

A METAPHOR METHOD

This manual is designed to help generate a more attentive engagement with metaphors. It can be used in contexts of health care, counseling and communication more generally. Though listed numerically, the steps below do not necessarily form a linear sequence. While some steps build on one another, others benefit from intermittent revisiting. A common metaphor—life (or illness) is a journey—exemplifies each step.

1. Identify an expression as a metaphor

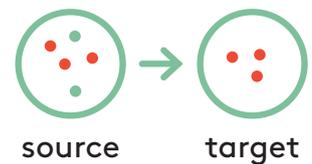
Metaphors have a source and a target domain and establish a relationship of similarity. Metaphors are also category mistakes. In a metaphor, something both *is* and *is not* something else. Ask yourself: **What is compared to what?**



For example, life is the target and journey is the source domain.

2. Name the relevant features

Metaphors carry over or transfer features from the source to the target domain. While some features are activated, others remain latent. Ask yourself: **Which features are carried over? And which aren't but might?**



For example, journeys imply movement and destinations. A journey might take a traveler to exciting places. There can be obstacles, and travelers can lose their way.

3. Evaluate

Metaphors have many functions. They explain and familiarize; they also surprise and produce ambiguity. They can make a suggestion—see it like this! They can also be normative and prescriptive—this is how it is! Ask yourself: **What does the metaphor do well? Where is it problematic?**



For example, journeys imply change. Someone might welcome life-changing encounters, adventures and new insights. Someone else might find change undesirable because it can involve loss and feeling uprooted.

4. Analyze the context

Different people typically activate different features in a metaphor. Contextual factors influence how a metaphor is used and (mis)understood. Depending on our type of lens and in changing our own position, we can focus on a range of factors: cultural background, history, power hierarchies, ethnicity, age, irony. Ask yourself: **How do different contexts impact the meaning of the metaphor?**



For example, the concept of journey may evoke specific connotations for a regular commuter and entirely different ones for a refugee. Keep in mind that not everyone will immediately perceive the figurative dimension of the journey concept and may understand the metaphor literally.

5. Activate the generative potential

Metaphors can be creatively reused and playfully misused. Established features in the source domain can be elaborated and new features can be activated. A metaphor can also be combined with another metaphor. Ask yourself: **Which other ideas does the metaphor afford?**



For example, travelers can walk on their own or be joined by an experienced guide. The mode of transportation might involve a train, a Maserati or imaginary wings.

Concluding thoughts

After completing these steps, you may wonder: What now? Should I share my thoughts with a client or patient? Which other caveats should I keep in mind? Which benefits does this type of work have? For answers to these questions, follow the QR code or the embedded links below which take you to:



- my book *Metaphor in Illness Writing: Fight and Battle Reused* (2022)
- an open-access chapter on the Metaphor Method from my book
- an archive of other articles on metaphors

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