

CHAPTER 11

CREATING METAPHORS

Why Is It Important to Create Metaphors Skillfully?

Metaphors accentuate characteristics of objects, people, and events using an image of something analogous that highlights those characteristics clearly and dramatically. If a co-worker is described as a "loose cannon," that metaphor suggests that this individual is directionless, unguided by purpose or principle, unfocused, and capable of doing great harm with one impulsive, unexpected discharge. The image of an unsecured cannon on the rolling deck of a ship, primed and ready to go off, communicates these ideas very effectively.

The economy of language in using metaphors is striking. Two words, "loose cannon," call up an image that communicates several important perceptions about the co-worker. Comprehending and discussing those perceptions depends on the background of the person hearing the metaphor. Only if the listener knows what a cannon is will that image communicate its meaning effectively.

Developing effective metaphors is a form of creative thinking, connecting together two things that are not ordinarily associated to give us a new insight. Using metaphors is common in creative expression and is especially important in creative writing and the visual media.

In problem solving, creating metaphors is also effective for suggesting new ideas for unusual problem solutions. By creating a metaphor for the problem, solutions that may not be initially apparent may emerge. Creative problem solving based on metaphoric thinking can help people solve personal, professional, and technical problems.

Uses of Metaphors

Images in poetry often communicate ideas through various types of metaphor, such as figures of speech or allusions. In saying "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players," Shakespeare used the stage as

a metaphor to give us insight into key relationships and actions in different periods of life. In "Dream Deferred," Langston Hughes used five metaphors in eleven short lines, one of which is "a raisin in the sun," to express the frustration of African-Americans in continually postponed justice and opportunity. In William Blake's "To See A World in a Grain of Sand," the poet used four metaphors in four lines to describe how understanding significant ideas is found in observing small things.

Metaphors communicate images and insight in other forms of literature, as well. Plato's cave allegory, Aesop's fables, the parables of Jesus of Nazareth, the African trickster tales of Anansi the Spider, the humor of Abraham Lincoln and Will Rogers, and the homilies of Ben Franklin employ metaphors to express spiritual, moral, or political principles.

Metaphors are sometimes used to persuade. Roosevelt used the metaphor of an epidemic to support resisting the expansion of the Nazi movement and lending a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire to justify the lend-lease policy. Churchill's metaphor of an "Iron Curtain" became the common term to describe the division of Europe after World War II, an image that conveyed a "we-they" relationship of threat and impenetrability. "The rising tide of Communism" during the early 1950s suggested that political leaders should take precautions against a destructive and uncontrollable flood.

Metaphors also convey humor in jokes or puns. The Volkswagen ads of the '60s used humorous visual metaphors to draw attention to the special features of the "beetle." Soon after the 1969 moon landing, Volkswagen used a picture of the lunar landing module in its ad with the caption, "It's ugly, but it gets you there." Poking fun at itself and the charges that the "beetle" was ugly, Volkswagen also called upon American pride in the moon landing to sell its cars. Political cartoons similarly rely on metaphors for meaning and humor.

Metaphors may help people not familiar with

certain objects, actions, and functions understand new information more easily. The computer industry uses metaphors like "virus," "mouse," "trash," "file," "byte," etc. to convey abstract, technical ideas or operating procedures in language that people not familiar with computer technology can understand.

Metaphors are also used in scientific investigation to develop and express sometimes complex and abstract scientific principles. Mendeleev's dream of a table on which all elements had a place or Kekule's image of the benzene ring as a snake with its tail in its mouth expressed ideas that these scientists had been incubating. Scientific models, like the DNA double-helix, serve as metaphors for abstract structures, properties, or complex causal relationships.

Problems in Creating Metaphors

Although metaphors can communicate ideas well, sometimes poorly selected metaphors can be misleading and or confusing. One limitation in the way that people create metaphors involves using a metaphor that is too narrow to communicate what we are trying to convey, making the message superficial. To describe a starched table cloth as "stiff as a board" is a fairly useful description. Both are materials that have a rigid appearance and do not bend easily. To describe someone as "stiff as a board" suggests that the person seems inflexible, but does not convey the person's behavior or characteristics very meaningfully. Does the person have an overly polite or inexpressive manner, a rigid posture, dogmatic views, a stilted way of expressing ideas, or unimaginative ways of thinking? This metaphor is too thin to convey the complexity of human personality.

