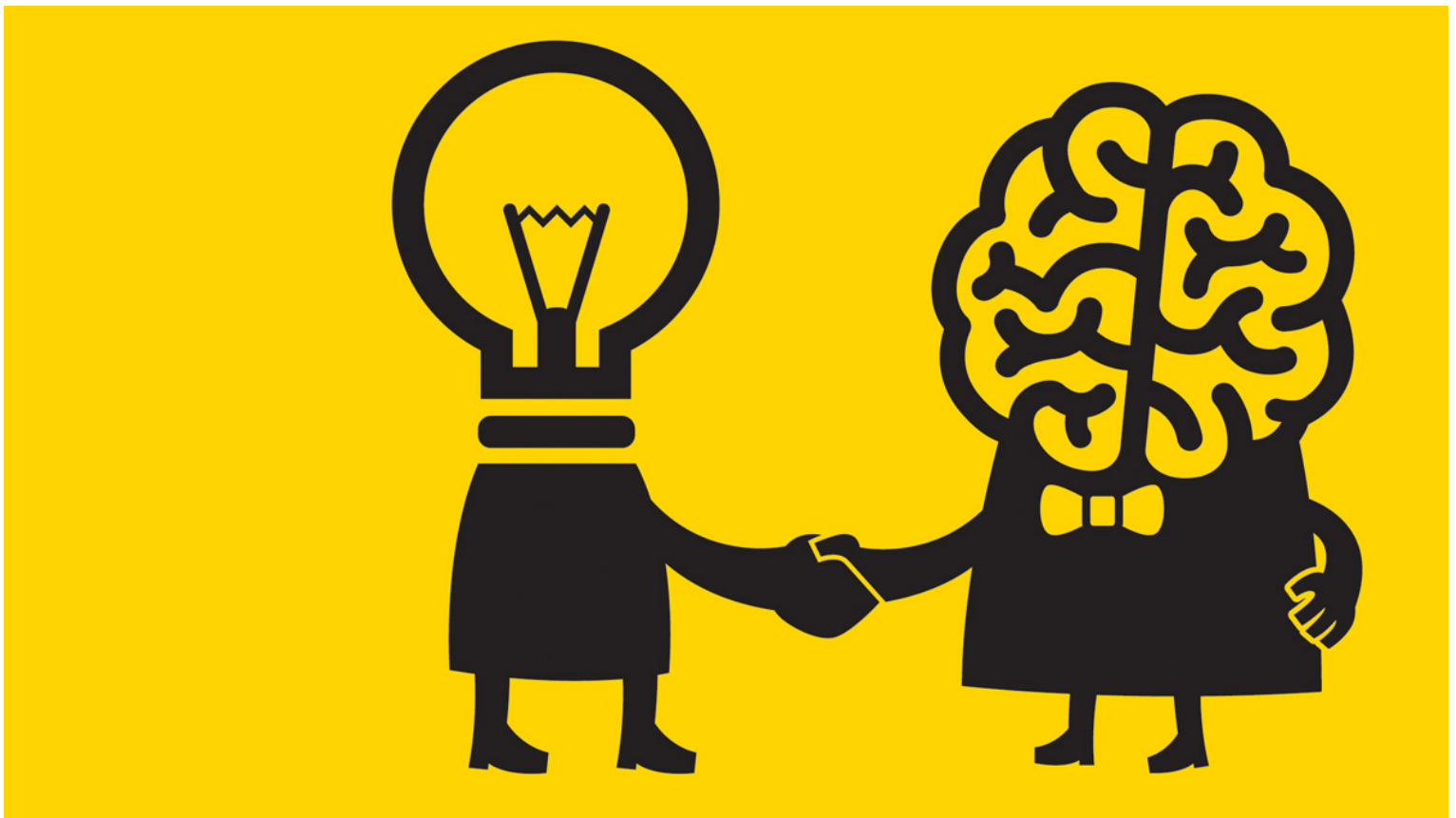


PRESENTATIONS

Finding the Right Metaphor for Your Presentation

by [Nancy Duarte](#)

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When trying to persuade people to think and act differently, we study their wants and needs, what they care about, what keeps them up at night. Sometimes we reach them by making clear, concise arguments that address those concerns. But often it takes a little something more to engage an audience.

