
Similes Dictionary

FIRST EDITION

**Elyse Sommer and
Mike Sommer, Editors**

Similes Dictionary

A Collection of More Than 16,000 Comparison
Phrases from Ancient Times to the Present
Compiled from Books, Folklore, Magazines,
Newspapers, Plays, Politics, Stage, Screen, and
Television and Arranged Under More Than
500 Thematic Categories

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Special thanks to Nancy Franklin, Marie Browne, Doris Lewandowski,
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Similes dictionary.

Bibliography: p.

I. Simile—Dictionaries. I. Sommer, Elyse.

II. Sommer, Mike.

PN6084.S5S56 1988

082

87-36109

ISBN 0-8103-4361-4

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The manuscript for this book was prepared on an IBM-XT with WordPerfect 4.2 and with
Productivity Plus and Electra-Find as enhancements.

Printed in the United States

Similes

Dictionary

Related Gale Titles

Allusions—Cultural, Literary, Biblical, and Historical: A Thematic Dictionary. 2nd edition. More than 8,700 literary, biblical, and cultural allusions and metaphors are identified by source in this dictionary. Entries are arranged alphabetically under more than 700 thematic headings.

Dictionary of Collective Nouns and Group Terms. 2nd edition. Furnishes definitions, usage examples, and source notes for 1,800 terms. Ancient phrases, general terms, modern punning terms, and terms of quantity and number are covered.

Idioms and Phrases Index. Contains over 400,000 entries identifying some 140,000 idioms, phrases, and expressions in the English language. Each entry guides users to one or more of 30 dictionaries that define the term.

Loanwords Dictionary. More than 6,500 words and phrases encountered in English contexts that are not fully assimilated into English and retain their foreign orthography, pronunciation, or flavor. Entries include the loanword, language of origin, and definition.

Modifiers. Presents some 16,000 English adjectives derived from, or relating to, over 4,000 selected common and technical nouns.

Mottoes. An extensive collection of more than 9,000 mottoes - familial, personal, institutional - from around the world and throughout history. Arranged under nearly 400 thematic categories with alphabetical indexes, each motto is identified as to source. Foreign mottoes are translated into English.

-Ologies and -Isms. A lexicon of more than 15,000 words containing such suffixes as -ologies, -isms, -ics, -cides, -phobias, -mancys, etc., that are not easily accessible in standard dictionaries. Words are arranged under thematic headings.

Picturesque Expressions: A Thematic Dictionary. 2nd edition. Explains 7,000 expressions. Entries give the expression, an explanation of its origin, its approximate date of appearance in written English, and, in most cases, usage notes and illustrative quotations.

Prefixes and Other Word-Initial Elements of English. For each of 3,000 common and technical prefixes, the dictionary gives examples of use, a description of its origin and meaning, and variant and related forms.

The Private Lives of English Words. Identifies and explains the etymologies of some 400 words that exemplify various processes of linguistic change. Most of these words have had their meanings drastically changed over the course of their history.

Slogans. This work collects more than 6,000 slogans, rallying cries, and other exhortations from such fields as advertising, politics, and everyday speech, and arranges them under appropriate thematic headings, along with a discussion of each slogan's origin and use.

Suffixes and Other Word-Final Elements of English. Provides definitions, usage notes, examples, and variant and related forms of 1,500 suffixes.

Introduction

**The English language is like an enormous bank account
—Robert Claiborne**

Similes Dictionary brings together the similes from that vast and continually growing bank account into one comprehensive, timely, and easy-to-use inspirational guide and phrase finder.

Although used as a literary device and to lend color to daily conversation since time immemorial, the simile is not old in the sense associated with being old-fashioned. On the contrary, in an age that places a high premium on minimalism, the simile's effectiveness as a pithy and vivid word sketch makes it **as timely as tomorrow, as useful as a Swiss army knife**. It's more robust than a single word and more spontaneous than a formal quote.

Like a good picture, a good simile equals a thousand words when it comes to characterizing people, places, and ideas. Yet, its utility as a colorful language tool notwithstanding, the simile has not had an up-to-date book of its own, a lack which has caused many pithy examples to fall through the cracks unrecorded. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. is a case in point. Only a few of the many similes that enlivened his medical lectures and conversations were put into a formal record. His biographer John T. Morse lamented this loss with a simile of his own: **They [the Holmes similes and other witticisms] have sunk away and disappeared like the raindrops which fall in the ocean**. This dictionary is a response to that lament and the formal outgrowth of a personal collecting habit.

