

Metaphor and Simile in Fiction

A metaphor or simile is a loan. The writer borrows an image from one thing to illuminate another, and like any loan it has to be paid back with interest, in this case interest paid in reader understanding. **When the loan is good,** the reader sees the original subject more clearly than plain description could have shown it. **When the loan is bad,** the reader is left holding an image that cost them attention and gave nothing back.

Most craft discussions of figurative language stop at “make it fresh, avoid cliché.” **That advice is true and useless.** It doesn’t tell a writer when to reach for a comparison at all, when a comparison is quietly doing no work, or when the comparison has died in the language and become invisible. This Power Tool covers all three, plus the related and newer problem of comparisons that are not just worn out but are becoming unreadable, because the thing they were borrowed from has faded out of common experience.

1. What a Comparison Is Actually For

A simile (“her voice was like a dropped plate”) and a metaphor (“her voice dropped and shattered”) do the same job by different grammar. Both take a quality the reader already understands from one domain, sound, texture, narrative temperature, motion, and transplant it onto the subject so the reader feels the quality instead of being told about it.

The test for whether a comparison earns its place is simple. It should give the reader something specific that direct description could not have delivered as fast, or could not have delivered at all.

Compression. A good comparison does in four words what a paragraph of direct description would take to establish, and does it without slowing the sentence down.

Example: “The old barn leaned like a man giving up.” That’s posture, age, and a suggestion of quiet defeat, compressed into one image the reader assembles instantly.

Cross-sense translation. Some qualities are hard to describe in their own terms. Fear, dread, grief, and awe resist direct naming without going flat or melodramatic. A comparison can smuggle the feeling in through a completely different sense.

Example: “The silence had weight, the way a held breath does before someone finally speaks.” Silence isn’t heavy. But borrowing the physical sensation of a held breath gives the reader the felt experience of a particular kind of silence, tense and about to break, rather than the label “tense silence.”

A lens the reader didn’t bring with them. The strongest comparisons make the reader see the ordinary subject differently afterward, not just more vividly in the moment.

Example: “He filed his opinions the way other men filed taxes, promptly, without enjoyment, and only because the law required it.” That doesn’t just describe a habit. It reframes the character’s relationship to his own opinions, as a chore rather

than a passion, and that reframing is the entire point of the sentence.

2. When a Comparison Is Doing Real Work

A comparison is earning its place in the sentence when it meets at least one of these tests.

It replaces a longer, weaker passage of direct description. If cutting the comparison would force you to add three sentences of exposition to recover the same information, the comparison was carrying real weight.

It's built from the story's own world, not borrowed from outside it. A comparison drawn from the character's trade, era, geography, or obsessions does double duty, characterizing the viewpoint character even while it describes something else. A ship's engineer thinks in torque and tolerances. A grieving florist thinks in things that wilt. The comparison becomes evidence of who is doing the noticing, not just decoration on the thing noticed.

Example, genre comparison: In a hard SF novel, a technician might think “the reactor's hum dropped a half-step, the way an engine does before it stalls,” using mechanical vocabulary native to the character and the world.

The same emotional beat in a literary grief novel might render as “her voice dropped the way conversation does in a room that's just been told the diagnosis,” using an image native to that book's emotional register instead. Same function, comparison earning its keep, entirely different vocabulary

because the comparison is drawn from its own story rather than imported generically.

It resolves something abstract into something the body understands. Grief, dread, love, and shame are concepts. Cold hands, a stone in the stomach, a held breath are sensations. A comparison that trades a concept for a sensation is almost always doing real work, because it lets the reader feel the abstraction through the body instead of being told to accept the label.

3. When a Comparison Is Just Incidental Texture

Not every comparison needs to be load bearing, and it's worth being honest about the difference between a comparison that's doing real work and one that's simply pleasant, adding a small amount of sensory pleasure to a passage without changing what the reader understands.

Example: "The coffee had gone cold, sitting there like an afterthought." The comparison is a nice touch. It's also completely optional. "The coffee had gone cold" tells the reader everything they need to know, and the story loses nothing structurally if the simile is cut.

This is not automatically a problem. A single incidental comparison in an otherwise plain paragraph is seasoning, and seasoning is fine. The trouble starts with density and with what the incidental comparisons are covering for, which is the subject of the next section.

A rough guideline, not a rule: if a reader could go through a page and find a load-bearing comparison in most paragraphs, alongside two or three incidental ones scattered for texture, that's a healthy ratio in most commercial and literary prose. If nearly every sentence describing setting or action reaches for a comparison, incidental or not, the density itself becomes the problem, independent of whether any single comparison is good.

4. When a Comparison Becomes a Crutch

A crutch comparison isn't identified by being a bad sentence in isolation. Plenty of crutch comparisons are individually well written. The tell is what's missing underneath them.

