

# *Literary Genius*

Using literary devices  
in journalistic writing

By Bobby Hawthorne  
Austin, TX 2007

## **It smells like...**

---

The air smells like stale hamburgers and unbrushed teeth. It smells like cold coffee, like sour beer. It smells like exhaustion.

The air smells as if it has been inhaled and exhaled by too many people for far too long, and they are breathing it still, snoring and snuffling, sighing and murmuring as they sprawl about O'Hare International Airport, like refugees from some invisible war.

# Tools of the trade

---

- Anecdote
- Dialogue
- Repetition
- Partial sentences
- Personification
- Allusion
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Mild alliteration

## **Anecdote**

---

A small story that represents the big truth.  
It doesn't tell. It shows.

## **This story tells...**

---

In Houston and other urban school districts across the nation, the safety of teachers and principals is a growing concern.

In the 2003 fall semester alone, there were 47 assaults against Houston Independent School District staff members, district security reports show. In each of the two previous school years, the total for both semesters was about 60 assaults.

## **This story shows...**

---

James Miller was calling roll in his first-period history class last month when one of his 14-year old students started shouting, throwing paper and walking around the room.

The Stockard Middle School teacher's cue to send him to the office came when the boy pulled a marijuana cigarette out of his pocket.

But before Miller could fill out the principal's referral form, witnesses said, the youth punched him repeatedly in the face, slammed him against a chalkboard and knocked him out.

---

A classroom full of stunned eighth-graders looked on as the boy kicked the unconscious teacher in the chest and fled. Miller was left with a broken nose, loose teeth, eye damage and bruises. He has been on medical leave since the attack Jan. 7 at the southside school.

In Houston and other urban school districts across the nation, the safety of teachers and principals is a growing concern.

In the 2003 fall semester alone, there were 47 assaults against Houston Independent School District staff members, district security reports show. In each of the two previous school years, the total for both semesters was about 60 assaults.

## Dialogue

---

Carrying only a clipboard and a malfunctioning pen, Judy Coyle raps briskly on the apartment door. A moment later, a 16-year-old girl opens it.

“How come you’re not in school?” Coyle asks.

“Cause I don’t feel good,” she replies.

“I’ve sent you a warning,” Coyle says. “I’m fixing to go one step further. I can take your mother to court or you can be in school. Now, y’all don’t have money for that. I’d hate to bring the police after you — but I will. Now I expect to see you in school tomorrow.”

Judy Coyle is on the job. Her silver shield, which she flashes police-style as she makes her rounds, identifies her as an attendance officer for the Irving Independent School District. But the children she tracks down know her as the truant officer.



## **Internal dialogue**

---

Though it made her dizzy and sick to her stomach, junior Lisa Strolberg began smoking when she was 13 because, she explained, it made her feel accepted by the older girls she hung out with. They all smoked, so she did too.

She chased away her fears of disease and addiction by convincing herself, “I’m just doing this for now. I won’t get hooked. I can quit any time I like.”

Five years later, she’s still puffing away.

“I’d like to quit,” she said. “I’m just not sure I can.”

## **Repetition**

---

Soak up a year in America. Learn some English. Make some friends. Then return to Russia and deal with the rest of his life.

That was the plan anyway.

But that was before his mother died. Before he decided there was nothing left in St. Petersburg. Before he became a small-town basketball star at Toledo High School, along the Cowlitz River.

“How did I get here?” Artem Wallace asks rhetorically. “Oh man, where do I start?”

— Michael Ko, “Hoops journey spans half the world,” The Seattle Times

## **Partial sentence**

---

After Jean Wheeler gave birth at age 17, she didn't know what to do when her son cried. Or how to change his diaper. Or when to switch from milk to cereal.

She learned quickly, though, through the school's Pregnancy Education and Parenting Program.

Without the program, "I wouldn't have graduated," Wheeler said. Now 19, she works two jobs, including part-time work at the school-district day-care center.

## **Partial sentence/repetition**

---

Junior Shannon Hefferman has witnessed it. The taunting. The teasing. The bullying. Students teased about their clothes. Teased over how they speak, what they say. Teased for being “stupid,” teased for being who they are.

“I think it’s horrible,” Shannon said. “There are people in our school who don’t even have friends. I’ve seen people get teased for horrible reasons.”

## **Personification**

---

Trees must love Gordon Bell.

The Microsoft researcher set out years ago to live a paperless existence, and he's just about there.

## **Allusion**

---

It's summer time and the painting's not easy.  
Storms are jumpin' and the humidity's high.  
But nothing could dampen the spirits of 400  
teenagers and 25 adult leaders who converged  
Monday for a week of repairing and rolling new  
paint onto 45 houses on Lansing's east side.

## **Allusion**

---

Of all the gym joints in the world, Marty Blake is liable to walk into yours if there's even a whisper of a rumor that a pro prospect might be playing there. It's his business to spin out, in eyes-only briefing books circulated among the 30 NBA teams, the prospective story of every credible, draft-eligible ballplayer on the planet.

## **But not dumb allusion...**

---

To be or not to be. A drug addict, that is. Many students will experiment with drugs, and they will surely become hooked.



## **Comparison**

---

Welcome to the Wacko life of Chicago White Sox catcher A.J. Pierzynski, flakier than a truckload of Wheaties.