To achieve comprehensive coverage, our selections span two millennia of more than 16,000 comparison phrases coined by more than 2000 famous and talented as well as little known and ordinary men and women. They include the simile in all its permutations—literary and colloquial, humorous and serious, original and derivative. Sources tapped include books; print, broadcast, and electronic media; stage and screen; plus, contributions from students, writers, friends, and colleagues.

In selecting similes from books, we tried to cover at least a representative number of titles. This highlighted the consistency or lack of it with which some authors use similes. For some a simile about similes by William H. Gass applies: **Similes dangle like baubles from me**. These consistent simile users

include such writers from the past as William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Edith Wharton; and contemporary authors like Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, T. Coraghessan Boyle, George Garrett, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Sharon Sheehe Stark.

Naturally, with such a large mass of material to choose from, it was necessary to cut down a few trees in order to more clearly see the forest. For a while we considered eliminating familiar expressions. However, while overuse has devalued many to clichés, they have a certain piquancy that lends itself to life-extending modifications ranging from extensions and perversions to unique new twists. Clearly, a book like this could not be considered comprehensive without including at least some of the more enduring colloquialisms, as well as their extensions and twists.

Comments from contributors and colleagues confirmed this decision; these include a writer who pointed out that familiar similes make great dialogue for certain characters and a crossword puzzle designer who needed easy access to clichés.

A question asked by many contributors, “must it contain the ‘like’ or ‘as’ to be acceptable?” also prompted the decision to include some entries illustrating a somewhat looser interpretation of the simile as a comparison than those made explicit with “like” or “as.” Exceptions to the “like/as” rule include alternative introductory phrases such as:

as if
as though
it was a bit like
is comparable to
akin to
can be likened to
not unlike
is kind of like
may be compared to
similar to

Two other formats that depart from the traditional simile are sparingly represented: phrases in which “like” is implied and those in which “more” serves as a more emphatic substitute for “like.”

The comprehensiveness criterion was also used to decide what information each entry should contain. This centered around context and attribution; to be specific:

1. Context. Because this is a phrase book, the sample similes tend to be more fragmentary than conventional quotes. To give the reader a better sense of how the simile was used, many entries include the descriptive frame of reference in parentheses or an explanation in brackets. In addition, comments were often added to explain the simile or show it in fuller context.

2. Attribution. Author attribution, though often difficult to pinpoint with absolute certainty, was considered a clear-cut must. On the other hand, the addition of sources for similes culled from books promised to detract from an uncluttered overview of the text as much as it might add. To offset this, whenever information about the source promised to add an extra dimension to an entry, an explanatory comment was added. Furthermore, there is a complete bibliography.

To achieve optimum timeliness, words in some examples from the past have been modernized, including some paraphrases to eliminate gender specific language. Such changes are always mentioned in a comment following the entry. As for selections from our era, these reflect the current trend towards more explicit language.

In applying the timeliness criterion to inclusion decisions, the selection process encompassed not only well-established writers but also newcomers and those with popular rather than literary reputations. An equally wide net was cast for selections from other sources, e.g. dialogue from popular television shows. Probably our most up-to-date sources included contributors on several computer bulletin boards.

In the final analysis, of course, the true criterion for a selection's timeliness depended on content and style. Some of the most poetic similes from the past now sound too flowery or dated. On the other hand, many a comparison made a century or more ago could have been made today.

To achieve easy accessibility to this dictionary's contents, the thematic category arrangement with extensive **See** and **See Also** cross references proved the ideal organizational approach. Because the simile is so frequently used to draw a graphic physical and character description, headings pertaining to these are significantly represented, often sub-divided into more specific headings. In addition to **FACE(S)**, for example, readers will find categories for **FACIAL COLOR**; **FACIAL DETAILS**; **FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, BLANK**; **FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, MISCELLANEOUS**; and **FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, SERIOUS**. The simile maker's penchant for irony and disparaging remarks is also reflected in the headings. Besides a whole category of **INSULTS**, numerous synonyms lead the way to more. Many other headings encompass both positive and negative expressions, with the negative entries often outnumbering the positive ones.

