Figuring out figurative language in high-scoring narratives

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Recently, I started a new research project with four colleagues to investigate the writing choices made by primary and secondary school students who scored highest of all Queensland students on the three most recent NAPLAN writing tests. I have done this sort of research in the past but always focused on successful persuasive writing across the tested year levels (i.e., Years 3, 5, 7 and 9). For our new project, named NAPtime, we will investigate the narrative writing choices valued by NAPLAN markers for the first time. The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (caretakers of completed NAPLAN tests up here) granted us access to the 285 highest-scoring Queensland writing samples written for the 2019, 2021 and 2022 NAPLAN tests (i.e., roughly 20–25 samples per year level for the three years of the test). In the next couple of years, my colleagues and I will use a variety of linguistic and rhetorical frameworks to identify patterns in the students' writing and communicate our findings to the education community.

My first exploration of the successful writing samples will focus on the students' use of figurative language to entertain their readers. Figurative language choices are often referred to as figurative devices, rhetorical devices, literary devices or figures of speech, and are commonly associated with poetry and argumentation. But high-quality narratives are also overflowing with artful and playful uses of figurative language. In fact, this is often what makes the stories we read so engaging.

Figurative language has been the focus of research and teaching for (literally) thousands of years. The figurative language choices I'll be looking for in the NAPLAN writing samples were identified first by Aristotle and other rhetoricians way back in Ancient Greece. Aristotle outlined the ins and outs of five canons of classical rhetoric – Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery – which included everything a speaker or writer would need to discover, organise and communicate compelling ideas through spoken and written texts. Of most relevance to our NAPtime research project is the third canon, Style, which concerns how we put the ideas we have into words that are communicated with others. This is the part of classical rhetoric that dealt with figurative language.

Figurative language in the Australian Curriculum: English

It's quite amazing to see just how much emphasis is given to figurative language in the Australian Curriculum: English. Even a cursory glance

will show this is one of the most underrated aspects of English teaching. Unlike certain other aspects of English that are only dealt with in niche sub-strands of the curriculum, figurative language can be found across all three strands (i.e., Language, Literature and Literacy), spread out across a full eight sub-strands!

While figurative language is taught from Year 1 to Year 10, it becomes especially prominent in the secondary school years, where it is mentioned directly in six content descriptions for each secondary year level (i.e., 7, 8, 9 and 10). In this sense, teaching students to interpret and use figurative language is likely a regular part of every secondary English teacher's day job.

Despite the wide reach of figurative language, this aspect of English is, arguably, treated in a fairly disjointed manner in the Australian Curriculum: English. Figurative language pops up here, there and everywhere. It is described as serving many varied functions in different types of texts, such as enhancing and building up layers of meaning; shaping how readers interpret and react to texts; influencing audience emotions, opinions, and preferences; evaluating phenomena; and conveying information and ideas. At times, it is described as a stylistic tool of poetry, songs and chants; at other times it's a persuasive tool of argumentation; and at other times it's a literary tool of storytelling.

All these uses make figurative language feel a bit like sand slipping through your fingers; nothing really ties it together.

The Australian Curriculum: English refers to 14 figurative devices explicitly (i.e., metaphor, simile, personification, onomatopoeia, assonance, alliteration, hyperbole, idiom, allegory, metonymy, ellipses, puns, rhetorical questions and irony).

This might seem like a lot, but more than 200 figurative devices have been identified in the writing of William Shakespeare alone (Joseph, 1947)! It would be interesting to know how and why these 14 figurative devices have been named in the curriculum.

Figurative language in the NAPLAN writing tests

Another place educators come across figurative devices is in the NAPLAN writing marking guides. The persuasive writing version of the test includes a criterion named Persuasive devices, which involves "The use of a range of persuasive devices to enhance the writer's position and persuade the reader" (ACARA, 2013, p. 6). In the glossary of the persuasive writing marking guide, nine figurative devices are mentioned: alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, idiom, puns, irony, hyperbole, and rhetorical questions. The guide also includes some descriptions of the effects of other figurative devices (e.g., parallelism, anaphora, epistrophe) without mentioning the technical names (e.g., "Words or phrases at the beginning or end of successive clauses or statements" (ACARA, 2013, p. 87) refers to anaphora and epistrophe).

