

Identifying Hyperbole and Understatement

To add humor to your writing or to focus your readers' attention, use hyperbole or understatement. Hyperbole and understatement are two sides of the same coin: they both use distortion to make a point. **Hyperbole** is a figure of speech that makes something seem bigger or more important than it really is. It uses exaggeration to express strong emotion, emphasize a point, or evoke humor. **Understatement** is language that makes something seem less important than it really is. Look at the following examples.

Hyperbole It rained enough yesterday to float a steel mill.

Understatement You might say Albert Einstein had a good head for numbers.

Like stand-up comics or writers of **satire**—a form of persuasion that uses humor to criticize and change society—you can use hyperbole and understatement to skewer your target, whether it be a social practice or institution, a political plan, or a human quirk. Just don't overuse these strategies, or they will lose their effectiveness.

EXERCISE A Label each item as *hyperbole* or *understatement* in the space provided.

Sample _____ hyperbole I've told you a million times not to call me during my favorite show.

1. _____ Sally was a tad annoyed when her brother sneaked a peak at her secret diary.
2. _____ "The weather *is* brisk," Nathan admitted, as the thermometer read minus ten degrees Fahrenheit.
3. _____ That hotel room was so small that even the mice had hunched shoulders.
4. _____ "Oh, I've been known to bang out a chord or two," said the renowned concert pianist.
5. _____ Every word Laurie says is a lie, including "a" and "the."
6. _____ You must admit, Ken isn't the most talented singer in the world.
7. _____ I've wanted to go to France since the beginning of time.
8. _____ Herbert doesn't actually brush his teeth; he just waves a toothbrush near his mouth.
9. _____ How ugly is that shirt? Well, if you paid more than a nickel for it, you were ripped off.
10. _____ Maya was somewhat pleased when she aced the calculus final.

EXERCISE B Rewrite each sentence to make it either hyperbolic or understated (your choice). Change words, phrases, or punctuation as needed.

Sample The gardens at Winterthur are beautiful.

Revision *The gardens at Winterthur are the most beautiful things I've ever seen.*
or
The gardens at Winterthur are pleasant enough.

1. I enjoy playing basketball.

2. Dave's sand castle was big.

3. Dennis was thrilled when the Steelers won the Super Bowl.

4. The Marquez family seems to have a lot of money.

5. Jessica isn't getting enough sleep; she fell asleep at the lunch table today.

6. When Amy wore her alligator shoes, she attracted attention.

7. For me, cleaning house is an unpleasant activity.

8. Video games can be time-consuming.

9. People who talk on the phone while they drive do not pay enough attention to the road.

10. Mark was very disappointed about getting a D on the test.

11. Lilacs smell sweet.

12. Books are stacked four feet high around the perimeter of Stephen's room.

Identifying Errors in Logic

Whether writing an editorial or a persuasive speech, be sure to avoid **logical fallacies**, or errors in logic. Logic is the process of clear and organized thinking that leads to a reasonable conclusion. Errors in logic weaken your argument and your credibility. Although using errors in logic may persuade readers who don't catch the errors, readers who do may likely dismiss your entire argument. Study the examples in the chart below.

Common Errors in Logic	
Stereotyping	You should remind Grandma about her appointment. Old people are very forgetful.
False Analogy	To prevent shoplifting, we ought to ban kids under eighteen from shopping together. There are hardly any children in a retirement community, and shoplifting rarely occurs there.
Loaded Language	Even good kids can get caught up in a mob mentality whenever they gang together with other mall rats.
Limited Sample	Shoplifters always wear baggy clothing. This is what a classmate of mine did.
False Cause	When Melissa wasn't getting good grades, her parents gave her a curfew. Her grades later improved. It's clear that the curfew helped her do better in school.

EXERCISE For each item below, identify the error in logic as *stereotyping*, *false analogy*, *loaded language*, *limited sample*, or *false cause*.