Metaphors may also convey incorrect ideas about something. We must be sure that the metaphor suggests what we want to describe and does not convey unintended meanings. If I notice how a person walks and comment that he is "squirrely," I may be trying to convey that he makes scampering movements like a squirrel. I may be unintentionally communicating that he seems fearful, easily distracted, or that he hides things away. In this case, the metaphor is not effective because it carries ideas that suggest

misimpressions, rather than insight. Most of us can think of a time that we used a metaphor jokingly and offended someone, either because it didn't fit the situation in a humorous way or because it carried some other message that was offensive.

Metaphors may also create confusion, rather than clarification. Mixed metaphors, for example, often confuse us or seem humorous because they convey conflicting ideas. Consider the mixed metaphors in this advice, "To get ahead, keep your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel, your ear to the ground, and your eye on the ball." The resulting image is one of motionless contortion, rather than progress.

Malapropism sometimes result from mixing metaphors, an error that the speaker often does not intend. If a pessimistic friend comments "Do not count your chickens before they come home to roost," the speaker is mixing a proverb about not expecting something good before you know it with a proverb about bad things always coming back to their origins. The listener does not know whether the speaker is confused, starting to say one thing and ended up in another proverb, is trying to make a joke, or is suggesting that the outcomes can only be bad ones. Malapropisms confuse the listener because the mixed metaphor blurs together several sets of connections, some of them conflicting.

Figure 11.1 summarizes these problems in creating metaphors.

DEFAULTS IN CREATING METAPHORS
1. We select metaphors with narrow meanings or that have only superficial connection with what they stand for.
2. We select metaphors without thinking about ideas that they convey that are inaccurate or misleading.
3. We mix metaphors in ways that convey conflicting or contradictory ideas.

Figure 11.1

Two additional problems arise in using metaphors: inappropriateness and overuse. A metaphor must fit the background of the listener for

its communication to be complete. We are sometimes "put off" by "inside jokes" used in a group in which others share a common language and experience. We may feel slightly ignorant if we must look up allusions to understand a writer's metaphors or confess that we do not know what a speaker is referring to. We may be critical of a person using an obscure metaphor, believing that the speaker is being insensitive or "showing off" by using an analogy that excludes us from enjoying the humor or sharing the insight.

The esoteric metaphors of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound may not mean much to readers unfamiliar with the allusions. Since these metaphors are profound to those familiar with the background, the insights of these authors warrant the research that might be necessary to comprehend what the metaphors are supposed to convey.

Overuse also detracts from the effectiveness of metaphors. Skill in creating and using metaphor lies in connection with what we are expressing and in originality. Overuse of the same metaphor or using only hackneyed ones adds little interest or insight to our ideas. Poets and writers poke fun at themselves and others in overusing metaphors. Sylvia Plath's poem "Metaphors" and Ogden Nash's poem "Very Like a Whale" satirize overuse and misuse of metaphors. Shakespeare's Sonnet "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day..." describes the limitations of using them.

How Do We Create Metaphors Skillfully?

When we draw an analogy between two things of different types, we recognize that they have important similarities. We use analogies for a number of purposes. When we reason by analogy, we extend something we know about one of the two things to another, based on the analogy. In creating metaphors, analogies are used to convey something we already know about one thing by using an image of something else that is literally quite different from the original object. Creating metaphors is a creative thinking activity because metaphors clearly express ideas or insights by matching two things that are not ordinarily associated.

Creating metaphors is not just free associa-

tion, although it almost seems to be that intuitive when we hear people who are good at metaphoric thinking spinning off metaphors. While some individuals hear and express metaphors spontaneously, we can all create metaphors skillfully with some careful, organized thought: determining what you want to say with a metaphor, identifying the characteristics that suggest that meaning, and selecting a metaphor which is analogous enough to convey the same image or meaning effectively.

Creating metaphors can be facilitated by using a variety of creative thinking techniques. Visualization or imagery prompts analogies that are used to create solutions to business or technical problems. Free association techniques that awaken stored memories or sharpen observation can generate metaphors for creative expression or practical problem solving.

In whatever way we get ideas for metaphors, it is important to think about whether these metaphors communicate what we intend, offer deep understanding or original expression, and do not carry with them misleading associations. The strategy described in this chapter is based on explicitly using analogies between things to give us ideas for metaphors and then analyzing whether or not the metaphors are a good fit. It is a strategy that we all can use, regardless of our background or experience with other creative thinking techniques.

