

# ANALOGICAL THINKING

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## ANALOGICAL THINKING

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Cognitive Science, Philosophy

### 1. Core Definition and Nature

**Analogical thinking**, frequently termed analogical reasoning, constitutes a fundamental cognitive process characterized by the ability to perceive and utilize structural similarities between distinct domains or situations. Unlike formal reasoning modes such as deductive reasoning, which relies on strict sequential logic and adherence to formalized rules, analogical thinking operates through the use of an **analogy**. This involves mapping relations from a familiar source domain (the analogy) onto a less familiar or target domain (the problem at hand). The core function is not the evaluation of absolute truth based on premises, but the generation of hypotheses, predictions, or novel insights based on relational correspondence. This type of non-sequential reasoning is crucial for navigating complexity where explicit rules are absent or insufficient, allowing human cognition to generalize knowledge effectively across diverse contexts.

In the context of problem-solving, analogical thinking serves as an essential heuristic technique. When faced with a novel difficulty, an individual attempts to retrieve and apply solutions or successful methods derived from analogous problems encountered in the past. If a past problem shares a similar underlying relational structure--even if the superficial content differs wildly--the solution pathway can often be transferred. For instance, a military strategy used to conquer a fortress (source domain) might be mapped onto a seemingly unrelated business negotiation (target domain), provided the structural relations concerning resource allocation, defense, and attack patterns are shared. This mechanism allows humans to transcend rote learning and apply knowledge flexibly. The original source content highlights this application: "a technique that is used by a person in trying to find the solution to a problem via preponderance of answers to like problems."

The definition highlights two primary facets: first, analogical thinking is a substitution for purely rational or sequential thought when navigating complex relationships; second, it is a practical problem-solving technique relying on the successful retrieval and projection of solutions from structurally similar past problems. It is a highly efficient cognitive shortcut, facilitating rapid hypothesis generation and knowledge transfer. The effectiveness of this process hinges entirely on the quality and depth of the relational structure mapped, requiring the thinker to look beyond surface features (e.g., specific objects or attributes) and identify the crucial functional, causal, or spatial relationships between them.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development in Cognitive Science

While the formal study of analogy traces its roots to classical Greek philosophy--where figures like

Aristotle discussed the use of proportional similarity in rhetoric and dialectic--the modern scientific understanding of **analogical thinking** emerged primarily within the 20th-century movements of cognitive psychology and Cognitive Science. Early psychological research, initially influenced by behaviorism, often underestimated the relational complexity inherent in analogy, focusing instead on simple association. However, the cognitive revolution of the 1950s catalyzed a shift, directing focus inward to examine internal mental representations and complex processing operations.

A critical inflection point in the rigorous study of analogy was the work of researchers focusing on artificial intelligence (AI) and human problem solving during the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars recognized that analogy was not merely a literary embellishment but a core mechanism enabling high-level reasoning, learning, and creativity. This period witnessed the development of computational models designed to simulate how humans map complex structures. These models conclusively demonstrated that analogy relies on sophisticated matching algorithms that prioritize relational identity and structural consistency over superficial attribute matching, forcing a reconsideration of human intelligence mechanisms.

The seminal contributions of Dedre Gentner, with her development of the Structure-Mapping Theory (SMT) in the 1980s, solidified analogical reasoning as a central topic in cognitive science. SMT provided a formal framework explaining how analogies are processed: people prefer analogies that maximize systematicity--that is, those mappings that involve interconnected systems of relations (e.g., cause-and-effect chains) rather than isolated facts. This theoretical advancement allowed for precise experimental testing and robustly differentiated analogical reasoning from mere similarity judgment, paving the way for decades of intensive research into its mechanisms and neural correlates across various species and developmental stages.

### 3. Key Mechanisms of Analogical Thinking

The process of engaging in **analogical thinking** is typically modeled as a series of cognitive steps: retrieval, mapping, evaluation, and abstraction. The initial step, **retrieval**, involves accessing long-term memory to identify a suitable source analog that shares relevant relational structures with the target problem. This stage is often considered the greatest bottleneck in analogical transfer, as thinkers frequently fail to retrieve structurally relevant analogs if the surface features (the objects or thematic content) of the source and target problems are highly dissimilar, demonstrating the powerful interference of context in accessing deep knowledge.

The second stage, **mapping**, is the operational heart of analogical reasoning. It requires establishing point-to-point correspondences between the elements--the objects, attributes, and particularly the relations--of the source domain and the target domain. Mapping processes adhere to critical cognitive constraints, such as parallel connectivity (if two elements are mapped, their constituent relations must also be mapped consistently) and the systematicity principle (preference

for mapping higher-order relations that form coherent systems). Successful mapping allows for the projection of inferences--new, unobserved information or relations present in the source are inferred to exist in the target, forming the basis of prediction or problem solution.

