Develop students’ understanding of figurative language by asking them to interpret, extend, and create metaphors.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which an object is described by comparing it to something else. For example, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a rose takes on special meaning as a metaphor for a woman’s marital status. A rose plucked and distilled into perfume describes a married woman, while a rose that withers on the stem describes a spinster.

Shakespeare also used metaphors to describe more abstract topics such as life, time, and the meaning of the universe. In The Tempest and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, life is a dream in which we can never be sure of what’s real and what isn’t. Prospero believes that the world will one day disappear into thin air, just as dreams do (4.1.156). In As You Like It (3.2.310), Rosalind compares time to the paces of a horse: “Time travels in divers paces with divers persons... I’ll tell you who Timeambles withal, who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal, and who he stands tall withal.” In other words, though time is a constant, it seems to move faster or slower to different people.

Shakespeare’s plays are rich in original metaphors, especially those relating to animals (birds in particular), war, fencing, hunting, fishing, music, food, clothing, and other familiar Elizabethan pastimes. Shakespeare was a country boy, and so his metaphors often conjure up natural and pastoral images.

To introduce the concept of metaphor and demonstrate Shakespeare’s use of them, it’s helpful to take a closer look at several examples. Start by reading aloud the following passage from Much Ado About Nothing:

The pleasant’st angling is to see the fish Cut with her golden oars the silver stream, And greedily devour the treacherous bait; So we angle for Beatrice... (3.1.26)
The “fish” is Beatrice and the “bait” is false gossip that the hated Benedick actually loves Beatrice. Ursula and Hero (the “anglers”) allow Beatrice to overhear this false gossip on purpose. Beatrice takes their bait “hook, line, and sinker”—she truly believes that Benedick loves her.

After reading the passage aloud, invite students to identify the metaphorical topic (fishing) and what it is being used to describe (tricking Beatrice). Then brainstorm and list words associated with the metaphor (angler, stream, river, lure, reel in, cast, pole, bait, worm, fly, hook, line, sinker, fish such as trout and bass, catch). Using the class-generated list, extend the metaphor: To lure a trout, you must use the right bait. Once you hook your catch, you can reel it in, and so on.

Next, have students work with the metaphors on the Metaphorically Speaking reproducible on pages 22 and 23.

To wrap up your metaphor lesson, have each student choose a new metaphorical topic (sports, plants, rocks, the stars, machines, animals) and apply it to the topic of school. To spark creative thinking, ask students questions such as “If this school were an animal, what animal would it be and why?” Have students list three things that school has in common with their topic. Here’s an example for a turtle:

1. School days and turtles advance slowly.
2. They send their “young” into the world to take care of themselves.
3. Like a turtle’s shell, the school walls protect the vulnerable contents.

More Metaphors: Spotting metaphors in the text can become an on-going game for students. Ask students to keep a running list of examples they find as they read. Once you’ve completed

Similarly Speaking: Similes are usually easier for students to understand and write than metaphors. Similes compare one object with another using the words “like” or “as.” A few examples:

I found him under a tree, like a dropped acorn. (As You Like It 3.2.235)

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear. (Romeo and Juliet 1.4.47)

Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods, Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds. (Julius Caesar 2.1.173)

A simple exercise is to ask each student to write the first half of a simile and then pass it to the next student to complete. For an extra challenge, students can continue passing the page to create several versions of the simile.

MORE TO DO

More Metaphors: Spotting metaphors in the text can become an on-going game for students. Ask students to keep a running list of examples they find as they read. Once you’ve completed

the play, students can compare metaphors and classify them by topic. The topics that Shakespeare chose give a glimpse into popular events and objects of the day. For example, war and hunting were much more common. The sea and sailing were as vital as automobiles and airplanes today. The stars and planets loomed ominously. Other categories include the skilled trades (carpentry, butchery, sewing, weaving), clothes, food and drink, jewels and precious metals, prisons, disease, sports, money, nature, and weather.

More Metaphors: Spotting metaphors in the text can become an on-going game for students. Ask students to keep a running list of examples they find as they read. Once you’ve completed

the play, students can compare metaphors and classify them by topic. The topics that Shakespeare chose give a glimpse into popular events and objects of the day. For example, war and hunting were much more common. The sea and sailing were as vital as automobiles and airplanes today. The stars and planets loomed ominously. Other categories include the skilled trades (carpentry, butchery, sewing, weaving), clothes, food and drink, jewels and precious metals, prisons, disease, sports, money, nature, and weather.

Similarly Speaking: Similes are usually easier for students to understand and write than metaphors. Similes compare one object with another using the words “like” or “as.” A few examples:

I found him under a tree, like a dropped acorn. (As You Like It 3.2.235)

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear. (Romeo and Juliet 1.4.47)

Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods, Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds. (Julius Caesar 2.1.173)

A simple exercise is to ask each student to write the first half of a simile and then pass it to the next student to complete. For an extra challenge, students can continue passing the page to create several versions of the simile.

More Metaphors: Spotting metaphors in the text can become an on-going game for students. Ask students to keep a running list of examples they find as they read. Once you’ve completed

the play, students can compare metaphors and classify them by topic. The topics that Shakespeare chose give a glimpse into popular events and objects of the day. For example, war and hunting were much more common. The sea and sailing were as vital as automobiles and airplanes today. The stars and planets loomed ominously. Other categories include the skilled trades (carpentry, butchery, sewing, weaving), clothes, food and drink, jewels and precious metals, prisons, disease, sports, money, nature, and weather.
Metaphorically Speaking

Try your hand at interpreting the metaphors below. Then create a few of your own.

METAPHOR 1: The Meaning of Macbeth
Here are two short metaphors from the first act of Macbeth. For each one, write two or three sentences in your own words to describe what the metaphor means.

If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me...  
(Macbeth 1.3.58)

I have begun to plant thee, and will labor  
To make thee full of growing.  
(Macbeth 1.4.27)

METAPHOR 2: Hamlet’s Troubles
This famous speech from Hamlet includes a military metaphor. The “slings and arrows” are problems that fate keeps flinging at Hamlet. The question is, should Hamlet just suffer these slings and arrows or take up his own weapons to end them?

To be, or not to be; that is the question:  
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And, by opposing, end them.  
(Hamlet, 3.1.58)

Apply the military metaphor to your own “sea of troubles.” In what ways...
do these troubles “wound” you? What kind of weapons best describe their pain? What metaphoric weapons do you have? Use as many military terms as you can to describe how you could fight these troubles including; gun, cannon, armor, helmet, soldier, battle, army, uniform, battalion, fife, and drum.

METAPHOR 3: All the World’s a Spaceship
“All the world’s a stage” are famous words in a famous metaphor. We live on a stage. We’re simple actors, playing many parts during our lifetimes. Read the passage below. Then rewrite it with a new metaphor: “All the world’s a spaceship.” Use space-related words such as “lift-off” to describe the “seven ages” of humans from birth to death.

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.
(As You Like It  2.7.138)