Figurative Language: What is It?

“Figurative language tells it like it isn’t to show the way it really is.”
— Richard Lederer, The Miracle of Language

A figure of speech is an expressive use of language to create an image that enriches the message. These words are used both creatively and non-literally. There are several categories of figurative language; a few of the more commonly seen figurative language forms are described below.

Hyperbole – In the simplest of terms, hyperbole is an exaggeration (e.g. I could eat a horse!)

Idioms – These are expressions that develop over time and should be learned as a “whole.” (e.g. Don’t let the cat out of the bag.”)

Simile – Writers compare things that are alike in one way, but different in most other ways. A simile uses the words “like” or “as.” (e.g. She ran like the wind.)

Metaphor – Unlike a simile, metaphors compare things that are alike in one way, but different in most other ways without using the words “like” or “as.” (e.g. He was king of the world.)

Onomatopoeia is an ancient Greek term that means "name-making," because the meanings of onomatopoetic words are indeed made by sounds. (e.g. bang, snap, chirp, thump)

Personification – application of human qualities to inanimate things or ideas (e.g. the house rumbled…)