

# Allusions and Figures of Speech

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Score: \_\_\_\_\_ / 10



## Quick Review

Figurative language and allusions reward readers who know the background. An **allusion** is a brief reference to a famous person, place, story, or event — usually from literature, the Bible, or mythology — that carries a compact meaning. *She's a real Cassandra* (Greek myth: a prophet whose true warnings were not believed). *It was a Goliath of a task* (biblical: huge and intimidating). *He met his Waterloo* (history: a decisive, final defeat). *She's a Romeo* (Shakespeare: a hopeless romantic). Other figures to know: **simile** (*like, as*), **metaphor** (direct comparison), **hyperbole** (huge exaggeration), **personification** (human traits for non-human things), **oxymoron** (two opposite words together, *bittersweet*), and **paradox** (a true statement that sounds contradictory).

## PRACTICE

Identify the figure of speech, interpret the allusion, or explain its effect in context.

1. Read the sentence: *When the budget meeting turned ugly, Mr. Hayes warned us all not to open a **Pandora's box** of old grievances.*

The allusion to **Pandora's box** MOST LIKELY means —

- A. a beautifully decorated gift from Greek myth.
- B. an action that releases many troubles that cannot be taken back.
- C. a small wooden box that a Greek goddess used.
- D. a cure for jealousy and anger between people.

2. Read the sentence: *I told my brother three times that his investment plan would fail, but he wouldn't listen. I felt like a **Cassandra** at the family dinner.*

The allusion to **Cassandra** MOST LIKELY means —

- A. a person who only speaks at family gatherings.
- B. a character invented by a modern novelist.
- C. an ancient Greek city famous for its dinners.
- D. someone whose true warnings are not believed.

3. Read the sentence: *After our team's six-game winning streak, the playoff against the state champions felt like a real **Goliath** of a challenge.*

The allusion to **Goliath** MOST LIKELY means —

- A. a fair fight between equally matched players.
- B. a small but tricky obstacle to overcome.
- C. a huge, intimidating opponent or task.
- D. a coach known for shouting at his team.



4. Read the sentence: *Once the press got hold of his old social-media posts, the senator knew he had met his **Waterloo**.*

The allusion to **Waterloo** MOST LIKELY means —

- A. a final, decisive defeat that he cannot recover from.
- B. a long vacation by a lake in Europe.
- C. a battle in which he is sure to win.
- D. a famous song from the 1970s.

5. Read this sentence from a poem: *The angry storm hurled rain against the windows and shouted across the rooftops all night.*

What is the writer's MOST LIKELY purpose in personifying the storm?

- A. to give a precise weather-forecast reading.
- B. to argue that storms are scientifically dangerous.
- C. to make the storm feel alive and threatening, increasing the suspense of the scene.
- D. to make the line sound funny and lighthearted.

6. Which line is an example of **oxymoron**?

- A. The library was as silent as a tomb.
- B. Their parting was bittersweet — happy and sad at the same time.
- C. The wind whispered through the leaves.
- D. I've told you a million times to lock the door.

7. Read the sentence: *Carlos is the **Romeo** of Lincoln Middle School: he wrote his crush a sonnet and left it taped to her locker.*

The allusion to **Romeo** MOST LIKELY means —

- A. a hopelessly romantic young man.
- B. a dangerous swordsman from Verona.
- C. a poet who writes only in Italian.
- D. a character who dies at the end of the play.

8. Read this line from a speech: *The senator was drowning in a sea of paperwork, every wave a fresh request from another committee.*

The figure of speech is MOST CLEARLY a —

- A. personification, because the paperwork is given a human voice.
- B. hyperbole, because the speaker exaggerates a number.
- C. allusion, because the speech refers to a famous historical event.
- D. metaphor, because paperwork is described as a sea with waves.



9. Read the sentence: *After three losing seasons, Coach Rivera's perfect playoff run felt like an **Achilles heel** moment in reverse — the one small thing that finally turned everything in his favor.*

- (a) Identify the source of the allusion to **Achilles heel** (mythological, biblical, literary, or historical). (b) Explain in your own words what *Achilles heel* usually means. (c) Explain what the writer means by *in reverse* in this sentence.