Attention Points in Creating Metaphors Skillfully

We set the stage for creating new metaphors by asking, "*What is the purpose of this metaphor? What am I trying to communicate that a metaphor would express?*" Identifying the context for creating the metaphor is the first step in bringing possibilities to mind for consideration.

Next we should list the key characteristics that explain what we want to communicate about the given object. These important characteristics are the "idea bridges" that allow us to search our memory to find something else that expresses in a new way the idea that we are working with. Clarifying these key characteristics allows us to put forward connections to a new object that is analogous. For example, I may

want to communicate that a co-worker is dedicated to her job, very hard working, and quite productive. Key characteristics that express these ideas include that she is always active, puts out a lot of energy, and accomplishes many tasks.

A metaphor will work only if a number of characteristics connect it to the given object. We should consider a range of different types of characteristics related to the ones we start with so that the metaphor is a rich and useful one. Thinking about the details that elaborate each characteristic of the given object helps us to be very clear about what we are trying to convey.

With a variety of characteristics before us, we are ready to brainstorm a number of images, objects, or ideas that have these key characteristics. For example, when thinking about many types of characteristics of my co-worker, I think of a locomotive, an army, a dynamo, and a basketball player.

From this metaphor menu, we can select the ones that have the most significant characteristics in common with the given idea. When one object, person, or event seems most promising for our purpose, we can check how well the key characteristics of one fits the other, noting whether any significant differences might interfere with the effectiveness of the metaphor. A basketball player is similar, but there are too many breaks in the action in a basketball game. A locomotive is too overbearing. An army suggests a complex of individuals working together. A dynamo, on the other hand, does not have similar disadvantages.

The last step in creating metaphors is determining whether the characteristics and details between the two things are strong enough to make the metaphor a good one. "She's a dynamo" seems to convey what we wanted to describe about her very well.

The thinking map for creating metaphors (figure 11.2) summarizes these steps.

The graphic organizer for creating metaphors in figure 11.3 is an adaptation of the compare/contrast graphic, redesigned for the creative development of metaphors.

Add any additional characteristics boxes that may enhance the richness of your metaphor.

CREATING A METAPHOR

1. What do I want to describe about an object, person, or event that a metaphor would express?
2. What are the details of the key characteristics of what I am trying to describe?
3. What other things (objects, people, or events) have these key characteristics?
4. Which of these things might make a good metaphor?
5. What details of the metaphor fit the characteristics of what I am trying to describe?
6. Are there differences that make the metaphor misleading? If so, why?
7. Is this metaphor a "good fit"? Why?

Figure 11.2

WHAT I WANT TO DESCRIBE

WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT

CREATE A METAPHOR

↔

THESE THINGS ARE LIKE THAT

PROPOSED METAPHOR

WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT.

DETAILS		DETAILS
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	

DIFFERENCES:

DO THE DIFFERENCES MAKE THE METAPHOR MISLEADING? WHY?

STATE THE METAPHOR: _____ **IS LIKE** _____.

Figure 11.3

The graphic organizer follows the questions on the thinking map, moving vertically down the diagram. After writing in the upper-left box what you want to describe about the thing or idea, write these characteristics on the arrows in the middle of the box. Think about whether there are other related characteristics of the given object that occur to you as you consider the key characteristics. For example, I may want to describe my co-worker as active, energetic, and able to do many tasks. Then I realize that she is also forceful. I add this somewhat related characteristic to the list of things that I want to say about her and to the arrows in the middle of the diagram.

To have a clear image of what you want to convey, brainstorm details about the given object and write them in the "Details" boxes. Figure 11.4 shows how the diagram may look at that point in the process.

After surveying the details and the characteristics of the thing that you wish to describe,

suggest several things that have many of the same characteristics and write the list of possible metaphors in the top box on the right. From this list, select an object that seems like a good fit for many of the characteristics on the left, and write it in the "Proposed Metaphor" section of the same box.

Now brainstorm details of each of the characteristics as that characteristic applies to the "Proposed Metaphor." Add characteristics that are important in describing the proposed metaphor to find out whether there are any similar features in the original object that we may have overlooked earlier. For example, a dynamo keeps on going for long periods of time without breaking down and so does my co-worker. I now add "keeps on going" to the characteristics and think of details about how both my co-worker and a dynamo keep on going. Figure 11.5 shows how the graphic organizer may look.

