

Daniel Hall Presents



Episode 94

How to Use Analogies and Metaphor to Sell More

with John Pollack

Welcome to this episode of the Real Fast Results podcast! Today's episode features a very, very special guest. His name is John Pollack, and he is a world-class writer and an expert on the use of language. So, if you are an author or publisher, you are going to gain a lot by reviewing this material. **John helps people just like you to tap the full potential of language to reveal truths, articulate ideas, and persuade others to take action.**

John's expertise comes from working in the corporate arena and for nonprofits. Additionally, he is a journalist as well as a former Presidential Speechwriter for Bill Clinton, and he has spent more than a decade as a consultant for Fortune 500 companies, nonprofits, and public sector leaders. His proficiency doesn't end there either. John has worked as a speechwriter on Capitol Hill, as a foreign correspondent in Spain, and is known for his work as a project manager at The Henry Ford, which is a museum of American innovation.

Above all else, John is probably most recognized for the empathy and creativity that comes across in his writing. He has a tendency to venture off the beaten path, and this has led him to become more persuasive as a result of the insight and understanding he has gained. Moreover, his world view has grown immensely from working and living in places like Africa, Antarctica, and Europe. He has also hitchhiked across Australia, explored Caucasus, and skippered a boat, which he built out of 165,321 corks, down the Douro River in Portugal. Some of his written works include [*The Pun Also Rises*](#), [*Cork Boat*](#), [*The World on a String*](#), and [*Shortcut: How Analogies Reveal Connections, Spark Innovation and Sell Our Greatest Ideas*](#). Without further ado, John welcome to the show...

How to Use Analogies to Communicate Better and Persuade More People

I think that we can start by paying attention to all of the analogies around us. **I think many people grew up thinking about analogies in their strictest SAT format.** “The Kentucky is to horse racing as the Indie 500 is to auto racing.” And so, people feel constricted that way. Once you start thinking of analogies more broadly, as a comparison that suggests parallels between two different things, you’ll start seeing them in marketing taglines, business models, legal arguments, biblical parables, sports pages. That awareness, learning to cultivate that awareness, will start tuning up your analogical instincts and allow you to put them to work on your own behalf.

How to Broaden Your Awareness of Analogies

When you are reading the newspaper, if you start paying attention, and I do this as an exercise myself sometimes... **I’ll sit there with a pen, and I’ll start circling all of the analogies that I see.** And, even a sentence that we take for granted, such as, “The stock market skyrocketed today, after Congress embraced good economic news and broke their budget gridlock.” **“Stock market” is an analogy that comes from a time when people sold cattle and pigs at “the stock market,” and then that language was applied to shares of a corporation in the more modern era.**

The word “gridlock” was a medieval word for a griddle or gridiron. Again, that is a physical analogy that is taken from our everyday experience. The point of this is not that you’re looking at obscure etymologies of words, but you’re starting to focus in on the true meaning of these statements and the emotional currents that lie just beneath the surface because we are often persuaded by these emotions.

Let’s take an example. “Three strikes and you’re out.” The laws that essentially filled up our prison system. That was first passed in California by popular referendum after a very gruesome murder by some repeat criminals, and the father of the victim, who was frustrated by the legislature’s inability to pass stricter sentencing rules, launched a ballot initiative, “Three strikes, and you’re out.” That makes sense to people because people think of baseball as being fair. It’s a rules-based system, and the emotional value of baseball transferred very easily to a much more complex legal system.

Ultimately, while certain career criminals did deserve to, and ended up going to prison a lot more, people were caught up with second or third strikes, such as stealing a slice of pizza, or breaking into a car and stealing change from a cup holder. Now, we don’t want to allow those perpetrators to commit petty crimes at \$50,000 a pop to lock someone up for stealing change from a cup. Who is winning and who is losing? Decades on, the taxpayers of California realized that baseball maybe wasn’t the best analogy for judicial reform.

So, This Analogy was Used to Sell This Concept for Reform?

Right? And, what is people's most precious commodity? It's time. Money comes and goes. Time only goes. So, when we think about making an elevator pitch (which is in itself an analogy), we need to be respectful of people's time. By using an analogy effectively, you distill something which is complex into something that, perhaps, is simpler, in terms that your audience can understand. The strength of a good analogy is that it is a story, a comparison with a spring loaded conclusion.

