



University of Essex



Image in literature and creative writing

A resource for teaching A-level English

About these resources

At the University of Essex we want to invest in the next generation of students to better prepare them for future university study. We recognise that the teaching they receive in school and college is a centrally important part of this preparation, and therefore we are committed to investing in this teaching process wherever we can. We hope that these teaching resources will help to get students thinking at a more in-depth level about their chosen subject, and will aid teachers in encouraging this level of engagement.

The resources are deliberately designed to be flexible so that teachers can choose the sections and exercises that they feel are most relevant and beneficial to their students and insert them into their own teaching plans as they see fit. Throughout the resources we have tried to include elements of the teaching carried out at the University of Essex whilst staying closely linked to A-level syllabi.

About the authors

These resources are based on the notes of Dr Chris McCully, who lectures in creative writing and literature at the University of Essex as well as being a freelance writer. Chris has thirty years of experience in academic writing and research spanning linguistics, philosophy, stylistics and literature. His current research interests surround the origins and development of poetic forms in English.

Dr McCully's work has been adapted for these resources by Mona Becker, a PhD student in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex

You can find out more about the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies and the courses they run at www.essex.ac.uk/lifts



CONTENTS

IMAGE	04
FLAT WRITING	04
IMAGES AND FIGURES OF SPEECH	06
TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTS	06



Image

This class centres on the concept of ‘Image’ All of us use images in our writing, and ‘Imagism’ was of course an important theoretical stance adopted by those early 20th-century poets following the lead of Ezra Pound and others. Pound insisted that the images presented in verse should have the ‘hardness’ and ‘precision’ of images presented in (good) prose. The following – Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ - is a famous Imagist poem, first published in 1913:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

FLAT WRITING

Class activity

Working with a partner, **summarise** the most important points in the text extract given to you. Note them down and discuss them (*do you agree with what you've read? Any questions arising from it?*).

Write down any **instances** you know of **‘flat writing’** – writing that doesn’t appeal to the senses via images. What **genres** typically (if not obligatorily) make use of ‘flat’ written styles?

Write down three sentences of your own that contain **abstractions**.

Example: *The consequences of his intelligence were beautiful.*

Write down several sentences of your own that contain **generalisations**.

Example: *Everybody dislikes the outcome of that committee’s deliberations.*

Write down several sentences of your own that contain **judgments**.

Example: *That stanza seems redundant.*

An image is a word or series of words that appeals to one or more of the five senses. *An image appeals to the senses.* This is the foundation of imaginative writing. If you can “grok” that fact (a useful word that means to understand in the gut as well as the head), you are on your way to being a writer.

Here is a thought that does not contain an image:
Not everything that appears to be valuable is actually valuable.

Here is an image that contains the same thought:
All that glistens is not gold.

A thought without an image:
It is best to consider consequences before proceeding.

An image that contains the thought:
Look before you leap.

A thought without an image:
I will do everything in my power to overturn this unjust verdict.

An image that contains the thought:
I will fall like an ocean on that court! (Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*)

A thought without an image:
The verses I am writing have no vitality; they are unattractive and stale.

An image that contains the thought:
They are not pigs, they are not even fish, / Though they have a piggy and a fishy air-
(Sylvia Plath, “Stillborn”)

Notice that every case of flat writing above is full of abstractions (*actually, power, vitality, before*), generalizations (*everything, all, consequences, verses*), and judgments (*valuable, best, unjust, have no vitality, unattractive, stale*). When these are replaced with nouns that call up a sense image (*gold, ocean, court, pigs, fish*) and with verbs that represent actions we can visualize (*glisten, look, leap, fall*), the writing comes alive. At the same time, the ideas, generalizations, and judgments are *also* present in the images.