A special feature, not found in other thematically organized reference works, are **See Also** cross references pertaining to individual entries rather than an entire category.

To satisfy our criterion for easy utility, the headings and cross references were thoroughly tested on potential users who were asked to search for a simile via a category heading. If the heading under which they looked was not the main heading or a **See/See Also** cross reference, we added their synonym to our list. When necessary, category headings were changed to more meaningful words.

Another utility feature, the Author Index, includes listings for the Bible, colloquialisms, proverbs, and also similes that do not have their own number but are part of a comment in another entry.

To sum up the editors' aims, we have tried to construct the most all-encompassing, useful, and interesting compendium of similes ever devised. We hope users will find the resulting book as helpful as we have tried to make it. Besides using it as an inspirational springboard for creating new similes or as a thesaurus, those who agree with George Orwell that you should never use a figure of speech you've seen in print, can use this book as an elimination guide. No matter how readers use the *Similes Dictionary*, we hope all will spend some time simply browsing through its pages for the casual pleasures it will yield. We would also remind all that the simile is just one device for language enrichment and should not be dragged into what is written or said indiscriminately. The key at all times is appropriateness to what is being described, as illustrated by this example from a review by *New York Times* drama critic Frank Rich:

One long evening of evasions, as if the playwright were taking the Fifth Amendment on advice of counsel.

Rich, whose similes are unfailingly appropriate, used the above to describe a play about a blacklisted actor.

Finally, no book like this would be complete without acknowledging the collecting spirit of others. As the reference books listed in the Bibliography indicate, most have focused on proverbs and quotations that happen to include similes, as this dictionary happens to also include proverbs and quotations. This applies to books published before this century, as well as more contemporary references. Two notable exceptions are John Ray, whose simile-rich collection of proverbs was published in the seventeenth century, and Frank J. Wilstach, whose *Dictionary of Similes* was published in 1916.

The Wilstach book represents a serious and worthy effort to give the simile its just due. However, besides lacking the many fresh similes coined during the

last seventy years, its key word organization makes it difficult to find anything unless you know exactly what you're looking for. Were Mr. Wilstach alive today, he would no doubt have a wonderful time perusing this updated and thematically organized dictionary, enjoying the many contemporary similes, looking through the older ones to see which have stood the test of time.

Many thanks are also due to the staff of the Hewlett-Woodmere Library and the New York State Library System through whom we were able to examine many out-of-print works that proved extremely fruitful, e.g.: Bohn's *Hand-book of Proverbs*, which encompassed Bohn's own collection as well as a complete reprint of the above-mentioned John Ray's proverbs; and the works of Josh Billings, Thomas Fuller, Jerome K. Jerome, and Walter Savage Landor.

Last, but by no means least, we thank the many friends, writers, and simile enthusiasts who learned about *Similes Dictionary* and contributed clippings, suggestions for authors with good simile potential, and similes from their own published and in-progress works:

Alvin Boretz, John B. Drinks, John B. Drisko, Judith Clark-Reilly, Gerard Flynn, Dorothy Francis, Daniela Gioseffi, Larry Gottlieb, Ann Jasperson, Paul Kuttner, Dan P. Herod, Ruby E. McGreight, Newton E. Meltzer, Patterson Pepple, Harry Prince, Rochelle Ratner, Joe Sweet, and A. D. Winans.

Readers are invited to follow in their footsteps and send contributions and suggestions for the next edition to me, in care of Gale Research Company, Book Tower, Detroit, Michigan 48226.

Elyse Sommer

How To Use This Book

The *Similes Dictionary* is designed for the browser's enjoyment and inspiration and as a thesaurus for writers and speakers. Because many similes are complete little quotes, the book also serves as a quotation finder.

To best fulfill all these functions, the more than 16,000 entries have been grouped into 558 thematic categories, with 717 synonyms to ease and expedite access to them. The Table of Thematic Categories at the front of the book contains an alphabetical list that includes the subject categories, synonyms, and **See** and **See Also** cross references. All categories and synonyms with their cross references are also included in the text.

