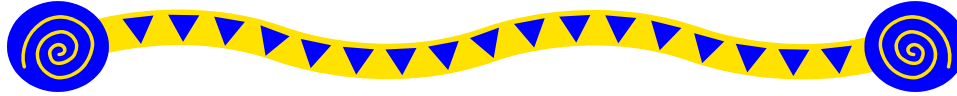


Understatement and Litotes



Objective: As they prepare to draft a personal narrative writing, students will be able to distinguish between the rhetorical devices of understatement and litotes, while effectively integrating these devices in their own writing in order to strengthen the strategy and variety of their papers. Ultimately, students will be able to utilize these strategies in order to score a 5 or 6 on the CCSS narrative writing rubric.

Journal 5: Personal Narrative Writing Topic: "I can't stop thinking about..." Please include at least one appositive phrase, one example of hyperbole.

What is Understatement?

- A rhetorical form in which the force of a descriptive statement is less than what one would normally expect.
 - Example:
 - To describe a category five hurricane, one might state, “We had a bit of weather.”
 - A category five hurricane is certainly more than a “bit of weather”.

More on Understatement...

- Therefore, understatement can be used to:
 - Highlight the extreme nature of the event, as was the case with the category five hurricane;
 - Add ironic effect
 - For example, “Leonardo da Vinci had a good idea or two.”
- It is often the best way to signal to the reader that a matter is so self-explanatory that there is nothing you can add to its force with superfluous words.

Other cases for understatement:

- Repeated use of understatement, to lull a reader into a sense of calm, can help you to later reveal the true extent of what you have been under-representing.
- Understating for the sake of later driving the point home forcefully is particularly useful when building an argument to convince.
- This device may also be used for humorous effect. It should not, however, be confused with simplifying a discussion or idea. Simplification aims to make something more understandable. Understatement is trying to bring out the full force of an idea.

Examples of Understatement

- “Whatever his faults, Sir Isaac Newton did have a fairly good mind for science.”
- “The Middle East is currently having some political squabbles.”
- “To the uninitiated, neurophysiology can be a bit of a challenge.”
- “Our school spirit is, shall we say, less than overwhelmingly enthusiastic.”
- “The meal left a bit to be desired.”

Understatement and Litotes Are Different Devices.

- Understatement may be a way to get a few points across, but Litotes isn't bad either.

Litotes

- Very similar to understatement, litotes emphasizes its point by using a word opposite to the condition.
 - “The trip across the mountain was a hard journey.” (original sentence)
 - “The trip across the mountain was no easy journey.” (litotes)
 - “The journey across the mountain was easy.” (understatement)

Take a look at these examples of litotes.

- “It was no small accomplishment.”
- “It wasn’t a big deal.” (litotes as understatement)
- “It wasn’t a bad day.” (ambiguous)
- “A cup of coffee would not be unwelcome.”
- “It’s not the smartest idea I’ve ever heard.”
- “That store is not in the most convenient location.”
- “The former CEO’s lifestyle was not shabby, which may explain why the company went bankrupt.”

Guided Practice: Litotes

In your own words, rewrite the following examples of litotes as a straight declarative statement. Try to keep the style of the original.

“I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will take them honored, and they shall not be small.” (Jeremiah 30:19 RSV)

Guided Practice

In your own words, rewrite the following examples of litotes as a straight declarative statement. Try to keep the style of the original.

“That [sword] was not useless / to the warrior not.” (Beowulf)

Guided Practice

In your own words, rewrite the following examples of litotes as a straight declarative statement. Try to keep the style of the original.

“It isn’t very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain.” (The Catcher in the Rye)

Guided Practice

In your own words, rewrite the following examples of litotes as a straight declarative statement. Try to keep the style of the original.

“for life’s not a paragraph / And death I think is no parenthesis.” (e e cummings)