Some differences between the metaphor and what you are trying to describe give richness to

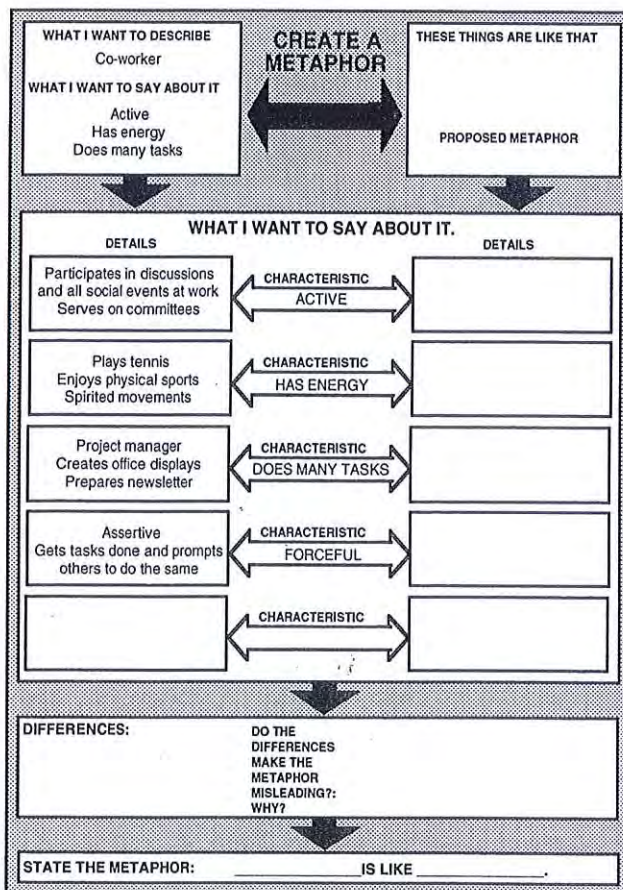


Figure 11.4

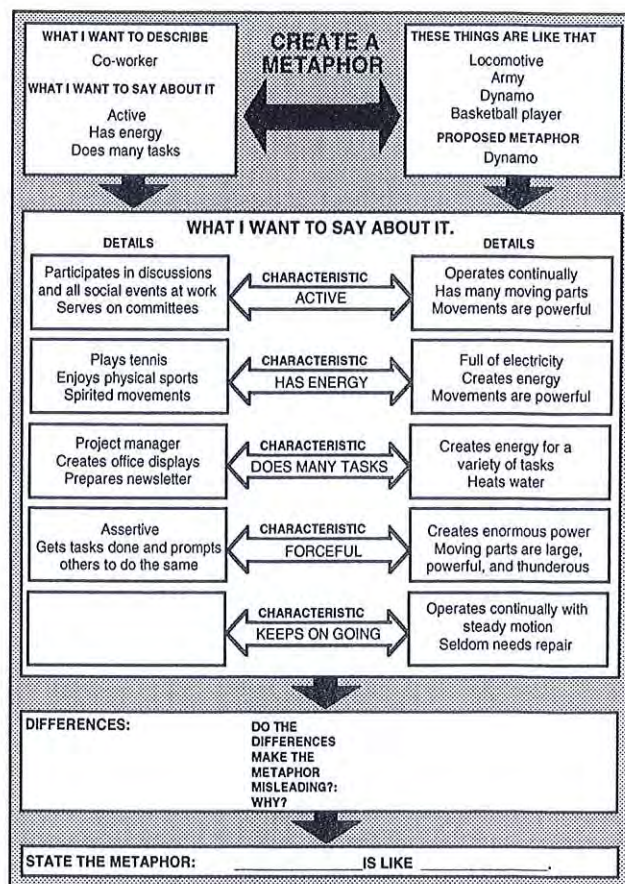


Figure 11.5

the metaphor. The difference in the degree of energy, power, and productivity between a dynamo and my co-worker adds desirable meaning to the metaphor. Using the metaphor of a dynamo exaggerates those qualities in her in a complimentary way. However, I must check to see that the image of the dynamo does not carry with it some undesirable connotation that I do not want to ascribe to her.

