

Skills 360 – Making your Speech more Powerful with Metaphors (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1. Are there any really common expressions or phrases that you find overused and annoying?
2. Do you know any common topics for idioms in business?
3. Can you think of examples of when a good speaker or presenter used a comparison to help the audience understand?

Vocabulary

Metaphors: words or phrases for a thing that are used instead of another thing to show how the two things are similar; “When you give a presentation, using a few good metaphors will help your audience understand and remember what you say.”

To take something to the next level: to make something good even better; “Doing an MBA really helped me take my leadership skills to the next level.”

To think outside the box: to think in a new way or about original ideas and solutions; “Our marketing team is known for its creativity, so we’re really looking for people who can think outside the box.”

Cliché: a word or expression that has been used so much that it has lost its impact; “I find clichés like ‘I just don’t have the bandwidth for this right now’ so annoying.”

To cook something up: to create a story, plan, or idea; “It’s amazing what some of these young tech entrepreneurs have cooked up in their basement or garage.”

To drop the ball: to make a mistake or not fulfill a responsibility; “I’m so sorry everyone, but it was me who dropped the ball on this report that should have been finished yesterday.”

Down to the wire: if something “comes down to the wire,” it is resolved or decided at the last possible moment; “Negotiations between the union and management are really coming down to the wire... who knows how it will turn out.”

Slam dunk: something very successful; “Just talked to the client and showed them the new ads... looks like we’ve got a slam dunk everyone! Nice work.”

Endless: having no end, or very very long; "It feels like we've had an endless string of financial mistakes, so hopefully this new CFO can turn things around."

To pull out something: to take something out in order to use it; "If things get tense during the meeting, you might want to pull out a good joke to lighten the mood."

Interlocking gears: toothed wheels that fit together to transfer power from an engine to a machine; "When the interlocking gears in a car transmission become worn down, they may slip and cause a dangerous loss of power."

A well-oiled machine: a machine that works very well; also, a team or process that works very well; "Amazon's distribution centers run like a well-oiled machine."

Parallel: a thing or situation that is similar in many ways to another thing or situation; "I think our financial situation is parallel to the experience of a lot of European companies in the 1980s."

To paraphrase: to express an idea or statement in different words; "If I can just paraphrase what Toni was saying: these designs really aren't going to work."

To stick with you: if something "sticks with you," you remember it; "What sticks with me most from that conference was the presentation on workplace wellness."

Analogy: a comparison between two similar things that helps people understand; "A great analogy for the distribution process is a chain, where different links join together in a long series."

To transform: to completely change; "With the assembly line, Henry Ford completely transformed the business of manufacturing."

Ingrained: not easily changed, especially for beliefs or attitudes; "We want to change some of our production processes, but many of the employees' work habits are very ingrained."

Essence: the most basic or central quality or aspect of something; "We do some print work, but the essence of our business is web design."

Burnout: when you work so hard that you have no energy left or become sick; "I've been working 70-hour weeks and I'm starting to worry about burnout."

To tread water: to move your arms and legs in the water to stay on the surface; "I feel these days like I'm just treading water, and maybe I need a career change."

To figure out: to determine or be able to understand; "Greta, can we just go for coffee and figure out why we don't seem to be able to work together very well?"

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host Tim Simmons, and today I want to give you some more tips for using [metaphors](#) in English.

If you tuned in last time, you'll remember that a metaphor is when you compare something you're talking about to another idea. A classic example of a metaphor is "time is money." But, if you really want to use metaphors to [take](#) your English [to the next level](#), you'll need to learn to [think outside the box](#).

Whoa, wait a second. What did I just say? "Take it to the next level" and "think outside the box?" Well, those expressions are idioms, which is one kind of metaphor. But haven't you heard those expressions a bit *too* much? I sure have. And that's why I suggest *avoiding* these kinds of extremely common metaphors, or [clichés](#). A cliché is an expression that is used so much that people don't really think about its meaning any more. And if you use clichés, you won't make a good impression on people.

So don't just memorize extremely common metaphors. Instead, make new ones. But about what? Well, in business we [cook up](#) metaphors from many interesting topics. Take sports, for example, which are easy to compare with business. This is why you might talk about "performance," or "scoring a goal," or "coaching." And that's why we use expressions like "[drop the ball](#)" and "[down to the wire](#)" and "[slam dunk](#)."

Sports aren't the only source of metaphors. Other great topics are food, war, games, gardening, and mechanics. But really, the list of topics is [endless](#). The important thing is that you use metaphors that connect with your audience and your purpose.