In keeping with the thematic principle, the entries within each category are arranged (and numbered) in alphabetical order. Alphabetizing is done letter-by-letter, except for articles (a, an, the) and text in parentheses or brackets. Cross references pertaining to the category in general appear after the thematic heading. Cross references specific to a single entry appear after that entry.

How to Locate Similes through the Subject Headings

Since this is a phrase book, most readers will be best served by searching through the thematic categories to find the phrases that interest them. Taking the thesaurus approach, turn first to the Table of Thematic Categories and go to a heading most likely to lead you to the similes that interest you. If you looked up **ABILITY**, you will find that it is a main heading and also a cross reference to a thematically related heading, **ACCOMPLISHMENT**. If you looked under **ACCURACY**, you would find it listed as a synonym, with a cross reference to the main heading, **CORRECTNESS**.

How to Locate Similes by Browsing

Taking the browser's approach, go right to the entries and let the thematic categories and cross references in the text guide you through your ramble.

How to Locate Similes by a Specific Author

If you're curious about who said what, turn to the Author Index and look up the categories and entry numbers for the author whose similes you want to see. If an author's listing includes many entries you can limit your search to just a few thematic categories.

How to Locate Familiar Similes

The search for a specific familiar phrase can often be narrowed down to similes from Shakespeare, the Bible, early writers and poets like Chaucer, Shelley, Swinburne, Tennyson and Longfellow. All can be tracked through the Author Index.

A second familiar simile category encompasses proverbs, proverbial comparisons and colloquialisms of unknown authorship. These too can be located through the Author Index which includes listings for Bohn's *Hand-book of Proverbs*, Bartlett's *Dictionary of Americanisms*, proverbs, and colloquialisms. Like the individual authors, they include the thematic categories and their numbers. Similes that appear in comment paragraphs have a (c) after the entry number.

Additional Source Information

The Bibliography lists the books and publications from which similes were culled. Entries are alphabetically arranged by author or editor. Anthologies without editors or with rotating editors are alphabetized by title.

Things to Bear in Mind When Reading the Entries

1. Spelling and punctuation in entries from printed sources are as they appeared there. The exception to this is words with spelling common only in England, e.g.: colour, favour, grey, honour, moustaches, odour which appear as color, favor, gray, honor, mustaches, odor.
2. Some similes contain modernized words and phrases but such changes are always called to the reader's attention, with the original form in a comment paragraph after the entry. The same holds true for dialectal words and phrases.
3. When the descriptive reference frame for a simile is not crucial to its meaning but would enhance reading or shed light on its use, a word or phrase preceding the simile is included in the entry. Such additional text is enclosed in parentheses. This keeps the focus on the simile and maintains the alphabetizing by simile system, e.g.:

(Gaze as) innocent as a teddy bear —Babs H. Deal
4. When additional text is in square brackets, the words are not the author's but were inserted for clarity by the editors, e.g.:

[School boys] frail, like thin-boned fledgling birds
clamoring for food —Sylvia Berkman

Words in parentheses or brackets may also appear in the middle or at the end of an entry, e.g.:

My efforts [to stir my husband out of a sense of doom] have
been like so many waves, dashing against the Rock of Ages
—Robert E. Sherwood

5. To enhance the browser's enjoyment and increase the book's utility, many similes include brief comments. These can include any or all of the following: information about the simile, its source, examples of variations, cross references specific to that simile. The following comment appears after the above simile: Sherwood wrote this simile for the character of Mary Todd Lincoln in his play "Abe Lincoln in Illinois."

Table of Thematic Categories

In the following table, categories used throughout the text and synonyms that are cross-referenced to categories are combined in one alphabetic order.