Seeing the details and characteristics side-by-side, I can now decide whether the proposed metaphor has enough of the characteristics of the thing that I wish to describe to convey that thing's important characteristics. Then I write the metaphor: My co-worker is like a dynamo. I may then use information in the "Characteristics" and "Details" boxes of the diagram to write about my co-worker as if she were a dynamo. Figure 11.6 shows how the completed graphic may look.

The metaphor web diagram in figure 11.7 is used to summarize the metaphors that have been selected to describe the same object or idea. This activity shows that many metaphors can be

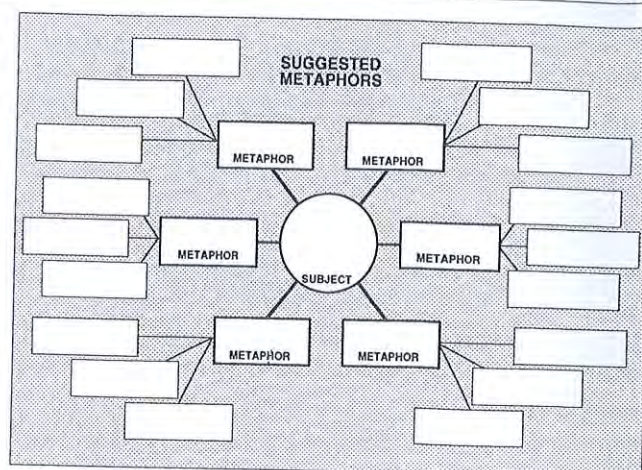


Figure 11.7

used to describe the same thing, each adding different understanding and emphasizing different characteristics. The web diagram can be used by an individual to compare metaphors that he or she has developed or in a group activity to summarize the metaphors developed by several group members.

Extended uses of metaphors in writing. To use a metaphor in a poem or persuasive prose, one should ask, *What details about one thing can I use to describe details about another?* In describing a co-worker as a "loose cannon" or as a "dynamo," the metaphor is a focused one and need not be elaborated. However, the force of the metaphor can be extended in continued dialogue by using details about a loose canon or a dynamo to further describe the co-worker. I might say of her, "She never shuts down," or "She's full of electricity." This is an important device in poetry. In creating a metaphor like the cat in Carl Sandburg's poem "Fog," details are very important to express and extend the image of the cat to convey meaning about fog. The fog is described as creeping in "on little cat feet," for example. The details boxes in a completed graphic organizer like that in figure 11.6 contains the "raw material" from which a poem, some other literary work, or a pictorial representation can be created. The next step in the creative process is executing the images, poetry, or prose for which the metaphor is created.

Fluency and originality are important in any form of creative thinking. The three steps in this strategy that involve brainstorming (listing char-

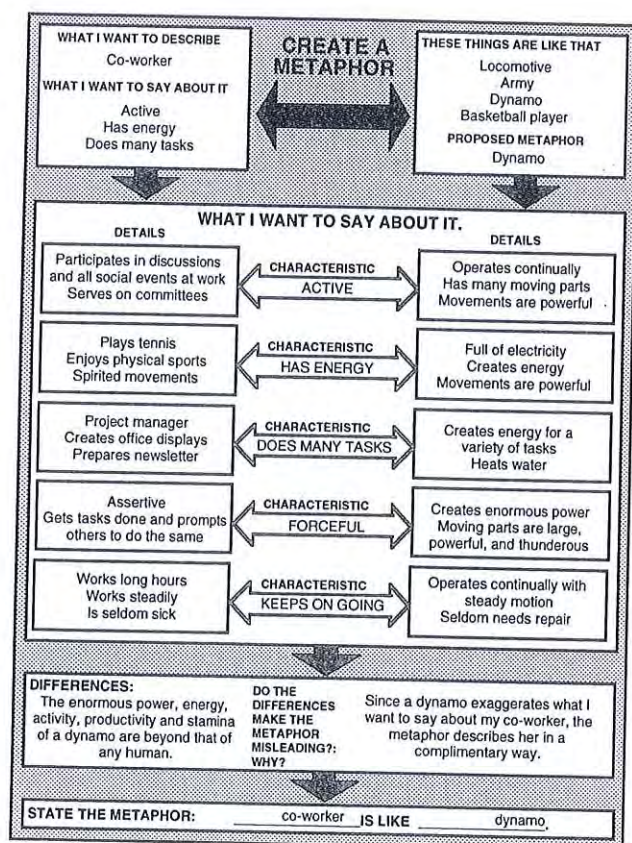


Figure 11.6

acteristics, creating a menu of possible metaphors, and generating many details for expressing the connection) should provide original material that can be used in the creative expression of the metaphors developed.