Following mapping, the **evaluation** stage determines the validity, relevance, and overall utility of the generated analogy. This step involves assessing the goodness-of-fit of the derived inferences within the target problem context and ensuring that the analogy generates sensible, consistent, and contextually appropriate conclusions. An analogy might be rejected if the structural correspondence is weak or if the projected inferences conflict with established facts about the target domain. Finally, **abstraction**, or schema induction, represents the learning component: repeated exposure to similar analogical mappings leads to the creation of an abstract relational schema or principle, decoupled from the specific contents of the original source and target. This generalized schema can then be applied more efficiently to future problems, signifying a transition from specific transfer to generalized expertise.

#### 4. Psychological Models of Analogical Reasoning

The field of cognitive psychology relies on several sophisticated theoretical models to describe and predict the complexities of analogical thought. The most foundational and widely tested model remains the Structure-Mapping Theory (SMT), developed by Gentner. SMT's central tenet is that analogy is fundamentally about the alignment of relational structures rather than object attributes. It heavily emphasizes the principle of systematicity, positing that the human mind naturally favors analogies where relations are embedded within interconnected systems, as these offer greater explanatory power and predictive coherence, effectively distinguishing true analogy from mere surface similarity.

A critical refinement and extension of SMT is the Multi-Constraint Theory, which offers a broader view of analogical processing by acknowledging that reasoning is guided not only by internal structural consistency but also by external factors. According to this model, the constraints influencing mapping and retrieval operate across three distinct dimensions: structural constraints (systematicity and consistency), semantic constraints (similarity of the underlying meaning or conceptual categories), and pragmatic constraints (the relevance of the analogy to the current problem-solver's goal). This framework provides a richer account of how context, expertise, and purpose guide the selection, use, and ultimate success of analogies in real-world cognitive tasks.

In parallel with psychological models, computational approaches, such as the Analogical Constraint Mapping Engine (ACME) and the Structure Mapping Engine (SME), have provided concrete, operational implementations of these theories. These AI systems demonstrate the feasibility of simulating human analogical processes, allowing researchers to explore the precise cognitive workload and computational requirements imposed by different constraints. These

models are essential tools, not only for deepening the understanding of human cognition but also for advancing the development of artificial intelligence systems capable of sophisticated, creative, and human-like relational reasoning.

## 5. Applications in Learning and Problem Solving

**Analogical thinking** is indispensable in both formal education and practical, real-world problem-solving scenarios. Educators routinely employ analogy as a pedagogical tool to introduce complex or abstract concepts by linking them to existing knowledge domains that are already familiar to the learner. For example, explaining the principles of electrical current flow (the target) by comparing them to the flow of water through pipes (the source) allows students to quickly grasp concepts such as resistance and pressure differential, significantly accelerating knowledge acquisition and improving retention by anchoring novel material to established cognitive schema.

In professional problem solving, analogy is often the catalyst for innovative breakthroughs. Experts across disciplines--from engineering and software development to management and strategic planning--routinely draw parallels to solutions from seemingly disparate areas when direct, sequential approaches fail. As stated in the source content, individuals use analogical thinking to "find the solution to a problem via preponderance of answers to like problems." This strategy is particularly vital in ill-defined domains where the problem space is vast and established rules are ambiguous, enabling practitioners to bypass linear logic through creative transposition of solutions.

However, the successful application of analogical transfer is highly sensitive to cognitive factors. Research indicates that spontaneous analogical transfer--retrieving a useful, distant source without prompting--is surprisingly rare. Learners often require explicit instruction on how to look past superficial disparities and identify deep structural similarity. Training individuals to compare and contrast multiple source examples that share the same underlying structure, a process often referred to as comparative analysis, dramatically increases the probability that they will successfully induce an abstract schema and apply it effectively to novel target problems in the future.

## 6. Role in Creativity and Scientific Discovery

Analogical reasoning is widely regarded as a cornerstone of human creativity and a primary engine driving scientific and technological innovation. Many of the most profound scientific breakthroughs in history have depended on recognizing a structural parallel between previously unconnected phenomena. For example, the development of theories concerning light, waves, and particles often involved analogies to mechanics or fluid dynamics. These cross-domain mappings allow researchers to borrow established, validated theoretical frameworks from one scientific field and apply them to explain perplexing observations in another, leading to entirely new

conceptualizations of reality.

