactly what it says? Yes, she ran to a real place.

No comparison or exaggeration is used.

So it is literal.

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Practice questions

1 Classify: 'He has a heart of stone.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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2 Classify: 'The cat sat on the mat.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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3 Classify: 'Time flies when you are having fun.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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4 Classify: 'She opened the door.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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5 Classify: 'The classroom was a zoo.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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6 Classify: 'It rained all afternoon.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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7 Classify: 'His words cut like a knife.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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8 Classify: 'We walked to school.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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9 Classify: 'She is drowning in homework.'

A Literal

B Figurative

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10

Classify: 'The dog slept on the rug.'

A Literal

B Figurative

Understand It with Pulse

Flag a mistake

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ANSWER KEY

1. Figurative

2. Literal

3. Figurative

4. Literal

5. Figurative

6. Literal

7. Figurative

8. Literal

9. Figurative

10. Literal

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