ABANDONMENT

See Also: ALONENESS, BEARING,
FRIENDSHIP, REJECTION

ABILITY

See Also: ACCOMPLISHMENT

ABSORBABILITY

ABSURDITY

See Also: DIFFICULTY,
FOOLISHNESS, FUTILITY,
IMPOSSIBILITY

ABUNDANCE

See Also: CLOSENESS, GROWTH,
SPREADING

ABUSE

See: CRUELTY

ACCEPTABILITY

See: BELONGING

ACCESSIBILITY

See: AVAILABILITY

ACCIDENT

See: FATE

ACCOMPLISHMENT

See Also: ABILITY, CLEVERNESS,
SUCCESS/FAILURE

ACCUMULATION

See: GROWTH, SPREADING

ACCURACY

See: CORRECTNESS

ACCUSATION

See: CRITICISM

ACTIONS

See Also: BEHAVIOR, CAUTION,
LEAPING, JUMPING, MOVEMENT,
VIOLENCE

ACTIVENESS

See Also: ALERTNESS, ENERGY,
ENTHUSIASM, EXCITEMENT,
MOVEMENT, PERSONALITY
PROFILES

ACTORS

See: STAGE AND SCREEN

ADAPTABILITY

See: BELONGING,
FLEXIBILITY/INFLEXIBILITY

ADJUSTMENT

See: HABIT,
FLEXIBILITY/INFLEXIBILITY

ADMIRATION

See: FLATTERY, WORDS OF
PRAISE

ADULTERY

See: MARRIAGE

ADVANCING

See Also: ENTRANCES/EXITS,
MOVEMENT

ADVANTAGEOUSNESS

See Also: COST

ADVERSARY

ADVERSITY

See: FORTUNE/MISFORTUNE

ADVERTISING

See: BUSINESS

ADVICE

See Also: FRIENDSHIP, FUTILITY

AFFABILITY

See: AVAILABILITY, BEHAVIOR

AFFECTION

See Also: FRIENDSHIP, LOVE

AFFLICTION

See: HEALTH, PAIN

AFFLUENCE

See: RICHES

AGE

See Also: LIFE, MANKIND,
YOUTH

AGGRESSION

See: PERSONAL TRAITS,
VIOLENCE

AGILITY

See Also: MOVEMENT, SPEED,
TURNING AND TWISTING,
WALKING

AGITATION

See Also: EXCITEMENT,
HEARTBEAT, NERVOUSNESS,
TREMBLING

AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT

See Also: COMPATIBILITY,
FIGHTING

AILMENTS

See: HEALTH, ILLNESS,

AIM

See: PURPOSEFULNESS

AIMLESSNESS

See Also: BELONGING,
EMPTINESS

AIR

See Also: ATMOSPHERE

AIRPLANES

See: VEHICLES

ALCOHOL

See: DRINKING

ALERTNESS

See Also: ATTENTION,
CLEVERNESS, SCRUTINY,
WATCHFULNESS

ALIENATION

See Also: ALONENESS,
REMOTENESS

ALIKENESS

See: SIMILARITY

ALIMONY

See: MARRIAGE

ALLURE

See: ATTRACTION

ALONENESS

See Also: ABANDONMENT

ALOOFNESS

See: PERSONAL TRAITS,
REMOTENESS, RESERVE

AMAZEMENT

See: SURPRISE

AMBITION**ANGER**

See Also: EMOTIONS,
IRRITABLENESS

ANIMALS

See Also: BIRDS

ANIMATION

See: ACTIVENESS, ENERGY,
ENTHUSIASM

ANNOYANCE

See Also: IRRITABLENESS

ANTICIPATION

See Also: HOPE

ANXIETY

See Also: EMOTIONS,
NERVOUSNESS, TENSION

APATHY

See: REMOTENESS

APPAREL

See: CLOTHING

APPEARANCE

See: PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

APPETITE

See: HUNGER

APPRECIATION**APPROVAL**

See Also: WORDS OF PRAISE

ARGUMENT

See Also: FIGHTING

ARITHMETIC

See: MATHEMATICS AND
SCIENCE

ARM(S)

See Also: ARM MOVEMENTS,
FINGERS, HAND(S)

