
Metaphors Are Jewels

The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.

—ARISTOTLE, *POETICS*

Want to wake up your readers? Poke them with a good metaphor. (I just poked you with one. Are you awake?)

Metaphors are handy rhetorical devices that compare one thing to another. Metaphors, also known as comparative tropes, “heighten the meaning or clarity of a subject by relating it to something more vivid.”⁹⁸ Throw in *like* or *as*—for example, *A metaphor is like a pointy object that you can poke readers with*—and you have a simile, a type of metaphor that makes the comparison explicit. With or without *like*, metaphors help new concepts click and help old ones perk up.

To write is to use metaphors.

To write is, too often, to use metaphors badly.

Metaphors easily go wrong. Consider this egregious example (from *Bad Metaphors from Stupid Student Essays*): “His thoughts tumbled in his head, making and breaking alliances like underpants in a dryer without Cling Free.”⁹⁹ I’d call this a case of “too much image.”¹⁰⁰ Unless you’re going for a comic effect, choose comparisons that fit the context.

98. Plotnik, *Spunk & Bite*, 63. He goes on here to say, “When the comparison also tickles the reader’s fancy, you’ve got a winner.” His whole chapter “The Punchy Trope” (61–70) tickles me right in the fancy.

99. “Bad Metaphors from Stupid Student Essays,” *MISTupid.com: The Online Knowledge Magazine*, accessed June 24, 2012, <http://mistupid.com/people/page027.htm>.

100. Plotnik, *Spunk & Bite*, 34.

Good metaphors enhance; bad ones distract. Boy, do those tumbling underpants distract.

May I have your attention back? I have more bad metaphors for you. It's almost unfair to pick on business speak; it's too easy. I can't resist giving you this example, though. I once saw a conference presentation that started with these three bullets:

- rabbit hole
- brass tacks
- recipes

This was the whole slide. It could have been Slide 1 in any presentation on any topic in any field. As everyone in the room knew, *rabbit hole* implied that the speaker would jump into a complicated topic full of confusion, like Alice's Wonderland. *Brass tacks* implied that the speaker would get down to some basics. *Recipes* implied that the speaker would step through some recommendations.

I could have gone along with any one of those cliché-metaphors—the rabbit hole, the brass tacks, the recipes—by itself without much trouble. (Such metaphors are called dead or dormant metaphors because the images, through overuse, generally go unnoticed.) But yoked together like that, these three metaphors combine to form a bizarre scenario: a bunny sliding down a hole, then pricking itself on some brass tacks, then abruptly concerning itself with cooking. Whoa! As I sat there in that roomful of people, wanting to get my money's worth out of every minute, I was so taken by this extra-mixed metaphor, that I barely processed what the speaker had to say.

Here's another example of business-speak metaphors gone wrong. "Patents [yes, patents] attempt to create a level playing field, but the last thing an 800-pound gorilla of a company wants is a fair fight."¹⁰¹ Huh? I have no idea what this jumble of images says about patents—or

101. R. L. G. (Robert Lane Greene), "Metaphors: Who Wants a Fair Fight with an 800-Pound Gorilla?" *The Economist*, Johnson blog, July 27, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2011/07/metaphors>.

about playing fields or gorillas. Even if I cared about patents, this clash of clichés would knock the caring right out of me.

A reader sinks into a *good* metaphor comfortably, like Goldilocks easing into Baby Bear’s chair. Arthur Plotnik, a writer’s writer among writer’s writers, describes good comparative tropes (good metaphors) as “factory-fresh, unpredictable, economical, and custom-fitted.”¹⁰²

The ideal metaphor works without seeming to do any work at all.

Where can you find examples of good metaphors? Look in plays (“All the world’s a stage”) and in poems, novels, e-mails, blog entries, brochures, technical manuals, or any other vehicles (!) of human communication. In an article on information architecture, two IBM pros compare the abstract term *information model* to another model that their readers find familiar: a model home. Andrea Ames and Alyson Riley explain, “If you’ve ever looked at a model home while house-hunting” (yes, I can see that model home now—the gleaming countertops, the fresh flowers) “you know that the model is an example, a pattern that shows an ideal state ... Let’s take a look at a handful of ‘model homes’ from the world of information.”¹⁰³

The natural, comfortable way that Ames and Riley compare information models to model homes gives me confidence in their knowledge and in their ability to explain what they know. Their introductory metaphor (which goes on for many sentences, making it an extended metaphor) prepares me to understand even as it motivates me to keep reading.

Another effective extended metaphor comes from Carmen Hill, a content strategist for a business-to-business (B2B) marketing agency. In her blog post “Thrillers, Fillers and Spillers: Cultivating Your B2B Content Garden,” Hill compares three types of plants needed for an attractive container arrangement (thrillers, fillers, and spillers) to three types of content needed for an attractive B2B marketing program:

102. Plotnik, *Spunk & Bite*, 63.

103. Andrea Ames and Alyson Riley, “Helping Us Think: The Role of Abstract, Conceptual Models in Strategic Information Architecture,” *Intercom: The Magazine of the Society for Technical Communication*, January 2012 (volume 59, issue 1), 16–17.