How Can We Teach Students to Generate Metaphors Skillfully?

It is not enough to ask students to “be creative” in developing and using metaphors. The strategy outlined in the thinking map helps students who may not view themselves as creative thinkers become skillful and confident about generating metaphoric images. Emphasize the importance of the purpose of the metaphor to give students a sense of why we develop and use metaphors and to establish a clear set of standards for selecting good metaphors from among the possible ways of expressing their ideas.

Creating metaphors reduces students’ insecurity and confusion when asked to interpret symbols, figures of speech, or analogies in prose. In addition to its cognitive value, creating metaphors promotes self-esteem by confirming for students that they are creative thinkers who can suggest workable, original ideas.

As in the case of teaching other thinking skills and processes, you should guide students’ practice and prompt them to reflect about how they developed these ideas so that they can guide themselves in using this creative thinking strategy.

Contexts in the Curriculum for Lessons on Creating Metaphors

Metaphors that students are exposed to as well as contexts in which students can create their own metaphors appear throughout the curriculum. In general, there are three contexts in which infusion lessons on creating metaphors can be developed and taught.

- *Students read literature and study works of art in which metaphors are used.* Poetry is, of course, rich with metaphors. Students can reflect on whether these metaphors “work” and what they convey. Similarly, metaphors used in short stories and novels can be

analyzed and students asked to evaluate their effectiveness. In *Fantastic Voyage*, Isaac Asimov’s metaphor of a trip through the body as a submarine voyage provides the details that suggest action in the narrative. Similarly, in the visual and performing arts, metaphors suggest designs or themes. The use of metaphoric images in art and music also provides such contexts.

- *Students are asked to compose works which contain metaphors.* Creative writing is a prime context for activities in which students develop their own metaphors. For example, students can develop a metaphor as the basis for a story. For example, students may create images to illustrate human traits like heroism, friendship, etc. They can also create metaphors for major historical events, for example, settlers making the trip from the Mississippi to California in the 1800s.
- *Students engage in creative problem solving.* Students may modify the possible uses of something based on its similarity to something else, a problem-solving application of metaphor. For example, creating a metaphor to stimulate use of the library might entail using fast-food restaurants as a metaphor. Examining what makes fast-food restaurants appealing and successful can suggest ideas to encourage students to use the library more often and more effectively.

A menu of suggested contexts for infusion lessons on creating metaphors is provided on pp. 335–336.

Teaching Students to Create Metaphors Skillfully in the Primary Grades

Creating metaphors draws on background knowledge and experience. Obviously, students in the primary grades have less knowledge than students in the upper elementary grades do. Encourage students to select metaphors that are familiar enough to enable them to draw upon what they know. Teachers are frequently surprised at how much already accumulated information their students express when creating metaphors.

The stage in the strategy in which students generate details for the key characteristics presents a good opportunity for "piggybacking" on other students' responses. Encouraging this type of cross-fertilization will enhance your students' thinking. Perhaps the most direct way to introduce piggybacking to young children is to explain the idea directly, and then ask them to do it in cooperative groups, followed by large group discussion. They are usually surprised and excited by what they have added to each other's ideas.

The thinking map in figure 11.8 may help primary grade students to create metaphors.

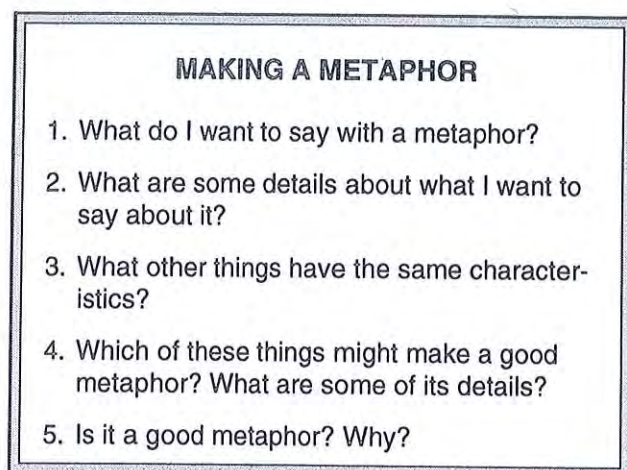


Figure 11.8

The graphic organizer for creating metaphors in figure 11.3 can be simplified slightly, as shown in figure 11.9, for students in the primary grades.

