Watch Your F#*k-%^g Language!

Why the Analogies We Embrace Drive Success and Failure, and How to Choose Better Ones

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Reading the title of this manifesto, you probably thought you saw an obscenity.

You didn't, your mind just filled in what you perceived to be missing letters, censored for the sake of propriety. In fact, a Google search returns no exact match for F#*k%^g, and the combination has no literal meaning in any language. Still, your mind makes the leap. Why? It's your analogical instinct, hard at work.

The analogical instinct is the human urge to compare what we encounter to what we know and, based on that comparison, jump to conclusions. This rush to judgment is a good thing, most of the time. It's an evolutionary advantage that helped our ancestors perceive the difference between a floating log and a floating crocodile; those who failed to see the similarity tended to get eaten at higher rates, and reproduce less. Those who recognized the analogy between log and croc, even those who erred on the side of caution, fared better.

Eons later, analogies still drive our decision-making as individuals, as organizations, as companies, and even as nations. The consequences, positive and negative, are also still big—often bigger than people realize. So if you take one idea away from this manifesto, it's this: pay attention to the analogies around you, or pay the price.

If you take a second idea away from this manifesto, it's that everyone can hone their analogical instinct to become more creative, more persuasive, and more successful in achieving their goals. In fact, a survey of history's greatest innovators, from Copernicus to Gutenberg to Darwin to the Wright Brothers, all achieved their greatest breakthroughs in large part through the effective use of analogy. Leaders as diverse as Winston Churchill, Steve Jobs, and Martin Luther King also used analogy to great effect, persuading millions that they could change the world no matter what challenges might lie ahead.

To understand how analogy works, it's helpful to start with a definition. Many people tend to think of analogy narrowly, as a type of a fill-in-the-blank logic problem on the old SAT, such as "Racecars are to the Indy 500 as _____ are to the Kentucky Derby." This is certainly one type of analogy. But as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, analogy also means correspondence, equivalency, or likeness of relations, resemblance of form or function, agreement between things and similarity. In short, an analogy is simply a comparison that asserts a parallel, explicit or implicit, based on the perception of a shared property or relation.

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The word perception is key, however. Bad analogies can deceive and distort, even without ill intent by those who make them. Good analogies can reveal fresh insights, leading to break-throughs in understanding. The challenge is telling one from the other at the very outset. Let's look quickly at two examples. In 1954, as Vietnamese communists besieged the isolated French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, a reporter asked President Dwight D. Eisenhower about the strategic importance of Indochina. Eisenhower answered with an analogy: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly." If the communists were not defeated in Vietnam, he explained, their victory could lead to the sequential toppling of neighboring Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and eventually even Japan.

At once visual, succinct, and easy to grasp, Eisenhower's domino analogy translated a complex foreign policy challenge into plain, everyday language that almost anyone could grasp— and millions did. And under successive presidents, the domino theory's hold on the American imagination drew the nation deeper and deeper into the quagmire of Vietnam, which eventually cost taxpayers the equivalent of $686 billion, killed 58,252 American soldiers and claimed the lives of some two million Vietnamese. Though persuasive, Eisenhower's domino analogy had one major problem: It was wrong.

Even after the last Americans were evacuated by helicopter from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon—a humiliating defeat televised around the world—Vietnam's neighbors didn't topple like dominos before a communist onslaught. In the decades since, in fact, several Southeast Asian nations have actually emerged as some of the world's fastest-growing market economies. And even as Vietnam's government itself remains nominally communist, the country actually thrives on capitalism, with native millionaires driving Bentleys and a rising middle class eating Dunkin' Donuts and ordering (hold the irony) Domino's Pizza. The lesson here? The most seductive analogies are not always true and, like a baited hook, swallowing them can be costly.

But before you throw the baby out with the bathwater, it's important to note that seductive analogies can have extraordinarily positive effects, too. Consider Apple Computer's introduction of the Macintosh computer in 1984. Prior to that time, most computers were large mainframes, and even IBM's "personal" desktop computers required users to know a significant number of technical commands to operate. By contrast, the Mac, which was built on innovations first developed by Xerox, allowed users to manipulate graphic icons representing an environment almost all office workers were familiar with: a desktop. And through this analogy, its virtual documents, folders, clipboard, scissors, paste—even a trash can that "bulged" until it was emptied—convinced millions of ordinary people that they didn't have to be programmers to use a computer.

The perception that using the tools on a Mac was just like using the tools on a desktop was just that: a perception. The physical similarities are actually quite limited; the two are only alike conceptually. But because the desktop analogy rang true, it enabled people to use the new machine intuitively and easily. And in the months and years that followed, the virtual desktop revolutionized people's relationship with computers and democratized access to their extraordinary power.

The desktop analogy was so powerful, in fact, that Microsoft's Bill Gates quickly developed a similar interface for IBM's Personal Computers and its clones. And when an infuriated Steve Jobs accused Gates of ripping off his idea, the Microsoft founder responded with an analogy. "Well, Steve," he said, "I think there's more than one way of looking at it. I think it's more like we both had this rich neighbor named Xerox and I broke into his house to steal the TV set and found out that you had already stolen it."