So which topic might be useful if you're trying to motivate your team before taking another company to court? Well, then you might [pull out](#) the war metaphors and talk about "doing battle" and "sharpening your swords" and "attacking the enemy." Or if you're giving a presentation to engineers about teamwork, you might draw on mechanics. For example, you might talk about "[interlocking gears](#)" and "[a well-oiled machine](#)."

These kinds of metaphors are very direct. We are saying that one thing *is* another thing. But sometimes we rely on longer comparisons between two things to show how they're [parallel](#). For example, I'll always remember when I heard a speaker compare a business to a plant. To [paraphrase](#), he said something like "a business is like a plant, in that it's either growing or dying. There's nothing in between." He went on to explain how helping a plant grow and taking care of a business are very similar. It [stuck with](#) me because it really made sense. He could have expressed all the same ideas about business *without* talking about plants. But the comparison really helped explain the ideas.

We call this kind of comparison an [analogy](#). It's similar to a metaphor, but it's less direct. We compare two things and show how they're similar in many different ways.

Analogy helps people understand and remember. It gives them a way to think about something that makes sense to them.

One great example of analogy comes from the world of computers. It's an analogy that helped **transform** computers from big mysterious machines to everyday tools for the home and office. That analogy is the "desktop." On your computer desktop, you've got folders, which contain files and documents. This analogy has become so **ingrained** that we don't even think about it anymore, which only shows how powerful and lasting analogies can be!

So how do you come up with your own analogies? Well, you start with an idea about a topic that you want to explain. Think about the **essence** of the idea, it's most basic elements or features or emotions. Now, brainstorm other things that people are familiar with that have the same essence. And once you find something that works, you'll find many different ways to show the similarity.

Here's my own example for you: just the other day I had to give a presentation about avoiding **burnout** from too much work. So I thought about how people who work really hard to achieve something need to take regular breaks.

Then I brainstormed other familiar situations that are similar, and I came up with the idea of swimming, like if you're trying to swim across a lake. You need to stop occasionally to **tread water** and rest. And you need to look around to **figure out** where you're going and to appreciate where you are. Without doing this, you won't have the energy or motivation to continue. And in the end, I told the audience they should learn to rest, not quit. And judging by the comments I got after the presentation, I think this analogy really worked for people.

And I hope it works for you too. I hope you see how analogy can be a powerful tool in helping people understand and remember your ideas.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **BusinessEnglishPod.com** website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. What is a "cliché?"
 - A A phrase that has a lasting impact on listeners.
 - B A phrase that English has adopted from another language.
 - C A phrase that has lost meaning through overuse.
 - D A phrase that simplifies a complex idea.

2. Which of the following are given as common topics for business idioms and metaphors? [Select all that apply]
 - A Sports
 - B Family life
 - C Mechanics
 - D Mathematics
 - E Games
 - F Art
 - G Gardening

3. When using metaphor, it is important to choose topics that connect with... [choose 2]
 - A ...your interests.
 - B ...your purpose.
 - C ...your field of work.
 - D ...your audience.

4. Which of the following is NOT an analogy?
 - A On your computer, you have "folders" that contain "files."
 - B Businesses are like plants, which are either growing or dying.
 - C Because of his colorful language, the presenter's ideas really stuck with me.
 - D Just like a swimmer in a lake, everyone needs to take breaks from work from time to time.

5. Analogies are effective because they help your audience...
 - A ... understand and remember.
 - B ... create and inspire.
 - C ... visualize and communicate.
 - D ... problem-solve and cooperate.

6. What's the first step in creating an analogy?
 - A Brainstorm topics that your audience might be interested in.
 - B Think about the most basic elements or features of your idea.
 - C Think about comparisons that have helped you understand.
 - D Make a list of overused metaphors or comparisons related to your topic.

Review Answers

1. What is a "cliché?"
C A phrase that has lost meaning through overuse.
2. Which of the following are given as common topics for business idioms and metaphors? [choose all that apply]
A Sports
C Mechanics
E Games
G Gardening
3. When using metaphor, it is important to choose topics that connect with... [choose 2]
B ...your purpose.
D ...your audience.
4. Which of the following is NOT an analogy?
C Because of his colorful language, the presenter's ideas really stuck with me.
5. Analogies are effective because they help your audience...
E ... understand and remember.
6. What's the first step in creating an analogy?
B Think about the most basic elements or features of your idea.