- A thriller—whether in plant or paragraph form—is “a focal point, something big and bold with enough sex appeal to catch the eye and inspire further discovery.”
- Fillers are “essential elements that build on the featured attraction.”
- A spiller is “anything that can be easily snipped and shared,” whether a vine or a video.¹⁰⁴

Hill develops her comparison smoothly and artfully, choosing broad terms—*focal point*, *big*, *bold*, *essential elements*, *snipped*, *shared*—that stretch to fit both plant life and marketing content.

You can find good metaphors in scriptwriting too. In the TV show *House, M.D.*, the main character, Dr. Gregory House, frequently calls on his powers of comparison to explain medical concepts to his team and, conveniently, to the show’s viewers. Here, he compares diagnosis to fishing:

Dr. House: You know, when the Inuit go fishing, they don’t look for fish.

Dr. Wilson: Why, Dr. House?

Dr. House: They look for the blue heron, because there’s no way to see the fish. But if there’s fish, there’s gonna be birds fishing. Now, if [the patient]’s got hairy-cell, what else are we gonna see circling overhead?¹⁰⁵

If only real doctors had scriptwriters like that.

Open any work of literature, and you’ll find comparative tropes galore. Tropemaster Mary Karr’s first memoir, *The Liars’ Club*, serves up delicious metaphors on every page.

104. Carmen Hill, “Thrillers, Fillers and Spillers: Cultivating Your B2B Content Garden,” *Babcock & Jenkins* blog, July 18, 2011, <http://www.bnj.com/thrillers-fillers-spillers-cultivating-b2b-content-garden>.

105. Richard Nordquist, “‘House’ Calls: The Metaphors of Dr. Gregory House,” *About.com Grammar & Composition*, 2012, <http://grammar.about.com/od/rhetoricstyle/a/housemetaphors.htm>.

Liars' Club Example 1:

[Grandma had] started auctioning Mother off to various husbands when she was only fifteen. Like some prize cow...fattened for the highest bidder.¹⁰⁶

Mother = prize cow. *Prize cow!* Two little words, and we're there. Instantly, we *get* Grandma, and we have no choice but to despise her. Mother's resentment washes over us. With this compact comparison, Karr achieves what many writers live for: she places us—smack—into her characters' psyches.

Liars' Club Example 2:

The fact that my house was Not Right metastasized into the notion that I myself was somehow Not Right.¹⁰⁷

Not-Rightness = cancer. This metaphor sneaks in under the cloak of the verb *metastasized*. (Did you notice that in the previous sentence, my own metaphor sneaks in under the cloak of the verb *sneaks*? You can practically see the metaphor tip-toeing. Metaphor as cloak-clad agent of surreptitious activity. That's a metaphor for *metaphor*. A *metametaphor*. Dizzy yet?)

My own metaphor sneaks in under the cloak of the verb *sneaks*.

Liars' Club Example 3:

If Daddy's past was more intricate to me than my own present, Mother's was as blank as the West Texas desert she came from.¹⁰⁸

Blankness of Mother's past = blankness of West Texas desert. This apt, revealing comparison feels natural, inevitable. If you were reading it in context, you'd whiz right by it. But let's slow down and look at this sentence. Karr could have made any number of comparisons:

106. Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 10.

107. *Ibid.*, 12.

108. *Ibid.*, 23.

“as blank as a whiteboard with nothing written on it” or “as blank as a clueless person’s face” or “as blank as a cloudless sky.” Lots of things can be blank. She chose a comparison that multitasks in a big way, accomplishing all these things:

- It answers the question, how blank did Mother’s past seem? (As blank as a desert.)
- It locates us in Mother’s world. (Mother came from the West Texas desert.)
- It conveys that world’s emptiness. (The West Texas desert is blank.)
- It communicates the prominence of this desert in the daughter’s mind. (She chose it for her comparison, after all. Each metaphor reveals something about the writer or character who chooses it.)
- It reinforces the daughter’s longing for closeness with her mother. (A blank desert conjures aloneness, thirst.)
- It serves as a transition. (The first half of the sentence reaches back to the previous paragraphs about the father. The second half gracefully swivels toward the ensuing paragraphs about the mother.)
- It motivates us to keep reading. (Blank West Texas desert. What was it like for Mother to grow up there, and why didn’t she talk to her daughter about it? *I must know.*)

We get all that from a single sentence comparing a person’s past to a desert—a rich equating of two unequal things. Metaphor. Choose a good one, and you bestow on your readers a shiny nugget of compressed communication.

Go metaphor hunting in any good writer’s work. Discover your own gems. Admire them from all sides. Feel their edges. Study the way they gleam. Then don’t be surprised when your own writing shows a new sparkle.