Hindsight is 20/20. Both the domino theory and the computer desktop were appealing analogies, but in retrospect, it's obvious that while the domino theory was misleading, the computer desktop was empowering. So, how can one tell a bad analogy from a good one at the outset? Well, the first thing you need to do is recognize when you're encountering an analogy in the first place. Once you start paying attention, you'll realize how often people use analogies to argue a point, sell a product, convey information, or explain something new.

Some of these include business models, political slogans, legal arguments, metaphors, marketing taglines, mathematical formulas, biblical parables, logos, TV ads, euphemisms, proverbs, fables, and sports clichés.

The next step is to recognize that effective analogies, whether they're "true" or not, achieve the following five criteria:

1. **Use the familiar to explain something less familiar**

2. **Highlight similarities and obscure differences**

3. **Identify useful abstractions**

4. **Tell a coherent story**

5. **Resonate emotionally**

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If you evaluate any analogy you encounter using these criteria, you'll gain a much better sense of its veracity and utility—and hopefully avoid the negative consequences that often flow from embracing faulty analogies. As an illustration, let's take another quick look at Eisenhower's dominos.

First, Eisenhower used a familiar, popular game to explain something much less familiar: foreign policy in a distant part of the world. Second, the analogy highlighted similarities—dominos are adjacent and countries are adjacent—and obscured myriad differences. After all, what qualities or characteristics do a domino and a country have in common? Third, the analogy identified a useful abstraction—an inevitable, chain reaction of sequential toppling—that listeners could transfer from dominos to countries. Fourth, the analogy told a coherent story: if you topple the first in a sequence of dominos, all will eventually fall. It's a truth that, however inapplicable to communism in Southeast Asia, is coherent and credible, in and of itself. Fifth, the analogy was emotionally resonant; by highlighting the inevitability of toppling dominos and, by extension, toppling countries, it stoked people's Cold War fears about the spreading communist threat.

Ultimately, analogies are models, and models are analogies. And for better or worse, they help guide our decision-making. Sometimes analogies are contained within single words, whose original meaning has been subsumed into a broader, more abstract concept.

For example, when people line up at the multiplex to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster, most don't realize that the word blockbuster was coined in World War II to describe a powerful bomb that could destroy an entire city block. After the war, blockbuster soon lost its destructive connotation and came to describe anything that was—to use another analogy—"a big hit." Today, we use such words as verbal shorthand to describe what we think of as simple actions or things, but those very descriptions are also subjective arguments.

In the years before General Motors acknowledged its culpability in a faulty ignition switch design that led to the deaths of 13 people, employees were trained to avoid using certain words including problem, defect and safety. Instead, they were instructed to use euphemisms—a form of analogy—when addressing such issues. According to a 2014 independent fact-finding report by former U.S. Attorney Anton Valukas, the deliberate effort to stymie open and honest communication within the company was a direct contributor to GM's decade-long refusal to acknowledge or address an issue that was literally killing its customers.

In the same report, a witness summed up GM's corporate culture with another analogy: the "GM Salute." This was company slang for crossing your arms, fingers extended, and pointing at the person on either side of you. Did anyone at GM actually salute that way? Of course not, but the mere existence of this analogy reflected the depth and breadth of cynicism, bureaucracy and lack of accountability that had permeated GM's ranks.

The takeaway? Beware your choice of analogies. Good analogies, like the GM salute, reveal truth, even when that truth might be unpleasant. Bad analogies, such as euphemisms, obscure and mislead. And ultimately, the consequences of that deception—even if it's only self-deception—may end up being much more unpleasant.

For better and worse, analogies offer conceptual and emotional shortcuts. And shortcuts, while they may save time and effort, don't always lead us where you expect. That's why it's so important to think rigorously about the analogies you encounter or employ, so that you can both avoid missteps and become more creative in your problem-solving. As a general rule, people who become adept at analogy think more clearly, see fresh solutions more easily, and persuade others more effectively. The best analogies are not only useful and make intuitive sense, but also bear up under honest scrutiny. Because while all analogies obscure complexity and some reveal simplicity, the very best approach truth. **The perfect analogy makes things as simple as possible, but no simpler.** ⌖

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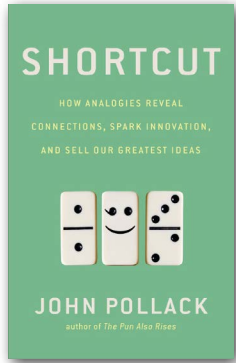
ABOUT THE AUTHOR | John Pollack is the author of *Shortcut: How Analogies Reveal Connections, Spark Innovation, and Sell Our Greatest Ideas*. Formerly a Presidential Speechwriter for Bill Clinton, he is now a consultant advising Fortune 500 companies and public sector leaders on issues of strategy, communication and creativity. John's other books include *Cork Boat: A True Story of the Unlikeliest Boat Ever Built*, and *The Pun Also Rises: How the Humble Pun Revolutionized Language, Changed History and Made Wordplay more than Some Antics*.

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