The NAPLAN narrative writing marking guide (ACARA, 2010) drops the Persuasive devices criterion and replaces it with another named Character and setting, which involves "The portrayal and development of character" and "The development of a sense of place, time and atmosphere" (p. 4). Only metaphor and simile are mentioned in the glossary as part of key vocabulary choices, while ellipsis is mentioned as a key resource for building text cohesion.

What can we take from the emphasis on figurative language in these marking guides? It seems the designers of the NAPLAN writing test are expecting students to use figurative language in both versions, but only really sets markers up to identify the use of specific figurative devices in the persuasive version. There is possibly an assumption here that figurative language is more important in persuasive writing than in narrative writing. When you add the Australian Curriculum's substantial but disjointed emphasis on figurative language into the mix, it's quite likely that some Australian teachers would feel unsure about the aspects of figurative language to teach and in which genres.

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Our approach in the NAPtime research

Educators and curriculum designers in contemporary settings might get a better grip on figurative devices if we follow the lead of classical rhetoricians who divided them into two categories: schemes and tropes. Both can be described as fundamental to how we put together sentences in written or spoken texts.

Simply put, a scheme (from the Greek word *schēma*, meaning form or shape) involves changing the usual pattern or arrangement of words in a sentence. A well-known scheme is alliteration, which involves the repetition of initial phonemes in two or more adjacent words, such as when Professor McGonagall from *Harry Potter* described students as "behaving like a babbling, bumbling band of baboons!"

A trope (from the Greek word *tropein*, meaning to turn) involves changing the normal meaning of words in a sentence. A well-known trope is metaphor, which involves making a comparison between two different things that have something in common, such as when Mrs Dursley from *Harry Potter* is compared to a crane (i.e., a longnecked bird): "she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbours."

Dividing the 14 figurative devices mentioned in the Australian Curriculum: English and the nine in the NAPLAN persuasive writing marking guide into schemes and tropes shows that these documents strongly favour tropes (i.e., nine tropes vs. three schemes in the curriculum and eight tropes vs. one scheme in the NAPLAN marking guide). A key interest of my research into high-scoring NAPLAN narratives will be to determine how the students used schemes and tropes to entertain their readers, and how well these key policy documents reflect the choices valued in the NAPLAN writing context.

I will pay close attention to the following 19 schemes and 17 tropes that are particularly useful in contemporary writing (Corbett & Connors, 1999). Clearly, this is more than double the number mentioned in the curriculum and NAPLAN, and some may not have been used much or at all by the high-scoring students. It's also possible that some devices were only used in certain year levels, so there is potential for interesting findings here. If we discover that NAPLAN markers rewarded students for using figurative devices that do not even appear in the key policy documents guiding our teachers, there will be fascinating implications for the usefulness, equity and ongoing enhancement of these documents.

Without further ado, here is a table of the schemes and tropes that I will look for in my first NAPtime article, with pronunciations, definitions and examples:

Scheme	Definition	Example
Parallelism	Refers to when words, word groups, or clauses in a sequence have a similar structure	He enjoyed studying English, history, and science.
Isocolon (ī-sō-cō'-lon)	A type of parallelism that occurs when parallel elements not only share a similar structure but also have the same length, such as the same number of words or even syllables	In this classroom, minds expand, ideas ignite, and knowledge flourishes.
Climax	Works together with parallelism. Occurs when words, word groups, or clauses are arranged to build up in importance or intensity	By the end of the school year, students will be armed with skills, wisdom, and a burning desire to make their mark on the world.
Antithesis (an-tith'-ə-sis)	A type of parallelism that occurs when contrasting ideas are placed side by side	Despite the rules and routines, the class had wild bursts of creativity. They seemed to value both conformity and rebellion.
Anastrophe (ə-'na-strə-fē)	When the usual word order of a clause or sentence is inverted	A place of endless possibilities, a school is.
Parenthesis (pə-ren'-thə-sis)	The insertion of a verbal unit that interrupts the normal flow of a sentence's structure	A school – with students hurrying between classrooms and the sound of slamming lockers – is a vibrant and dynamic place.
Apposition	Placing two elements side by side, where the second element serves as an example or modification of the first	The teacher, a tireless advocate for learning, guides the students with dedication and passion.
Ellipsis	The intentional omission of a word or words that can be easily understood from the context	You can enter the Year 5 classroom down the corridor, and Year 6 up the stairs.

