

## Metaphor Checker/ Simile Checker

This is a simple method for checking whether you have a metaphor or not. If a statement passes all of the first three conditions, it's very likely a metaphor. Similes and idioms will not likely pass this test, and can be verified using the fourth and fifth conditions.

### 1) Is it figurative? Or, is this statement not literal?

**E.g. 1):** "Love is a *flower*." Is love actually a flower? No. This statement is figurative, so it passes the first test.

**E.g. 2):** "The Internet is the information *superhighway*." Is it really a highway? No. This statement is figurative, so it also passes the first test.

**E.g. 3):** "Love is a feeling." Is it really a feeling? Yes. This statement is not figurative, so it fails the first test.

**E.g. 4):** The *typist* would *hunt* and *peck* for letters. Was the typist actually hunting, as if to kill, or pecking, as if to poke with a beak? No. The statement is figurative, and passes the first test.

### 2) Is it an equation? Are two components somehow being made equal?

**E.g. 1):** "Love is a *flower*." Is love being made equal to a flower? Yes. The components are being treated as equal, so it passes the second test.

**E.g. 2):** "The **Internet** is the information **superhighway**." Is the Internet equated to a superhighway? Yes. The components are being treated as equal, so it passes the second test..

**E.g. 3):** "Love is a *feeling*." Is love being equated to a feeling? Yes. It is a direct statement of fact, and technically passes the second test.

**E.g. 4):** "The *typist* would **hunt and peck** for letters". Are there two halves being made equal? Yes: The typist and a feeding bird. This is an *indirect (implied) metaphor*, since one half of the equation is not seen, but one can infer it, since the actions of hunting and pecking are actions of a bird feeding. This passes the second test.

### 3) Can it expand metaphorically?

**E.g. 1):** "Love is a *flower*." Love may *grow*, *blossom*, *wither* and *die*. This statement can expand, passing the third test. It also passed the first two tests, so **it is a metaphor**.

**E.g. 2):** "The Internet is the information *superhighway*." The Internet has *traffic*; and it may be *slow* or *fast*; the superhighway is *paved* with fiber optics - better pavement facilitates higher travel *speeds*. This statement also passes the third test, and passed the first two, **it is a metaphor**.

**E.g. 3):** "Love is a *feeling*." Like other feelings, love can *increase* or *develop*. However, these are *literal* descriptions of the word love, rather than *metaphorical* descriptions. It failed the first and third test - **it is not a metaphor**.

**E.g. 4):** The *typist* would *hunt* and *peck* for letters. The letters of the above typewriter are *seeds*; the typist may get *ruffled feathers*; the faster the typist *feeds* the *fatter* they will get (faster typists are paid more). This statement passes all three tests, so **it is a metaphor**.

## A Test of Metaphor Strength

If you have determined that you have a metaphor, you can test its strength further by checking if the metaphor is reversible:

**Metaphor Reversibility:** The stronger the metaphor, the more reversible it becomes. "*That man is a dog*" / "*That dog is a man*" doesn't reverse as sensibly as "*This house is a box*" / "*This box is a house*". This is because the comparative elements of man=dog are subject to personal opinion and implication, while the comparative elements of house=box can be seen with simple, universal geometry.

**Is the metaphor reversible?** *Can you reverse the source and target easily?*

**E.g. 1):** "Love is a *flower*". Could you say without much explanation "*a flower is love*"? Not really. This is a **weak metaphor** (a.k.a. *poetic* metaphor). "*Love is a flower*" works mainly because we've experienced the emotion, but it would take quite an effort to explain why a flower is love. Though commonly used symbolically, a flower's meaning may have more to do with primitive mating psychology than love: a sign that the male has found a source for provision later in the year - signaling the ability to provide for an offspring at harvest.

**E.g. 2):** "The Internet is the information *superhighway*." Could you easily explain why it's true that "*a superhighway is the Internet for cars*"? Yes. In fact the relationship is so strong that much of the language is interchangeable. This is a **strong metaphor**.

**E.g. 3):** "Love is a feeling." *Is a feeling love?* Yes, sometimes. But this statement is not figurative to begin with, only spelling out a category-subcategory relationship. It is *fractionally reversible*, making it a strong enough tie, but **since it is not a metaphor, it is not a metaphorical tie**.

**E.g. 4):** The *typist* would *hunt* and *peck* for letters. Can one readily explain the reasoning behind the statement "*the bird was seeking out and poking at seeds*"? Naturally. The process itself involves identical concepts: to look; to poke; to have one of many specific, valuable points to poke at; to be successful as a result. This is a **strong metaphor**.

### Further Tests:

Other types of figurative language are often mistaken for metaphor, especially *simile* and *idiom*. Similes behave as if approximations of some quality (e.g. "*Jazz is like Jello pudding*") and idioms give an old phrase the meaning of a single word (e.g. "*long in the tooth*" = *old*).

## 4) Is it a simile?

A simile generally compares things by implying they are *similar*, and uses words such as "like" or "as", while a metaphor implies it is *exactly the same* or interchangeable, often using only "is".

**E.g. 1):** "Love is like oxygen." Does the statement use "*is like*" or "*is as*"; or simply "*is*"? It uses "*is like*". This is a simile.

**E.g. 2):** "Love is a hunger." Does the statement use "*is like*" or "*is as*"; or simply "*is*"? It uses "*is*". This is not a simile (it is a metaphor, and would pass the first three conditions).

## **5) Is it an idiom?**

An idiom doesn't need to add up. It is a phrase that acts like a word. It defies translation because it has more to do with *history* than *language*. Idioms are acquired through the regular use of a phrase within a culture, and develop into a separate meaning, often at the loss of its original meaning altogether.

**E.g. 1):** "Her arguing tactics left him *over a barrel*." Was there a barrel? Was he over anything? No. While the American phrase "over a barrel" was once a reference to a specific practice, it eventually came to mean roughly "*helpless*", and has completely lost its original meaning. It would likely become gibberish if translated directly into another language, because its meaning is not the same as its words would suggest.