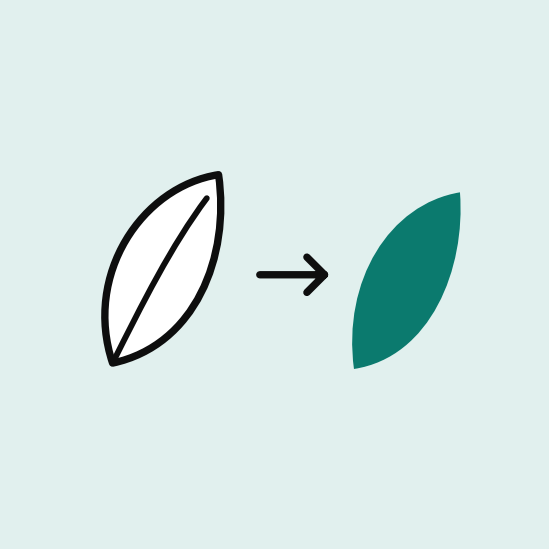
Method

Design by analogy

An ideation method that looks for similar problems in other fields, like nature or other sectors, and transfers the structure of their solution to your own problem.



In Spanish

Diseño por analogía

Origin

Gentner's theory of analogy (1983); in design, Moreno et al. (2016)

Output

Ideas carried over from solutions to similar problems in other fields

What it's for

It helps break fixation: getting stuck on the first ideas or on known solutions.

Key elements

Abstract

Describe the problem without the sector's terms.

Search far

Different fields with the same underlying problem.

Transfer the structure

What you copy is the relationship, not the appearance.

How it's done

1 

Describe the function: what needs to be achieved?

2 

Search for who else solves that.

3 

Transfer and adapt the idea.

Applications in design

When to use it

When the team keeps coming back to the same old ideas.

Avoid

Copying the form of a solution from another field without understanding why it works.

Don't fall for it

An analogy is a starting point: check that the idea fits your context.

Connections

Used by

- Sustainable design

Related to

- Analogous inspiration
- Brainstorming
- SCAMPER
- Synectics

Authors and works

1983	**Dedre Gentner**	Explained that an analogy transfers relationships from one case to another, not surface features.
2016	**Diana P. Moreno et al.**	Compared two methods with 97 professionals: both produced more novel ideas, and one helped break fixation.

Sources

Original sources

- Gentner, D. (1983). Structure-mapping: A theoretical framework for analogy. Cognitive Science, 7(2), 155–170. View source (https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0702_3)
- Moreno, D. P., Blessing, L. T., Yang, M. C., Hernández, A. A., & Wood, K. L. (2016). Overcoming design fixation: Design by analogy studies and nonintuitive findings. AI EDAM, 30(2), 185–199. View source (https://doi.org/10.1017/S0890060416000068)

Last reviewed: October 23, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.