



Analogies are an effective way to transmit complex or unusual ideas.

## Explain with Analogies

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Analogies are based on the similarity of two things. Typical examples are to talk of the economy as an engine or life as a river, as in “The economy is an engine that never stops” or “Life flows like a river in constant change”.

Analogies are useful to transmit new ideas because they compare something new to what we already know.

They also work well when talking about complicated or non-physical things. “If we could compare our new IT system with a car I would say it’s a Toyota. It’s reliable, durable and comes with great after-sales service.” Even if the salesperson is not actually explaining her system we can easily understand its positive features because we can all imagine a car. Analogies make complicated things easier to follow.

When in doubt between an analogy and an explanation, use both. However, start with the analogy because complicated explanations will contaminate listeners and close their minds to what else you tell them.

*Engine: motor.*  
*Grasp: understand.*  
*Feature: characteristic.*  
*Flow: move.*  
*Novel: new.*  
*Let down: disappoint.*

Here's a typical grade one analogy and explanation for children:

**Analogy:** "We have ten cats and two escape. We'll count the cats that are left. One, two... eight".

**Explanation:** "Ten minus two equals eight."

Which one will kids internalise better? The first. Real cats are easier to picture than imaginary numbers.

Analogies are also effective when giving bad news without offending people or when talking about somebody without mentioning their name. For example, you know that Joe is not working at full capacity so you might say "We are like dancers in a ballet; if someone does not follow the rhythm it affects the whole troupe". Of course, good listeners would understand that Joe can't make any other mistake if he wants to remain in the team.

Lastly, analogies are a bit like stories because they touch our non-rational as well as our rational selves. They work well when motivating people. "Success is similar to an iceberg. We see the top but not the hard work under water" or "A company is like a football club. We have a set number of players and face competitors every week. Let's play as well as we can." The real message? "Work hard and don't let me down."

A teacher's secret? People understand things better when presented from two angles. Introduce new ideas with an analogy followed by an example; present complex facts with

an analogy and an explanation; when you want to talk about someone without mentioning their names also offer a personal anecdote. To encourage people add a vision of what you can reach if you work together, a goal they can move towards.



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