As a seller, you want to make sure that your analogy is strong on all counts, or at least as many counts as it can be. As a listener, a consumer, we want to be skeptical of the analogies we encounter because we may be falling prey to bad analogies. Take, for example, how the American public was sold on the Vietnam War, and the escalation there was through the domino theory. A reporter asked President Eisenhower, "Why does French Indochina matter? Why should we care," and he said, "Well, it's like a game of dominoes. You set them up, and the first one topples, then the next one goes, and the next one goes, and pretty soon, we lose Cambodia, and Indonesia, and then they are on our doorstep in San Francisco."

That took a complex geopolitical issue and put it in terms that people understood, in an age in which domino playing was popular across America. For the next 20 years, or so, that defined American policy, and we got deeper and deeper into the conflict in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the analogy was wrong. Countries aren't like dominoes. Each one has its own culture, leadership, geography, economics, and we know the analogy was wrong because we lost in Vietnam, and yet, the neighboring countries didn't fall like dominoes, to communism. Today, in Vietnam, it's full throttle capitalism with a frosting of socialism on top, but it's a capitalist state full of manufacturing, McDonald's, and people driving Bentlys.

So, we've got to be very skeptical of the analogies that we encounter, and try to make those that we offer as accurate as possible. I will say this, in defense of Eisenhower, he did not mean to intentionally mislead. He believed himself. It was actually an analogy suggested by a general a year earlier, but the analogy was faulted because countries aren't like dominoes.

Effectively Using Analogies in Your Writing

If you think about analogies as a quick, effective way of selling ideas, whether it's a big, geopolitical idea or it's a product, you needn't look any further than TV commercials. Especially Superbowl commercials are just filled with analogies because, again, it's a great way to compress an idea. The greatest Superbowl ad of all time, widely considered, was Apple's 1984 commercial that introduced the Mac. You had this lone female athlete, with a sledgehammer, running from thought police, through a totalitarian world, and there's a big screen with a dictator on it. It's all very Orwellian, and he's talking about world domination.

As the masses watch, she throws the hammer, and it smashes the screen. Then the announcer says, basically, "We're introducing the Mac, and we'll show you why 1984 won't be like 1984." The ad never mentioned IBM, which was "Big Brother" or "Big Blue," in this case, and

it never showed the Macintosh, yet the commercial was so powerful because it drew on analogy and cultural knowledge. You can think of an analogy, in some ways, like an iceberg. We see just a small piece of it poking above the water, but there's a lot more that's hidden beneath in terms of knowledge, cultural assumptions, emotional content. That's why analogies can be so powerful and so deceptive.

Analogy is just like anything else. If you practice, you'll get better. It's a muscle. We all have an analogical instinct, and some people have honed it more than others. I think, as a starting point, it might be helpful if listeners were to understand the five criteria of what goes into an analogy. Then they can start to apply these and evaluate their own analogies according to these criteria. So let me just run through them really quickly.

First, analogies use the familiar to explain something less familiar. So, for example, using the term desktop to describe the computer screen. That was Steve Jobs big analogy in selling the Mac. If you know how to use a desktop, you can use a computer. That was a novel concept for people in an age when computers were mainframes, primarily, and not accessible to the "Average Joe."

Second criteria. Good analogies highlight similarities between the two things, and they obscure differences. So, let's go back to the desktop example. It's saying, "These two things are the same: computer desktop, physical desktop." Of course, they are very different in actuality. Although you might be driving something into the trash can, and then you empty the trash on your computer screen, it's actually completely different in every way, except conceptually. That is, the physical action as opposed to the electronic action, but that's hidden by the use of icons.

The third criteria of effective analogies is that they identify a useful abstraction. Again, let's use the computer desktop. A desktop is a place to work and a place to get tasks done, and it's a place where you manipulate information, either physically or electronically. So that abstraction is very useful.

The fourth criteria is that a good analogy tells a coherent story. That means it's simple, it's clear, and it's concise. In the case of Macintosh, it was, "If you can use a desk, you can use a computer." That's a very simple story. It's very coherent, and coherent doesn't necessarily mean complete. Every story, even *War and Peace* at 1,000 pages, leaves out details. The beauty of analogy is that it recruits the listener to supply the details.

The final, fifth criteria, is that good analogies resonate emotionally. We like to think of ourselves as logical people, and with training, we can exercise more logical thinking and use more of our reasoning faculties, but the best analogies resonate emotionally. Just to use this example again of the Mac, since it's such a good one of so many counts.