Creativity, particularly breakthrough creativity, often involves generating "remote" analogies--those mappings where the source and target domains are separated by significant conceptual distance (e.g., comparing the function of a biological enzyme to a key fitting into a lock). Although the cognitive challenge in retrieving and mapping remote analogies is greater, the potential for truly novel and transformative insight is maximized because the resulting synthesis transcends conventional categorical boundaries. Analogical processes enable the generation of novel ideas by projecting functional or causal features from a well-understood source domain onto a less-understood target domain, leading to testable hypotheses that could not have been derived through simple inductive or deductive methods alone.

In industrial design and engineering, analogy provides a powerful tool for functional transfer, a process known as biomimicry. Engineers frequently look toward successful biological systems as sources for optimal, proven solutions to structural or fluid dynamic problems. The classic example of the invention of Velcro being inspired by the structure of burrs illustrates how analogical thinking moves beyond merely solving a localized problem to fundamentally changing the conceptualization of potential solutions, illustrating its profound impact on material and technological advancement.

## 7. Neurological Basis and Development

Neuroscientific investigation, utilizing advanced imaging techniques such as fMRI and EEG, has consistently sought to map the neural correlates of **analogical thinking**, pointing toward a highly distributed network centered around the prefrontal cortex (PFC). Specifically, the lateral PFC, particularly the anterior prefrontal cortex (frontopolar cortex), appears essential for handling the complex relational comparisons, high-level structural alignment, and management of multiple constraints required for successful analogical mapping. These frontal regions are critically associated with executive functions, working memory, and cognitive control, all necessary for maintaining the representations of both source and target simultaneously and inhibiting attention to irrelevant surface features that might derail the mapping process.

The development of robust analogical reasoning skills is a primary indicator of cognitive maturation in children. While preschool children can successfully handle simple proportional analogies based on concrete attributes, the ability to process complex, systematic, and abstract analogies--those involving high-order relations and distant domains--develops significantly throughout middle childhood and adolescence. This developmental trajectory strongly correlates with the structural and functional maturation of the PFC, particularly the strengthening of connectivity between frontal executive regions and posterior brain areas responsible for semantic and perceptual processing, supporting the integration of increasingly abstract relational information.

Furthermore, research highlights a critical interplay between language and the development of

analogical skills. Explicitly teaching children common relational terms (e.g., "is the cause of," "is larger than," "is opposite to") helps them to encode relations in a manner that is decoupled from the specific objects involved. This linguistic framing makes relational structures more abstract and thus more accessible for analogical transfer. Therefore, **analogical thinking** is understood to be an active, executive-controlled process that relies heavily on advanced cognitive infrastructure and linguistic refinement to manage the intricate constraints of retrieval, mapping, and inference projection.

## 8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite the central role of **analogical thinking** in cognition, it remains subject to significant theoretical and practical criticisms. A primary debate centers on the "access problem": the difficulty in explaining precisely how the appropriate source analog is efficiently retrieved from memory, particularly when the source and target domains are superficially dissimilar. Critics argue that existing formal models, which primarily focus on structural consistency during the mapping phase, do not adequately account for the dominant influence of surface similarity during the initial retrieval phase, suggesting that the initial access mechanism might be fundamentally heuristic and prone to error, leading to the frequent "inert knowledge problem" in learning environments.

Another major point of contention involves the inherent fallibility and inductive nature of analogy. Since analogical reasoning draws probabilistic conclusions based on perceived similarity and structural correspondence, it does not guarantee logical truth. An analogy can be highly systematic and emotionally compelling while simultaneously yielding a factually incorrect inference (e.g., misapplying a medical treatment protocol based on a flawed analogy between two superficially similar diseases). Thus, while analogy is an invaluable tool for hypothesis generation and discovery, it requires subsequent rigorous verification through formal deductive reasoning or empirical testing, underscoring its limitation as a standalone method for establishing conclusive scientific or logical truth.

Finally, the sheer computational complexity of analogy poses a substantial challenge for both cognitive modeling and artificial intelligence implementation. Mapping all possible relations between two domains, especially if they are large and informationally dense, can quickly become computationally intractable (NP-hard). This raises critical questions about how human cognition manages this complexity. Researchers debate whether the brain attempts a genuine, exhaustive search for the optimal mapping or whether it employs rapid, efficient heuristics that prune the search space quickly, potentially trading marginal accuracy for immediate processing speed, a balance point that continues to be a significant area of research in cognitive computation.

## 9. Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Analogical Reasoning](#)

[Wikipedia: Structure-mapping theory](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Cognitive Science](#)

[Wikipedia: Deductive Reasoning](#)

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