

Ivy League Mentors Presents



**Understanding Poetry:
Figurative Language**

This guide is an excerpt from our textbook, *DSAT Reading & Writing: The Ultimate Guide*. If you found it helpful, you can purchase the full version here and use the promo code SAT25 at checkout for 25% off your purchase:

<https://ivyleaguementorsprep.com/sat/digital-sat-reading-writing-the-ultimate-guide/>

Contents include:

- Specialized strategies for approaching every question type within every domain on the Reading & Writing Section of the Digital SAT, along with realistic practice questions to help you get comfortable applying them.
- Guides to all the important grammar and punctuation concepts covered on the test, along with realistic practice questions to help you master them
- Guides to difficult text types, including poetry and texts with graphics, along with realistic practice questions to help you approach them more effectively
- A carefully curated list of high impact words, along with additional tips to help you develop your vocabulary
- 4 full-length practice modules with comprehensive answer explanations for additional practice and self-assessment

Figurative Language

One reason that poetry is challenging is because it often relies on figurative language, which is when writers use words or expressions that go beyond their literal meaning to create vivid images or express complex ideas. Three common types of figurative language are metaphor, simile, and symbolism. A metaphor compares two unlike things by saying one is the other, such as “time is a thief.” A simile also compares two things but uses the words like or as, such as “her smile was as bright as the sun.” Symbolism is when an object, person, or event represents something deeper—for example, a rose might symbolize love or beauty. These techniques can make poems difficult to understand because they add deeper layers of meaning that are not always immediately obvious and require interpretation.

Take a look at the example below.

The following text is from Grant B. Greenhane’s 1897 poem “The Lantern”

A lantern swings on a wind-worn trail,
Its flame is small, and often pale.
It flickers near a stream so wide,
But never falls, though shadows bide.
Some walk by and never see—
The light was meant to set them free.

Which choice best states the main purpose of the text?

- A. To convey the oppressive nature of ignorance
- B. To criticize those who are too busy to admire the lantern
- C. To emphasize the haunting beauty of the lantern
- D. To depict the lantern as weak and unstable

A poem like this could be hard to interpret without a knowledge of figurative language. However, if you know that a light (lantern) often symbolizes knowledge or truth and that a road (trail) often symbolizes the journey of life, it’s not so hard. The poem seems to suggest that some people go through life without acknowledging the truth, which prevents them from being free. This is perfectly conveyed by Choice A, which suggests that ignorance (a lack of knowledge) can be oppressive. Choice B can be eliminated because, while the poem may be criticizing those who do not see the lantern, it does not suggest that they fail to see the lantern because they are too busy. Choice C can be eliminated because it ignores the reaction of people to the lantern and falsely characterizes it as hauntingly beautiful. Choice D can be eliminated because it ignores the reaction of people to the lantern and falsely characterizes it as unstable, when in fact, it never falls.

Common Symbols in Poetry

If you struggle to pick up on the deeper meaning of poems, we've created a list of symbols that frequently appear in poetry, along with their most common connotations. Keep in mind that the meaning of symbols is highly dependent on context, so the same symbol may have very different meanings in different poems. Still, understanding these common meanings may help you approach the poems you encounter on the Digital SAT.

Rose: love, beauty, passion

Dove: peace, purity

Skull: mortality, death, the transience of life

Tree: growth, life, renewal

Light: knowledge, truth, purity, hope, divinity

Darkness: ignorance, evil, mystery, despair

Water: life, purification

Tides: cycles, change, and renewal.

Fire: passion, destruction, purification, transformation.

Bird: freedom, transcendence, the human soul.

Moon: femininity, change, mystery, the passage of time.

Sun: power, life, energy, enlightenment.

Cross: faith, sacrifice, burden, suffering

Crown: authority, power, sovereignty.

Serpent: evil, temptation, knowledge

Road: the journey of life, choices, the passage of time.

Spring: birth, growth, renewal

Storm: trouble, danger, hardship

Summer: beauty, passion, romance

Fall: decay, downfall, aging

Winter: death, despair, emptiness