The writer never made the specific observation. A crutch comparison substitutes for noticing rather than sharpening what was noticed. If you ask the writer "what did the room actually look like," and the honest answer is "I don't know, I just knew it needed to feel oppressive," the comparison was there to manufacture a feeling the writer hadn't earned through specific, story-native detail.

Diagnostic test: take the comparison out and force a plain, concrete sentence in its place. If the plain version is flat and generic, the writer likely never did the underlying observational work, and the metaphor was covering that absence. If the plain version is already strong on its own, the metaphor was an accent, and its removal is a style choice, not a rescue.

Example of the failure: “The office was cold as a morgue.” Strip the comparison and what’s left, “the office was cold,” is not just weaker, it’s empty, because the sentence was never actually about the office. It was reaching for a mood, oppressive, deathly, without ever describing a single true thing about the room, the light, the smell, the sound.

The fix: Not by re-adding a metaphor but by finding the concrete detail the metaphor was standing in for. “The office held the temperature of the file cabinets, and nothing in it had been touched since the last audit.” Now the reader gets the cold and the abandonment and the bureaucratic decay, all from specific, story-native observation, no borrowed image required.

Frequency confirms the diagnosis. One overreliant comparison in a manuscript is a sentence to revise. A comparison in nearly every paragraph of setting or action description, especially when the comparisons are interchangeable with each other, any one could be swapped for any other without changing the passage’s effect, is a habit rather than a choice. At that density the reader stops experiencing the scene and starts noticing the machinery, watching for the next comparison instead of seeing the room.

A useful cross-check: look at the verbs. Writers who lean hard on metaphor and simile for setting and action often haven’t developed the separate habit of choosing one precise, active verb to do the job instead. If the verbs nearby are generic, was, walked, looked, felt, while the metaphors are elaborate, that combination confirms the crutch. Strengthening verb choice is frequently the actual fix, more

than trimming metaphor count, because a sharper verb often removes the need for the comparison entirely.

Example, weak verb propped up by metaphor: “The wind moved through the trees like a rumor spreading through a small town.”

Fix, same moment on stronger verbs, no metaphor required: “The wind combed through the trees, branch to branch, the way a rumor moves house to house.” Even keeping the comparison here, notice the verb “combed” is doing real work the first version’s “moved” wasn’t, and a version with plain concrete detail and a strong verb could drop the simile entirely and lose nothing.

5. Dead Metaphors and the Problem of the Fading Referent

Some comparisons don’t fail because they’re a crutch. They fail because they’ve stopped being a comparison at all in the reader’s mind. “Pitch black,” “raining cats and dogs,” “cut to the chase,” “the whole nine yards” are idioms now, not live images. Nobody pictures actual pitch, tar, cats, dogs, or a foot race when they read them. The vehicle, the borrowed image, has fully detached from the tenor, the thing being described, and the phrase now functions as a single fixed unit meaning “very dark,” “heavy rain,” “get to the point,” “the complete amount.”

Dead metaphors aren’t automatically bad. Their flatness is also their speed. They read instantly, without calling attention to

themselves, which is exactly right for a moment that doesn't deserve the reader's full sensory attention. If a character glances out at a "pitch black" parking lot on her way to buy milk, the dead metaphor is the correct tool, because the darkness is incidental and the sentence needs to move on.

The problem shows up when a dead metaphor is used in a moment that's supposed to matter. If the darkness in a scene is meant to be felt, oppressive, disorienting, threatening, "pitch black" delivers none of that, because it's doing zero fresh sensory work. It tells the reader a fact about light level. It doesn't make them feel anything.

Example, dead metaphor misapplied to a moment that needed to land: "She stepped into the basement. It was pitch black, and she felt her way along the wall." Nothing here earns the reader's dread.

Example, same moment rebuilt from an original, story-native observation: "She stepped into the basement and the dark closed over the doorway behind her, absolute, the kind that makes a person aware of their own eyelids." The second version isn't just fresher. It's specific to the sensation of that particular kind of dark, in a way the idiom can't be, because the idiom has been used so many times it no longer has any sensation attached to it at all.

The newer wrinkle, opacity rather than just staleness. A worn idiom like "raining cats and dogs" still telegraphs its meaning through pure convention, even though the image makes no literal sense if you stop to examine it. Most readers have heard it enough

times that they don't need to know its origin to know what it means. "Pitch black" still mostly works the same way today, but it depends on "pitch" surviving as a word readers recognize at all, even divorced from its original meaning as a tar derived substance.

As that word drops further out of common experience, especially for younger readers who have never handled tar, patched a roof, or heard the word used outside this one phrase, the idiom risks losing even its conventional, meaning through repetition function. A reader who has genuinely never encountered "pitch" outside this phrase may register it as simply an intensifier attached to "black," true, but they're getting there through pure memorized association, not through any live image at all. It's dead a step further than an idiom whose referent is still common. Give it another generation or two and phrases like this may follow "the whole nine yards" fully into pure verbal formula, functional, but with the last thread to their original meaning finally cut.