## **Simile**

---

In 25 years I've been to at least 1,000 press conferences. World Series, Super Bowls, prizefights — huge rooms full of tough guys. But the most gripping press conference, the most unforgettable one, was last Thursday in a little room in Grand Junction, Colorado, starring a guy as skinny as a two-iron.

That was when 27-year-old adventurer Aron Ralston described for the world how he had saved his life by cutting off his lower arm with a dull pocketknife.

## **Simile**

---

Dallas Cowboys left tackle Flozell Adams is as impenetrable as a symbolist poem.

## **Simile**

---

Thirty years ago, the average number of television channels that Americans could receive was seven; today, with the rise of cable and satellite television, it is 71. Thirty years ago, there was no Internet, therefore no Web, hence no online newspapers and magazines, no blogs. The public's consumption of news and opinion used to be like sucking on a straw. Now, it's like being sprayed by a fire hose.

## **But again, not stupid simile**

---

He was deeply in love. When she spoke, he thought he heard bells, as if she were a garbage truck backing up.

The revelation that his marriage of 30 years had disintegrated because of his wife's infidelity came as a rude shock, like a surcharge at a formerly surcharge-free ATM.

## **Metaphor (good)**

---

Jonathan Lebed was something of a legend at his high school in the leafy suburb of Cedar Grove, N.J., even before last week, when he became the first minor ever to be charged with stock fraud by the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The 15-year-old possessed that most coveted band of 21<sup>st</sup> century schoolyard cachet: he knew how to make big money on the Internet. For all intents and purposes, he is a spiky-haired shark in parachute pants, a modern day John Dillinger with a laptop computer and enough passwords to get him into all the right chat rooms and bulletin boards where his scams ranked in almost \$300,000.

## **Metaphor (good)**

---

Ponce de Leon Avenue is a fat boy's dream.

In one two-block stretch, just north of downtown Atlanta, the drive-through fast-food restaurants are door-to-door, and the hungry but very busy people are bumper-to-bumper. A motorist can purchase three different brands of fried chicken, grab a handful of soft tacos, throw a pizza in the back seat, sample four different nationally advertised cheeseburgers and slurp down a butter-pecan milk shake and never get his car out of first gear.

## **Metaphor (bad)**

---

The cafeteria is a veritable ocean of humanity, and the senior sharks slice their way through the great barrier reef, tearing into the freshmen as if they were baby seals.



## **Alliteration**

---

Nobody beats Brady and Belichick in a big game, not even Big Ben.

Tom Brady and Bill Belichick were an unstoppable combination again for the New England Patriots, exposing all of the Pittsburgh Steelers' weaknesses to end their 15-game winning streak and win the AFC championship, 41-27, on Sunday night.

---

**Pulling it  
all together**

## **...men on the verge of drowning**

---

All the way down the bank of radar scopes, the air traffic controllers have the savage, bug-eyed look, like men on the verge of drowning, as they watch the computer blips proliferate and speak in frantic bursts of techno-chatter to the pilots: “Continental 1528, turn right heading 280 immediately! Traffic at your 12 o’clock!”

Tom Zaccheo, a tightly wound control-room veteran, sinks his teeth into his cuticles and turns, glowering, to the controller by his side. “Hey, watch your damned planes. You’re in my airspace.”

## **like a pneumatic drill...**

---

Two scopes away, the normally unflappable Jim Hunter, his right leg pumping like a pneumatic drill, sucks down coffee and squints as blips representing 747's with several hundred passengers on board simply vanish from his radar screen.

“If the FAA doesn't fix this damned equipment,” he fumes, retrieving the blips with his key pad, “It's only a matter of time before there's a catastrophe.”

## **‘Look out the cockpit window’...**

---

And Joe Jorge, a new trainee, pants down at the end as he orders pilots to turn, climb, descend, speed up, slow down and *look out the cockpit window, captain!*

From the passenger seat of a moving airplane, the sky over New York City seems empty, serene, a limitless ocean of blue. But on a controller’s radar scope, it looks more like a 6-lane highway at rush hour with everyone pushing 80. On the Sunday after Thanksgiving — usually the busiest air-travel day of the year — jets are barreling toward Newark just 1,000 feet above the propeller planes landing at Teterboro. Newark departures streak up the west side of the Hudson River just as La Guardia arrivals race down the east.

## **Curse and twitch like...**

---

And in the darkened operations room of the New York Terminal Radar Approach Control — the vast air traffic facility in Westbury, L.I. that handles the airspace over New York City — the controllers curse and twitch like a gathering of Tourette sufferers, as they try to keep themselves from going down the pipes.

# Using literary devices

---

- Have a purpose other than showing off.
- Use them sparingly.
- Write with your ear.
- Listen for tone and pace.
- Develop an honest voice.
- Read. Read. Read.
- Practice. Practice. Practice.
- Open your eyes!

---

**‘Your talent is  
in your choices’**

**Stella Adler, drama teacher,  
to a young Marlon Brando**

New York City, circa 1947



**For more great examples...**

---

THE *Radical Write*

By BOBBY HAWTHORNE

Available from the  
Journalism Education Association bookstore.  
[www.jea.org](http://www.jea.org)