Metaphors can help by tapping what learning theorists call prior knowledge to make a connection between what people already understand through experience and what they have yet to discover. We do this naturally in conversation – for instance, “The news hit her like a freight train.” By comparing the situation to something people already know or can at least imagine, we convey its intensity and urgency. But when explaining our ideas in presentations, we’re sometimes reluctant to use verbal or visual metaphors to relate to audiences. I’ve heard people say that metaphors are “off topic,” or worse, “cheap.” Though using a cheesy one can elicit groans, more often than not, metaphors offer a shortcut to understanding.

But how do you pick the right one? By digging into your *own* prior knowledge for connections that make the idea brighter in your mind. The brighter that idea shines for you, the more likely it is to resonate with your audience.

To do that effectively, get back to basics. Many of us sit in front of a computer screen all day, but studies have shown that writing by hand activates a different part of the brain and may even improve idea composition and expression. So, while you’re searching for the perfect metaphor to access the full depth of someone’s prior knowledge, put your ideas down on paper – the old-fashioned way.

Very few people, if any, can come up with a brilliant metaphor on the first try. When we’re brainstorming in our shop, we write down the obvious choices right away just to get them out of our brains. After pushing past those, we’ll start to come up with more creative ideas. If we’re trying to illustrate partnership, we might begin with a cliché like a handshake in front of a globe but then move on to a reef ecosystem, for instance, or a photo of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

BRAINSTORM FRESH METAPHORS TO PUSH PAST CLICHÉS

| CONCEPT | CLICHÉ | UNIQUE |
|-------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Goal | <i>Bull’s-eye</i> | <i>Maze; threshold</i> |
| Partnership | <i>Handshake in front of globe</i> | <i>Reef ecosystem; Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers</i> |
| Security | <i>Lock and key</i> | <i>Doberman pinscher; pepper spray</i> |

If you're feeling stuck, start naming random objects and then try to make a connection between those and your concept. This simple exercise might not lead to *the* metaphor, but it will jumpstart your brain.

Once you've generated some really good options, you'll be tempted to stop. Don't. Keep pushing past your creative blocks and into seemingly unrelated territory. The more unusual the metaphor, the better it will stand out in people's minds. Our associate creative director says that the first good idea comes an hour into the brainstorm. Though you might not have to brainstorm for a full hour, the point is to reach beyond your first idea – or your seventh. And don't start filtering out options until you've got a critical mass to work with.

Are metaphors really worth that much effort? I'd answer that question with another: How important is it for your audience to understand and embrace your idea?

Nancy Duarte is a best-selling author with thirty years of CEO-ing under her belt. She's driven her firm, Duarte, Inc., to be the global leader behind some of the most influential messages and visuals in business and culture. Duarte, Inc., is the largest design firm in Silicon Valley, as well as one of the top woman-owned businesses in the area. Nancy has written six best-selling books, four have won awards, and her new book, *DataStory: Explain Data and Inspire Action Through Story*, is available now. Follow Duarte on Twitter: @nancyduarte or LinkedIn.

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


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Kay Seo 4 years ago

I am a huge fan of Ms. Duarte's articles. While this article has great points, one point that is missing is the communications in a global setting with globally dispersed participants, whether they be customers, partners, suppliers or internal company audience. For those whose English is not their native tongue, it is often puzzling when slang, "metaphors" or too trendy words are used. Cultural sensitivity is extremely important, and many times in those global setting, the English needs to be plainer, simpler and yet thoroughly more effective to the non native English speakers.

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