What this means practically. A dead metaphor is a fine, fast tool for an incidental moment. It's the wrong tool for a moment that needs to land, because it can't, it has no sensory charge left to spend. And a dead metaphor whose underlying image is fading out of common knowledge is worth a second look even in incidental use, since it may be quietly losing readers who parse it as an odd fixed expression rather than as English that ever meant anything to the reader.

6. Genre Comparisons: How Usage Shifts by Register

Figurative density and style are not fixed rules, but genres do carry different tolerances and different sourcing conventions, and a comparison that reads as natural in one register can read as intrusive in another.

Literary fiction tolerates the highest density and the most ambitious, extended comparisons, and readers of the genre often come to the page expecting the prose itself to be part of the pleasure. The risk in this register isn't overuse in the crutch sense, it's ornamentation for its own sake, comparisons that call attention to the writer's cleverness rather than the character's experience.

Noir and hardboiled fiction favor spare, hard-edged comparisons drawn from concrete, often unglamorous objects, closer to Chandler's tradition of the wisecrack simile than to lyrical imagery. The comparison should sound like it came out of the narrator's mouth in a bar, not out of a workshop.

Example: "She had a smile like a paper cut, quick, a lasting sting."

Commercial thriller and action-forward genres generally want figurative language kept sparse and functional, prioritizing pace over ornament. A metaphor that stops the reader to admire it is a metaphor that's slowed down a chase scene that shouldn't be slowed down.

Romance tends to run warmer and more sensory, particularly in interiority around attraction and longing, where readers often want

the felt, embodied experience the genre is built to deliver, but the same crutch warning applies if every glance and every touch reaches for a comparison rather than a specific physical detail.

Science fiction and fantasy benefit from comparisons built from the invented world itself rather than imported wholesale from the contemporary one, since a character from a world without horses shouldn't think in equestrian idiom unless the story has specifically established that inheritance. World-native comparisons do double duty, characterizing the setting even while describing the immediate subject.

Horror often uses comparison specifically to reach for the uncanny, the moment where a familiar thing is described in a way that makes it suddenly wrong. The comparison's job in this genre is frequently to create dread through mismatch, comparing a body to something that shouldn't apply to a body, rather than to clarify.

Historical fiction carries a sourcing trap the other genres don't. A comparison has to be available to the era and culture of the viewpoint character. A medieval blacksmith cannot think that something moved "like a strobe light," and a comparison drawn from a technology, brand, or cultural reference that postdates the setting will break the reader's trust in the whole world even if the sentence itself is well built.

7. Exercises

The Strip Test. Take a page you've written. Copy it and remove every simile and metaphor and read the page again in plain

description only. Mark any sentence that goes flat or empty without its comparison. Those are candidates for a crutch diagnosis, not the sentence to fix by adding the comparison back, but the sentence to fix by going back and making the specific, concrete observation you skipped the first time.

The Frequency Audit. Count the similes and metaphors, dead idioms included, in three consecutive pages. If the count runs higher than roughly one load-bearing comparison per paragraph of setting or action, with only occasional incidental ones beyond that, treat the density itself as a note, independent of whether any individual comparison is well made.

The Verb Check. For any paragraph carrying a metaphor or simile, underline the nearest verbs. If the verbs are generic, was, went, looked, felt, while the metaphor is doing the heavy lifting, try rewriting the passage with a stronger, more specific verb first, then decide whether the comparison is still needed.

Mine Your Own World. Pick a scene and write three fresh comparisons drawn only from your point of view character's specific trade, geography, era, or preoccupations, nothing borrowed from outside that character's actual life. This builds the habit of manufacturing an original comparison instead of reaching for an inherited one.

Idiom Hunt. Go through a chapter and flag every dead metaphor and idiom, pitch black, heart of stone, ice in her veins, and so on. For each one, ask whether the moment it appears in needs to land emotionally. If yes, replace it with an original, story-native image. If

the moment is genuinely incidental, the idiom can stay, its speed is the point.

Common Failure Points

- **Reaching for a comparison before making the observation**, so the image covers an absence of specific, concrete detail rather than sharpening detail that's already there.
- **Comparison density high enough that the reader starts noticing the pattern**, watching for the next metaphor instead of seeing the scene.
- **Comparisons imported from outside the story's world** when a world-native image was available and would have characterized the viewpoint alongside describing the subject.
- **Using a dead metaphor in a moment meant to land emotionally**, where the idiom's flatness works against the scene instead of serving its pace.
- **Anachronistic or culturally unavailable comparisons in historical or invented-world fiction**, breaking reader trust in the setting even when the sentence itself is well crafted.
- **Weak verbs propped up by an elaborate comparison**, when a single precise verb would have done the job with no borrowed image required at all.