Model Lesson on Creating Metaphors

The model lesson on creating metaphors skillfully includes both a primary and an upper elementary poem. As you read the lesson, reflect on these questions:

- What specific strategies promote creating metaphors?
- How do the graphic organizers promote understanding, as well as creating, metaphors?
- What additional examples can you identify to reinforce this skill?

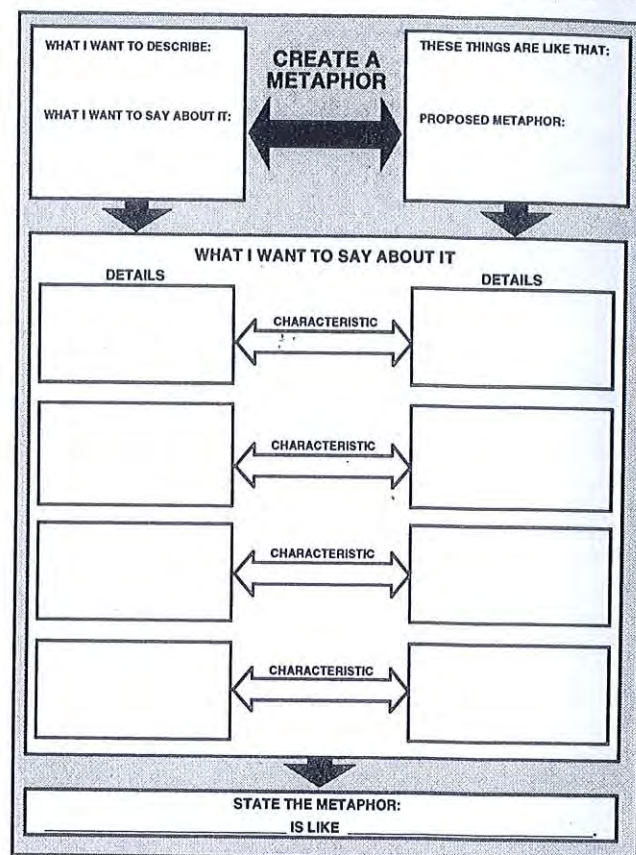


Figure 11.9

Tools for Designing Lessons on Creating Metaphors

The tools on the following pages include thinking maps and graphic organizers that can be used in designing infusion lessons on creating metaphors for primary or intermediate classes. The thinking map on page 323 is designed especially for use in the primary grades.

The thinking maps and graphic organizers can guide you in designing the critical thinking activity in the lesson and can also serve as photocopy masters, transparency masters, or as models that can be enlarged and used as posters in the classroom. Reproduction rights are granted for single classroom use only.

CREATING A METAPHOR

1. What do I want to describe about an object, person, or event that a metaphor would express?
2. What are the details of the key characteristics of what I am trying to describe?
3. What other things (objects, people, or events) have these key characteristics?
4. Which of these things might make a good metaphor?
5. What details of the metaphor fit the characteristics of what I am trying to describe?
6. Are there differences that make the metaphor misleading? If so, why?
7. Is this metaphor a “good fit”? Why?

CREATE A METAPHOR

WHAT I WANT TO DESCRIBE:

WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT:

THESE THINGS ARE LIKE THAT:

PROPOSED METAPHOR:

↓

↓

WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT

DETAILS		DETAILS
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	
	CHARACTERISTIC ↔	

↓

DIFFERENCES:

DO THE DIFFERENCES MAKE
THE METAPHOR MISLEADING?
WHY?

↓

STATE THE METAPHOR: A _____ IS LIKE _____

MAKING A METAPHOR

1. What do I want to say with a metaphor?
2. What are some details about what I want to say?
3. What other things have the same characteristics?
4. Which of these things might make a good metaphor? What are some of its details?
5. Is it a good metaphor? Why?

WHAT I WANT TO DESCRIBE: WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT:	CREATE A METAPHOR	THESE THINGS ARE LIKE THAT: PROPOSED METAPHOR:												
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