

# Metaphorical Thinking

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## Using Comparisons to Express Ideas and Solve Problems

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Find out how you can use metaphors to think outside the box.

You've likely heard the expression, "Time is money."

Of course, time isn't literally used as currency, but by thinking about time as money, you can create some powerful images. Time wasted is money down the drain, for example. Or, time well spent is an investment.

A direct comparison between two unrelated or indirectly linked things is called a metaphor. And as we see in the example of "time is money," metaphors can create strong images that can be used to great effect in everyday communications and thinking. The English language is littered with metaphors, and this is testimony to the power.

So metaphors can be used to improve communications: they can add impact or can help you to explain a difficult concept by association with a more familiar one. But metaphorical thinking can also help you to solve problems by generating new ideas for solutions.

In this article, we'll explain how you can use metaphors to effectively communicate complex ideas, and show how metaphorical thinking can also be useful in solving problems, with an example.

### Metaphors vs. Similes

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Metaphors sometimes get mistaken for similes, but the two are not the same. A simile makes a comparison too, but uses the word 'like,' as in "time is like money;" "the idea is like half-baked food." Similes often sound less powerful than metaphors, even if the idea is the same.

The simple metaphor format is "A is B," as in "time is money." But metaphors can also be indirect or implicit: "That's a half-baked idea." This metaphor compares ideas with part-cooked food – without mentioning the food!

**Note:**

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Allegories are another similar literary device, but are much longer than a metaphor and rely on symbols in a narrative to represent an idea and convey a moral. For example, the story of the Tortoise and the Hare is a well-known allegory. They can be in the form of an image or piece of writing, and are an effective technique used in storytelling.

## What Is Metaphorical Thinking?

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By associating an unfamiliar idea with one that is commonplace, you can spark better understanding of complex ideas. Let's say you want to explain the concept of the business cycle. You could use lots of words, definitions, and drone on for five or 10 minutes leaving the audience bored and confused. Then you could use graphs and diagrams, to help improve understanding and interest.

Or, you could explain using a metaphor: the business cycle is a pendulum, swinging back and forth from peaks of prosperity, down through economic troughs, and back up again.

The metaphor captures the essence of the business cycle – the listener immediately relates to the continuous back and forth movement. The vivid image helps people understand and also remember the idea. So, simply and in just a few words, everyone suddenly "gets it." To use another metaphor, the light bulb suddenly goes on.

Use metaphorical thinking to explain complex ideas with these four steps:

1. Identify what you are trying to communicate.
2. Determine the essence of the message.
3. Think of other instances in life where that same characteristic, idea, emotion, state, etc. applies.
4. There may be many metaphors for the situation you are describing – choose the one that will best relate to your audience.

### Tip:

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Make sure that your metaphors are understandable to your audience. If there's any risk that your metaphors will sound like jargon or could be misinterpreted, think again. The secret is to use a metaphor that instantly rings true with your audience.

## Metaphorical Thinking in Problem Solving

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When you use a metaphor to link two ideas together, you are combining elements that have little or no logical connection. By breaking the rules of logic in this way, metaphors can open up the creative side of the brain – the part that is stimulated by images, ideas, and concepts. So metaphorical thinking can also help you with creative problem solving; it helps you to "think outside the box."

Take the problem of creating a new product. You could attack the problem logically, and simply redevelop an existing product, or analyze what your competition is doing. You might come up with a quick solution, but will you hit the jackpot?

Problem solving often starts with brainstorming and bouncing ideas back and forth with your team. Brainstorming is great for getting the creative juices flowing, it can open up a floodgate of ideas (more metaphors!) However, people may still be constrained by the images they have of the current problem, or by their preconceived notions about the potential solutions.

When using metaphors for solving problems, you link the problem to something seemingly unrelated. Doing this allows your brain to see the issue from a completely different perspective – one that you may not even have known existed.

If the problem is how to create a successful new product, you could use the metaphor of someone learning another language. The next step is to generate solutions to the problem of learning another language rather than the problem of creating a new product. As you identify various solutions to the metaphorical problem, you can then relate these back to the real problem. Chances are, you will come up with some creative ideas for solutions.

## Metaphorical Thinking Example

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Here are the steps for using metaphorical problem solving, using our new product example:

1. First identify the metaphor for your problem or challenge.

There's no "right metaphor" – the ideas can be as unrelated as you like. But if the problem involves increasing something, make sure the metaphor relates to an increase as well, otherwise it can become too difficult to visualize. Here are some example problems and metaphors:

**Increase sales > Build larger muscles**

**Decrease recruitment costs > Lower the price of bread**

**Attract more investors > Harvest more corn**

And here's the metaphor of our example:

**Problem:** Create a new product.

**Metaphor:** Learn another language (for example, French).

2. Now it's time to generate solution ideas for the metaphorical problem, in this case, learning another language. Let's use French as an example:
  - Download a language learning app.
  - Listen to French podcasts.
  - Travel to France and talk to some locals.
  - Exchange letters with a French pen-pal.
  - Take French classes or join a group of other French learners.
  - Practice regularly.
3. Then, the next step is to see how the solution ideas for the metaphorical problem might relate back to the real problem:

<b>Solution ideas for the metaphorical problem</b>	<b>Solutions ideas relating back to the real problem</b>
Download a language learning app	Research and invest in new technologies
Listen to French podcasts	Listen to consumer feedback, needs and demands
Talk to French locals	Talk to your stakeholders and get to the root of their problem
Exchange letters with a French pen-pal	Share ideas and support with other similar departments
Take French classes or join a group	Hold a focus group to test your new product
Practice regularly	Continually revise and adapt your new product

4. Finally, use the solution ideas you have generated for the metaphorical problem to find a workable solution to the real problem.

**Tip:**

Don't get too hung up on how well the metaphorical solution ideas map back. Metaphors that map too well can stifle the creativity you are trying to generate! The whole idea is to generate solutions and ideas that you may not have otherwise thought of, so just let the ideas flow without too much scrutiny.

**Key Points**

A metaphor compares and equates two unrelated or indirectly connected things.

Metaphors are powerful shortcuts to instant and memorable understanding. They evoke vivid images and allow us to "see" things from a new perspective, and so are useful tools for creative problem solving.

Use metaphorical thinking to help explain complex ideas, create impact in your presentations, and think outside the box.

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