Literally vs. Figuratively

Nowadays, the word literally is being loosely used and can be spotted in casual conversations and writing where it is not denoting its actual meaning. This post will help you determine what the word literally truly means and how it differs with the term figuratively.

The word literally in its traditional sense is used as as an adverb meaning "in a literal manner or sense" or "exactly."

> Hedge Fund Sees 30% Gain by Betting Only on Tomorrow, Literally
> Bloomberg

> Will bad target shooting policy literally leave this monument in the crosshairs?
> The Wilderness Society

> Moment little girl is literally blown away as she opens front door in high winds
> Mirror.co.uk

On the other hand, the term figuratively is also used as an adverb to indicate a departure from a literal use of words or to mean "metaphorically."

> "Some high schoolers got to step, figuratively, into the shoes of St. Pete Police officers today…"
> ABC Action News

> "Perhaps I could try another route down into the bowels of the Earth to figuratively dip my toes into the candy-colored magma."
> Gizmodo

> "President Donald Trump's border wall is moving, at least figuratively."
> Bloomberg

Despite the distinction, some people use the term literally but actually means figuratively in their writing.

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Example:

> "I saw a security demo last week that literally blew my mind and I have to tell you about it."
> Forbes

The article above discusses political violence in the US. However, I doubt people would be using actual clubs like the ones used during Stone Age.

Here's another example:

> "…you're looking quite literally at hundreds of millions of dollars."
> The National Business Review

In the above example, the speaker was actually referring to the excise tax placed on petroleum in New Zealand. The reader would not literally see dollar bills amounting to hundreds of millions in value.

In order to maintain precision in your writing, you must be able to distinguish between the two terms and use them appropriately. Remember that literally means in an exact sense and should not be used loosely just to add intensity while figuratively means in an analogous manner and is the exact opposite of literally.