ARM MOVEMENTS

See Also: HAND MOVEMENTS

ARMY

ART AND LITERATURE

See Also: BOOKS, POETS/POETRY,
WRITERS/WRITING

ASTONISHMENT

See: SURPRISE

ATMOSPHERE

See Also: AIR

ATTENTION

See Also: ALERTNESS, SCRUTINY,
WATCHFULNESS

ATTIRE

See: CLOTHING; CLOTHING
ACCESSORIES; CLOTHING, ITS FIT

ATTRACTION

ATTRACTIVENESS

See Also: BEAUTY,
DESIRABILITY, PHYSICAL
APPEARANCE

AUTHENTICITY

See: REALNESS,
TRUENESS/FALSENESS

AUTHORITY

See: POWER

AUTHORSHIP

See: POETS/POETRY,
WRITERS/WRITING

AUTOMOBILES

See: VEHICLES

AVAILABILITY

AVARICE

See: GREED

AWARENESS

See: REALIZATION

AWKWARDNESS

See Also: MOVEMENT

BACHELOR

See: MEN AND WOMEN

BAD LUCK

See: FORTUNE/MISFORTUNE

BADNESS

See: CRUELTY, EVIL

BALANCE

See:
REGULARITY/IRREGULARITY

BALDNESS

See Also: HAIR, PHYSICAL
APPEARANCE

BARENESS

BARGAINS

See: ADVANTAGEOUSNESS

BARRENNESS

See: EMPTINESS

BASEBALL

See Also: SPORTS

BASKETBALL

See: SPORTS

BEACHES

See: OCEAN/OCEANFRONT

BEARDS

See Also: HAIR, PHYSICAL
APPEARANCE

BEARING

See Also: FACIAL EXPRESSIONS,
MISCELLANEOUS; LYING;
PERSONALITY PROFILES;
PHYSICAL APPEARANCE;
POSTURE; SITTING; STANDING;
WALKING

BEAUTY

See Also: BEAUTY, DEFINED;
FACE; PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

BEAUTY, DEFINED

BEGINNINGS/ENDINGS

See Also: BIRTH,
ENTRANCES/EXITS

BEHAVIOR

See Also: ACTION, LIFE,
MANKIND,
PROPRIETY/IMPROPRIETY

BELIEF

See Also: GOVERNMENT,
MORALITY, POLITICS, RELIGION

BELIEVABILITY

BELONGING

BENDING/BENT

BENEFITS

See: ADVANTAGEOUSNESS

BEREAVEMENT

See: GRIEF, SADNESS

BEWILDERMENT

See Also: EMOTIONS,
STRANGENESS

BIBLE

See: BOOKS

BICYCLING

See: SPORTS

BIGNESS

See Also: FATNESS, PHYSICAL
APPEARANCE, TALLNESS

BIGOTRY

See: INTOLERANCE

BIOGRAPHY

See: BOOKS, WRITERS/WRITING

BIRDS

See Also: ANIMALS, INSECTS,
SINGING

BIRTH

See Also: BEGINNINGS/ENDINGS,
ENTRANCES/EXITS, DEATH, LIFE

BITTERNESS

See Also: ANGER, FRIENDSHIP,
LOVE

BLACK

See Also: COLORS; DEJECTION;
FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, SERIOUS;
GLOOM

BLESSEDNESS

See: FORTUNE/MISFORTUNE

BLINDNESS

See Also: EYE(S); EYE
EXPRESSIONS, BLANK

BLOOD

See Also: VIOLENCE

BLOOMING

See: GROWTH

BLUE

See Also: COLORS

BLUSHES

See Also: FACIAL COLOR, RED,
SHAME, SHYNESS

BOATS

See: SEASCAPES

BODY

See Also: AGILITY,
AWKWARDNESS, BODY ORGANS,
MUSCLES, FATNESS, PHYSICAL
APPEARANCE, SHOULDERS,
STOMACH, STRENGTH, THINNESS

BODY ORGANS

See Also: SEX, TONGUE

BOISTEROUSNESS

See: NOISE

BOLDNESS

See: COURAGE

BONDS

See: CONNECTIONS

BOOKS

See Also: READERS/READING

BOREDOM/BORING

See Also: DULLNESS, LIFE

BOUNCING

See: ROCKING AND ROLLING

BOUNDLESSNESS

See: CONTINUITY

BOXING AND WRESTLING

See Also: SPORTS

BRAIN

See: INTELLIGENCE, MIND

BRAVERY

See: COURAGE

BREASTS

See Also: BODY, BODY ORGANS

BREATHING**BREVITY**

See Also: TIME

BRIGHTNESS

See Also: GLITTER AND GLOSS,
LIGHTING, SHINING

BRITTLENESS

See: FRAGILITY

BROWN

See Also: COLORS

BRUTALITY

See: CRUELTY, VIOLENCE

BUILDINGS

See: HOUSES