Figurative Language and Argument
Far from being mere decorations or embellishments, figures of speech are indispensable to language use. Figurative language brings two major strengths to arguments: 1) it often aids understanding by likening something unknown to something known; 2) it can be helpful in arguments because it is often extremely memorable.

Figures have traditionally been classified into two main types: tropes (artful diction) and schemes (artful syntax). We will start by studying the most frequently used figures in each category, but throughout the year, we will explore many others.

Tropes

- **Metaphor**: One of the most pervasive uses of figurative language, metaphor offers an implied comparison between two things and thereby clarifies and enlivens many arguments. English language use is so filled with metaphors that these powerful, persuasive tools often zip by native speakers unnoticed, so be on the lookout for effective metaphors in everything you read. But also be wary of overused and unoriginal metaphors that have become trite clichés.

- **Simile**: A direct comparison between two things, simile is pervasive in written and spoken language. Similes will usually say that one thing is “like” something else.

- **Analogy**: Analogies compare two different or dissimilar things for special effect, arguing that if two things are alike in one way, they are probably alike in other ways as well. Often extended to several sentences, paragraphs, or even whole essays, analogies can help clarify and emphasize points of comparison.

- **Hyperbole**: Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration for special effect. Hyperbole can sometimes backfire, so it pays to use it sparingly and for an audience whose reactions you believe you can effectively predict.

- **Understatement**: Understatement, on the other hand, requires a quiet, muted message to make its point effectively. Quiet understatement can be particularly effective in arguments.

- **Rhetorical Question**: These questions do not require answers. Instead, they are used to help assert or deny something about an argument.
- **Antonomasia**: Though likely an unfamiliar term, it is probably most familiar to you from the sports pages: Michael Jordan is “His Airness”; Wayne Gretzky is “The Great One”; Babe Ruth was “The Sultan of Swat.” Such shorthand substitutions of a descriptive word or phrase for a proper name can pack arguments into just one phrase. What does calling Jordan “His Airness” argue about him?

- **Irony**: Irony is the use of words to convey a meaning in tension with or opposite to their literal meanings. There are three types of irony: situational, dramatic, and verbal. One of the most famous sustained uses of verbal irony in literature occurs in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, as Mark Antony punctuates his condemnation of Brutus with the repeated ironic phrase “But Brutus is an honorable man.”

**Schemes**

- **Parallelism**: Parallelism uses grammatically similar words, phrases, or clauses for special effect: “The laws of our land are said to be ‘by the people, of the people, and for the people.’”

- **Antithesis**: Antithesis is the use of parallel structures to mark contrast or opposition: “Love is an ideal thing; marriage a real thing.”

- **Inversion**: Inverted word order, in which the parts of a sentence or clause are not in the usual subject-verb-object order, can help make arguments memorable: “Good looking he was not; wealthy he was not; but brilliant—he was.”

- **Anaphora**: Anaphora is effective repetition and can act like a drumbeat in an argument: “Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

- **Antimetabole**: This term refers to a reversed structure for special effect. A clear example can be found in President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address in which he charged citizens to “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”
Dangers of Unduly Slanted Language
Although all arguments depend on figurative language to some degree, if the words used call attention to themselves as “stacking the deck” in unfair ways, they will not be particularly helpful in achieving the goals of the argument. In preparing your own arguments, you will want to pay special attention to the connotations of the words you choose—those associations that words and phrases always carry with them. The choices you make will always depend on the purpose you have in mind and those to whom you wish to speak. Should you choose “skinny” or “slender” in describing someone? Should you label a group “left-wing agitators” or “student demonstrators”?

The lesson for writers of arguments is a simple one that can be very hard to follow: know your audience and be respectful of them, even as you argue strenuously to make your case.

Respond

1. Identify the types of figurative language used in the following advertising slogans—metaphor, simile, analogy, hyperbole, understatement, rhetorical question, antonomasia, irony, parallelism, antithesis, inversion, anaphora, or antimetabole.

   “Good to the last drop.” (Maxwell House Coffee)
   “It’s the real thing.” (Coca-Cola)
   “Melts in your mouth, not in your hands.” (M&M’s)
   “Be all that you can be.” (U.S. Army)
   “Does she... or doesn’t she?” (Clariol)
   “Breakfast of champions.” (Wheaties)
   “Double your pleasure; double your fun.” (Doublemint gum)
   “Let your fingers do the walking.” (the Yellow Pages)
   “Think small.” (Volkswagen)
   “We try harder.” (Avis)

2. During the Renaissance, students would memorize and practice more than a hundred figures of speech. As part of their lessons, these students would be asked to write whole paragraphs using each of the figures in order, in what might be called “connected discourse”: the paragraph makes sense, and each sentence builds on the one that precedes it. Use the following list of figures to write a paragraph of connected discourse on a topic of education. Each sentence should use a different figure, in this order: metaphor – simile – analogy – hyperbole – understatement – rhetorical question – antonomasia – irony – parallelism – antithesis – inversion – anaphora – antimetabole. Then write another paragraph on the same topic but using the list of figures in reverse order.