Janet Burroway, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*. (New York: Pearson Longman/Penguin Academics, 2007), p. 4

How can we define:

abstractions (hint: not experienced directly; many abstract nouns – such as e.g. ‘beauty’ – are also linguistically cued)

generalisations (hint: too many of a given. . .)

judgments (hint: tell, not show)

Yet many forms of writing (and colloquial speech) make abundant use of images, often deployed through *figures of speech*.

IMAGES AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

Class activity

With your partner, write down any figures of speech you happen to know. These could be metaphors, similes, or be figures of speech embedded in proverbs or clichés.

Example: ...*like a hot knife through butter*. (a cliché)

Now take one of the figures of speech you've just jotted down and try to find a new way to express the same:

Example:*like a hot knife through butter* > ...*like a cheese-cutter through rendered flesh*.

TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTS

It's important for writers and critics to be able to use some terms accurately. Do not confuse your metaphor and metonymy!

Simile

is an explicit comparison, always using the adverbs 'like' or 'as'.

Example: *His complexion was like a bomb crater.*

Metaphor (adjective: **metaphoric**)

is a direct but linguistically inexplicit (i.e. no 'like' or 'as') comparison.

Example: *His complexion was a bomb crater.*

Metonymy (adjective: **metonymic**)

where one thing is represented by another thing associated with it.

Example: *He was a devotee of the turf.* (turf > horse racing)

It was the property of the crown. (the crown > royalty)

Personification

where human characteristics are bestowed on nonhuman nouns.

Example: ...*the gentle breeze*.

...*as though the earth in short, thick pants were breathing...*

...*the livid sky...*

Synecdoche (pronounce **si-nec-dock-y**)

where a part stands for a whole.

Example: *All hands on deck!* (hands stands for crew)

He'd run out of legs. (running; he was exhausted)

The ball didn't have the legs. (to reach the boundary) (cricket; legs > momentum)

Class activity

Come up with at least two examples each of simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy and synecdoche.

Writing Exercise:

Working on your own, read the excerpt. This is flat (unpersuasive, unconvincing) writing, largely because it makes far too much use of generalisations, abstractions and judgments. (We've all written like this at some stage in our careers – and many of us still do, in first drafts.)

Now try to write a similarly 'bad' paragraph of your own, if you wish, using the extract as a model. The result should be full of generalisations, abstractions and judgments. As you work, consider how you'd make that same passage more persuasive and less flat; you should find that one way of doing so is to use metaphors, synecdoche, personifications and so on.

Swap your 'flat' paragraph with your partner and rewrite their paragraph, this time using less flat language. Try to help each other by suggesting your own ideas of how to make the passage you've written more persuasive by using metaphors etc. See if they agree with you or can come up with something better themselves.

Read and share the different versions of the passages with the class and discuss your colleagues' decisions and solutions.

"Debbie was a very stubborn and completely independent person and was always doing things her way despite her parents' efforts to get her to conform. Her father was an executive in a dress manufacturing company and was able to afford his family all the luxuries and comforts of life. But Debbie was completely indifferent to her family's affluence."

This passage contains a number of judgments we might or might not share with the author, and she has not convinced us that we do. What constitutes stubbornness? Independence? Indifference? Affluence? Further, since the judgments are supported by generalizations, we have no sense of the individuality of the characters, which alone would bring them to life on the page. What things was she always doing? What efforts did her parents make to get her to conform? What sort of executive is the father? What dress manufacturing company? What luxuries and comforts?

Janet Burroway, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*. (New York: Pearson Longman/Penguin Academics, 2007), p. 9

Homework

Take a vivid passage of writing from a text studied on this course and try to spoil it by re-writing it so as to include generalisations, judgments and so on. **Include both the source passage and your own rewriting and reflection in your notebook.**

Reading Homework

Read Ted Hughes' 'Hawk Roosting'. How does the poet work with language so that the imagery of the poem is and remains vivid? How does the poem exploit the notion of 'voice'? **Highlight** and **annotate** examples.

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection....

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Ted Hughes, "Hawk Roosting", (1960)