

Adding Fire to Your Argument: Tropes and Schemes

In classical rhetoric, the tropes and schemes fall under the canon of style. These stylistic features certainly do add spice to writing and speaking. And they are commonly thought to be persuasive because they dress up otherwise mundane language; the idea being that we are persuaded by the imagery and artistry because we find it entertaining. There is much more to tropes and schemes than surface considerations. Indeed, politicians and pundits use these language forms to create specific social and political effects by playing on our emotions.

Especially in your introduction and conclusion, these figurative language devices may add impact to a closing or opening argument; however, they can be used throughout your extended essay and earn you points that many other IBO students would not otherwise receive because their papers are dry or too literal. After the content of your paper is written, see if and where it might be appropriate to add some of these into your essay. The results could be refreshing and powerfully argumentative!

Definitions:

Trope: The use of a word, phrase, or image in a way not intended by its normal signification.

Scheme: A change in standard word order or pattern.

Tropes and schemes are collectively known as figures of speech. The following is a short list of some of the most common figures of speech. I have selected figures that politicians and pundits use often--especially schemes of repetition and word order, which convey authority.

Anaphora: A scheme in which the same word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. Example: "I will fight for you. I will fight to save Social Security. I will fight to raise the minimum wage."

Anastrophe: A scheme in which normal word order is changed for emphasis. Example: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Antithesis: A scheme that makes use of contrasting words, phrases, sentences, or ideas for emphasis (generally used in parallel grammatical structures). Example: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Apostrophe: A scheme in which a person or an abstract quality is directly addressed, whether present or not. Example: "Freedom! You are a beguiling mistress."

Epistrophe: A scheme in which the same word is repeated at the end of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. Example: "I believe we should fight for justice. You believe we should fight for justice. How can we not, then, fight for justice?"

Hyperbole: A trope composed of exaggerated words or ideals used for emphasis and not to be taken literally. Example: "I've told you a million times not to call me a liar!"

Irony: A trope in which a word or phrase is used to mean the opposite of its literal meaning. Example: "I just love scrubbing the floor."

Litotes: A trope in which one makes a deliberate understatement for emphasis. Example: Young lovers are kissing and an observer says: "I think they like each other."

Metaphor: A trope in which a word or phrase is transferred from its literal meaning to stand for something else. Unlike a simile, in which something is said to be "like" something else, a metaphor says something *is* something else. Example: "Debt is a bottomless sea."

Metonymy: A trope that substitutes an associated word for one that is meant. Example: Using "top brass" to refer to military officers.

Oxymoron: A trope that connects two contradictory terms. Example: "Bill is a cheerful pessimist."

Periphrasis: A trope in which one substitutes a descriptive word or phrase for a proper noun. Example: "The big man upstairs hears your prayers."

Personification: A trope in which human qualities or abilities are assigned to abstractions or inanimate objects. Example: "Integrity thumbs its nose at pomposity."

Pun: A play on words in which a homophone is repeated but used in a different sense. Examples: "She was always game for any game."

Rhetorical Question: A trope in which the one asks a leading question. Example: "With all the violence on TV today, is it any wonder kids bring guns to school?"

Simile: A trope in which one states a comparison between two things that are not alike but have similarities. Unlike metaphors, similes employ "like" or "as." Example: "Her eyes are as blue as a robin's egg."

Synecdoche: A trope in which a part stands for the whole. Example: "Tom just bought a fancy new set of wheels."

Zeugma: A trope in which one verb governs several words, or clauses, each in a different sense. Example: "He stiffened his drink and his spine."

Source: "Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student" by Edward P. J. Corbett.