

UNDERSTATEMENT

NCTE STANDARDS: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12

(Notes for understatement appear at the end. Vera Laska's testimony can be obtained through The Central Arkansas Library System.)

1. **ANTICIPATORY SET:** Lecture based introduction (with notes) to understatement, litotes, and meiosis- Students will watch a brief clip of Vera Laska. Students will then find 3 understatements from the literature assigned.
2. **OBJECTIVES AND PURPOSE:** The student will be able to identify understatement and explain how it is used by the author.
3. **MODELING:** Give students the definition of understatement, meiosis, and litotes. Watch Vera Laska's testimony about her daring escape. She makes the statement to her friend, "So you had potatoes, I had freedom. So what?" (1:45:45-1:47:35). Explain to students why this statement is considered understatement. Also, provide one or two examples for understatement that the students are familiar with. One obvious example is Mercutio's "a scratch, a scratch" after he is mortally wounded.
4. **CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING:** Break students into groups of two and have them write understatements that they use on a regular basis, along with the situation in which the understatement was used. Then, allow students to share out.

UNDERSTATEMENT, MEIOSIS, AND LITOTES (DEFINITIONS AND FIRST THREE EXAMPLES FOUND IN THE BEDFORD GLOSSARY OF CRITICAL AND LITERARY TRADITIONS, THIRD EDITION):

UNDERSTATEMENT- A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker says less than what he or she means; the opposite of exaggeration.

MEIOSIS- From the Greek for "lessening," a trope employing deliberate understatement. Usually for comic, ironic, or satiric effect. Meiosis typically involves characterizing something in a way that, taken literally, minimizes its evident significance or gravity.

LITOTES- A type of meiosis, involves making an affirmative point by negating its opposite.

Examples of Understatement-

1. “Just a flesh wound” from *Monty Python’s The Holy Grail*
2. “Mistakes were made” Reagan- Iran-Contra
3. “One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day.”
4. From “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning:

E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? **This grew; I gave commands;**
Then all smiles stopped together. (ll 43-46)

(Bolted lines are the understated lines).