Sample loaded language Mr. Anton must be a lunatic to believe that life could exist in other galaxies.

- _____ Ever since we started using filtered water, I've noticed that my headaches have disappeared. Something in the tap water must have been giving me headaches.
- _____ Little Louie is the sweetest, most agreeable toddler in town; I simply can't imagine that he would ever give his parents a hard time.
- _____ My daughter told me that she was studying with your daughter last night, but I don't believe her. Teens are dishonest with their parents.
- _____ If parents are strict, their children won't get into trouble. Look at Calvin's Hill Military Academy. Students at that school rarely get into trouble because the students there learn discipline.

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5. _____ The stricter the parents, the more trouble their children get into. For example, I once knew some obsessively strict parents whose child wound up stealing cars.
6. _____ The mayor believed that lining the city streets with artwork would bolster tourism, and he was right. Ever since the artwork was put in place, I've seen more people who look like tourists walking around.
7. _____ If our school had more students, we'd have a better softball team. Lawndale High has more students, and its tennis, soccer, and swim teams all went to state championships this year.
8. _____ I'd love to go camping with you at Gray Lake, but I'll get bitten all over by mosquitoes if I go. A friend of mine went there a month ago, and he suffered terribly from mosquito bites.
9. _____ My history teacher shouldn't torture our class with so much busy work. Last week, he assigned a ton of reading, and hardly any of the material appeared on this week's quiz.
10. _____ You want to do volunteer work in Central America before going to college? You must be a vegetarian, then. All volunteer workers are vegetarians.

Avoiding Clichés and Sexist Language

As you revise your writing, keep an eye out for clichés and sexist language. Replacing them will make your prose clearer, more interesting, and less offensive to your readers.

Clichés are stale and overused expressions. Some of them may at one time have been apt metaphors or expressions, but through overuse they've lost their meaning. Here are a few examples of clichés:

Clichés		
after all is said and done	good as gold	few and far between
cute as a button	right as rain	sad but true

By using **sexist language**—phrasing specific to one gender when either or both can apply—you run the risk of excluding and annoying many of your readers. Be careful to replace sexist words like *stewardess* and *mailman* with gender-neutral terms like *flight attendant* and *mail carrier*. Also, avoid using male pronouns to refer to antecedents of unknown or mixed gender. Here are some ways you can effectively recast a sentence that has sexist language.

- Gender-specific** Each student turned in **his** paper
- Gender-neutral** Each student turned in **a** paper.
 Each student turned in **his or her** paper.
 All the **students** turned in **their** papers.

EXERCISE A For each sentence below, underline the cliché(s). If the sentence uses sexist language, write *sexist* in the space provided.

Sample _____ *sexist* _____ Each actor was as cool as a cucumber when he spoke his lines.

- _____ Any writer worth his salt considers his audience.
- _____ Aunt Helen is a poetess who specializes in tugging at readers' heartstrings.
- _____ Quantum physics, the study of atomic particles, is not for the faint of heart.
- _____ Lonny is true blue, but his brother Lenny is a snake in the grass.
- _____ Any real gardener is proud of his green thumb.

EXERCISE B Rewrite each sentence, replacing clichés with original phrases and sexist language with nonsexist language. Not all sentences have both clichés and sexist language.

Sample Each actor was as cool as a cucumber when he spoke his lines.

Revision *The actors exuded confidence when they spoke their lines.*

1. Every engineer at the conference brought his visual aids.

2. Firemen risk their lives every day putting out fires.

3. On our flight to San Francisco, the stewardesses were very helpful.

4. My cousin Chris is as strong as a horse.

5. Every athlete at the Olympics represents his country with pride.

6. A registered nurse makes use of her training with every patient she sees.

7. Abel passed his driving exam with flying colors.

8. The waitress apologized for mixing up our orders.

9. A research scientist chooses his career path based on his interests.

10. When Jamal bumped his head on that pipe, he saw stars.