Scheme	Definition	Example
Asyndeton (a-sin'-də-ton)	The purposeful omission of conjunctions between connected clauses	Books, pencils, notebooks, a backpack filled to the brim – all essentials for a day of learning.
Polysyndeton (pol-ē-sin'-də-ton)	The purposeful use of many conjunctions	The young student struggled to carry her books and her pens and her laptop and her calculator and her highlighters to class.
Alliteration	The repeated use of the same sound at the start of several consecutive words	A boisterous banter of students blended with the rhythmic rattle of rolling backpacks.
Assonance	The repeated use of similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables of consecutive words, with different consonant sounds before and after them	The playful students stayed late to engage in debate.
Anaphora (ə-naf'-ə-rə)	The repeated use of the same word or words at the start of several consecutive clauses	In this class we pursue our dreams. In this class we discover our potential. In this class we become who we are meant to be.
Epistrophe (ə-pis'-trō-fē)	The repeated use of the same word or words at the ends of consecutive clauses	In the classroom, we learn. In the hallways, we learn. In the library and the gym, we learn. Everywhere in this school, we learn.
Epanalepsis (ə-pon-ə-lep'-sis)	The repeated use of a word or words at the end of a clause that was used at the beginning of the same clause	Learning to write is the most important part of learning.
Anadiplosis (an-ə-di-plō'-sis)	The repeated use of the last word of one clause at the beginning of the next clause	Education is the key to unlocking doors, and doors lead to endless possibilities for a life lived well.
Antimetabole (an-tē-mə-tab'-ō-lē)	The repeated use of words in successive clauses, but in reverse grammatical order	In this class you will not only learn to read, but you will read to learn.
Chiasmus (kī-əz'-mus)	When the grammatical structure in successive word groups or clauses is reversed	As teachers, we shape our students, but then our students shape us.
Polyptoton (pō-lip'-tə-tahn)	The repeated use of words that are derived from the same root word	The new learnings of the learners helped them learn most of all.

Trope	Definition	Example
Metaphor	The comparison of two different things by implying a connection between them	Schools are fertile gardens where knowledge takes root and young minds can bloom.
Simile	The comparison of two different things by using 'like' or 'as' to make the comparison explicit	The children gathered around the teacher, like bees around a hive.
Synecdoche (si-nek'-də-kē)	When a part of something is used to represent the whole thing	Many hands helped make the school fair a success.

Trope	Definition	Example
Metonymy (mə-tahn'-ə-mē)	The substitution of a word or word group with another that is closely associated or suggestive of intended meaning	The pen is mightier than the sword.
Pun: Antanaclasis (an-ta-nak'-la-sis)	The intentional use of one word in two or more different ways	If you never learn the content, you'll never learn to be content.
Pun: Paronomasia (par-ə-nō-mā-zha)	The intentional use of words that sound similar but have different meanings	The teacher plainly explained how the plane's crash was unplanned.
Pun: Syllepsis	The intentional use of a word in a way that modifies two or more other words, but with each of those words understanding the original word differently	The teacher did not raise her voice or her hopes.
Anthimeria	One part of speech is substituted for another	The student papered the hallway with his artistic skills.
Periphrasis (pə-rif'-ə-sis)	The use of a descriptive word or word group instead of a proper noun or the use of a proper noun to refer to a quality or characteristic associated with it	Sarah was crowned the Queen of Knowledge for her amazing academic results.
Personification	Giving human qualities or abilities things that are not human	The library books whispered enticing stories, beckoning the students to embark on magical adventures.
Hyperbole (hī-pur'-bə-lē)	The intentional use of exaggerated terms to emphasis meaning	For maths we were forced to sit and work through a thousand complex equations.
Litotes (lī'-tə-tēz)	The intentional use of understated terms to minimise meaning	Jim's performance in the science fair was not unimpressive.
Rhetorical question	Posing a question, not to receive an answer, but to express a point indirectly	Can you deny the importance of education in a child's life?
Irony	The use of words in a way that mean the opposite of their literal meaning	The 50-page maths assignment was every student's idea of a fun-filled holiday.
Onomatopoeia	The use of a word that imitates the sounds it describes	Over the courtyard she clashed and clattered on the way to the classroom.
Oxymoron	The combination of two terms that are usually contradictory or opposite to each other	The silent cacophony of the empty classroom filled the air.
Paradox	Making a statement that seems contradictory but that holds some truth	The more you learn, the more you realise you don't know.

I look forward to letting you know what we find. My hypothesis is that figurative language plays a much larger role in high-scoring narratives than the narrative marking guide suggests.

This article originally appeared on the author's blog, Read Write Think Learn.

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