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10. For each line below, name the figure of speech (allusion, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification, oxymoron, or paradox) and explain in one sentence what it really means.

- (a) *Don't open that email chain about the fundraiser — it's a real Pandora's box.*  
(b) *The silence in the hospital waiting room was deafening.*  
(c) *By the end of the meeting, my backpack weighed about a thousand tons.*

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## Answer Keys

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| Explanations |   |
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| <b>1. B</b>  | In Greek myth, Pandora opens a sealed jar and releases all the world's evils. The allusion means <b>an action that releases many troubles that cannot be taken back</b> . A picks the LITERAL gift, not the figurative meaning. C describes the box's physical look, not the warning the allusion carries. D reverses the meaning entirely (Pandora's box CAUSES trouble, doesn't cure it).       |
| <b>2. D</b>  | In Greek myth, Cassandra is cursed to prophesy true events that no one will believe. The allusion means <b>someone whose true warnings are not believed</b> , exactly the speaker's frustration. A invents a setting rule that isn't part of the myth. B drops the ancient source. C confuses the person with a place.  |
| <b>3. C</b>  | In the biblical story, Goliath is the giant Philistine warrior David must face. The allusion means <b>a huge, intimidating opponent or task</b> . A flattens the size difference that gives the allusion its meaning. B reverses the SIZE (Goliath is huge, not small). D invents a coach character that isn't in the story.  |
| <b>4. A</b>  | <b>Waterloo</b> alludes to Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 — the battle that ended his rule. The allusion means <b>a final, decisive defeat that he cannot recover from</b> . B takes the place name literally as a destination. C reverses the outcome (Napoleon lost, didn't win). D names a real song that borrows the allusion but doesn't carry the political meaning the sentence needs.    |
| <b>5. C</b>  | Personification gives non-human things emotion to deepen the mood. By making the storm <i>angry</i> and able to <i>hurl</i> and <i>shout</i> , the writer makes it feel <b>alive and threatening</b> , raising suspense. A reduces the line to a forecast. B reads it as a scientific argument, which a poem doesn't make. D misreads the tone (the line is tense, not playful).                  |
| <b>6. B</b>  | An <b>oxymoron</b> joins two opposite ideas in one phrase. <i>Bittersweet</i> — explicitly defined as <i>happy and sad at the same time</i> — is the textbook example. A is a simile ( <i>as silent as</i> ). C is personification (the wind <i>whispered</i> ). D is hyperbole ( <i>a million times</i> ). All four are real figures of speech, but only one is an oxymoron.                     |
| <b>7. A</b>  | Romeo, from Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , is the model of the love-struck young man — <b>a hopelessly romantic young man</b> . B picks the LITERAL Romeo (a swordsman) but ignores the figurative meaning the sentence wants. C invents a constraint (Italian-only) that isn't part of the allusion. D picks the LITERAL fate of the character, not the figurative meaning of his name. |
| <b>8. D</b>  | The line treats paperwork AS a sea — <i>no like or as</i> — a textbook <b>metaphor</b> . A is wrong because no human VOICE is given to the paper; metaphor doesn't require personification. B looks for a specific exaggerated NUMBER, but the line names no number. C claims a historical reference, but the line names no historical event or figure.   |



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| 9.  | <b>Answer:</b> (a) The allusion is <b>mythological</b> : in Greek myth, the warrior Achilles is invulnerable except for his heel, which becomes the cause of his death. (b) An <b>Achilles heel</b> usually means <i>a single small weakness that can bring down an otherwise strong person or thing</i> . (c) <i>In reverse</i> means the writer flips the usual meaning: instead of a small weakness causing a downfall, here a small detail (the perfect playoff run) causes a triumph &mdash; the same size of cause, but the opposite effect. |
| 10. | <b>Answer:</b> (a) <b>Allusion</b> (Greek myth). The email chain will unleash a flood of troubles that cannot be taken back. (b) <b>Oxymoron</b> . The room was so quiet that the silence itself felt overwhelming; <i>deafening</i> and <i>silence</i> are opposites placed side by side. (c) <b>Hyperbole</b> . The backpack felt very heavy, but obviously not a literal thousand tons; the exaggeration shows the speaker's exhaustion.  |



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