Steve Jobs set out to make a friendly computer. Now, what's a friendly computer? When he told his engineers that he wanted it to be friendly, they were like, "What? What are you talking about?" And yet, from the smiling face of the icon to the ease of interaction to the advertising

that accompanied it, following the launch, that was an emotionally resonate concept. The Mac was friendly. So, just to recap:

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

If you think of your analogies through those lenses, and if it's not hitting all of them, you might ask, "Is there another analogy that might be better, or is there a way to extend the analogy that you've identified?" You can tease out its properties as to why it might be a good one, or why there might be an alternative that's better.

Does it Really Take that Much Work to Craft a Good Analogy?

Well, there are two things that apply to this, and one returns to what I said before, which is, "With practice, you'll get better." If you think about the original Karate Kid movie, where Mr. Miyagi has the Karate Kid apply wax to his car in circles. When he goes back and forth, Miyagi tells him, "No, you need to wax it in a circle," and he has him sand the fence in a circle too. It just seems like an awful lot of extra work for nothing until the climactic fight in the movie, where suddenly that circular motion has become instinctual, and he is blocking and parrying a superior attacker. Eventually, he goes on to defeat him, against all the odds.

This same sort of practice of breaking down the analogies that you see and subjecting your own analogies to scrutiny, it seems like a pain at the time, but once you start doing it regularly, you'll start to find yourself getting a lot quicker and a lot more instinctive in your own use of analogy. I'll also add that most of the cliches that we encounter in our daily exchanges, in business and conversation, are analogies and because they are overused, they aren't so effective. That's why our English teachers say to stop using cliches.

The person who comes up with fresh analogies is the person who sparks a reaction, and the listener says, "Gee, I never thought of it that way. You're right." And, if you're trying to cut through all of the noise, all the repeating rhetoric, and all of the bombardment of ads, then the fresh analogy, the true analogy, is sticky. That's really important. You're up against a lot of competition, so make sure that you offer more value and more insight than everything you're trying to beat. That's a hard standard, but if you do it some of the time, you're doing really well.

In my book, I talk about very persuasive analogies that are true and very persuasive analogies that turn out to be untrue. It's important to remember that we couldn't get by in this world without analogies. If you think back to evolution, there are a lot of animals that can detect patterns, and that's why camouflage evolved. Animals are either trying to hide to sneak up on their prey and want to blend in, and others are trying to look like something that they're not as though to say, "Hey, don't eat me. I look like my poison cousin." Animals can recognize

patterns, and people can recognize patterns that are beneath the surface, that are not visual, and that are strictly intellectual constructs. This gives us a tremendous advantage, which along with the opposable thumb, really put us at the top of the heap.

Final Tips

I would say that if you look at the most successful people in history, and in so many different fields, whether it's Thomas Edison or Ronald Reagan, you're looking at people who are very comfortable with analogy. That's because analogies allow us to see connections between things that at first glance might seem different but really have the capacity to inform us, and enlighten us, and persuade other people. So, being good at analogies allows us to be nimble thinkers and to mix and match. If we were never capable of making these links between one subject and another, we wouldn't have any inventions in this world. We would have no progress in this world. We'd be stuck in a rut. See, there's another analogy.

I would just urge listeners who want to become better at analogy to play, to play, to play. Play with language and ideas, and keep drawing in new materials and asking, "How does Topic A relate to Topic Z?" You can play that game with the newspaper just by picking the first article on Page 81 in B7. See what parallels you can find, and once you start building those muscles, you're going to have a big advantage because you're going to be more creative and more productive.

It's fun, and again, we get better at things that we love because we play at them. If you play at analogy, then when you need an analogy, you've got that ability. It's like Roger Federick. He didn't get good at tennis because he hates tennis. He got good at tennis because he played a lot of tennis. Now, it may be a job for him at times, and he might get burned out and come back to it, but we get better at things that we enjoy. So, enjoy analogy and make it your friend, and it will be your friend in return.

There's an exercise that I do for myself when I need an analogy and it isn't springing to mind. I'll say, "Okay, what color is this idea," or "What animal is this idea," or "What country is this idea," or "What business is this idea?" Once you start forcing yourself through that exercise, you'll start identifying the properties of the idea that you're trying to articulate. Then, perhaps, an analogy will come to mind, but you can run through this exercise of categorizing one thing as another, just to break down the barriers that you might have artificially erected in your mind, or never even considered at all. **Again, becoming flexible in the association of ideas is the key to becoming stronger when using analogy.**

Connecting with John

The best way to reach me is through my website, JohnDPollack.com. Also, if you are interested in learning more about the subject of learning to use analogy, pick up my book, [*The World on a String and Shortcut: How Analogies Reveal Connections, Spark Innovation and Sell Our Greatest Ideas.*](#) You can find it on Amazon and through other great retailers.

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