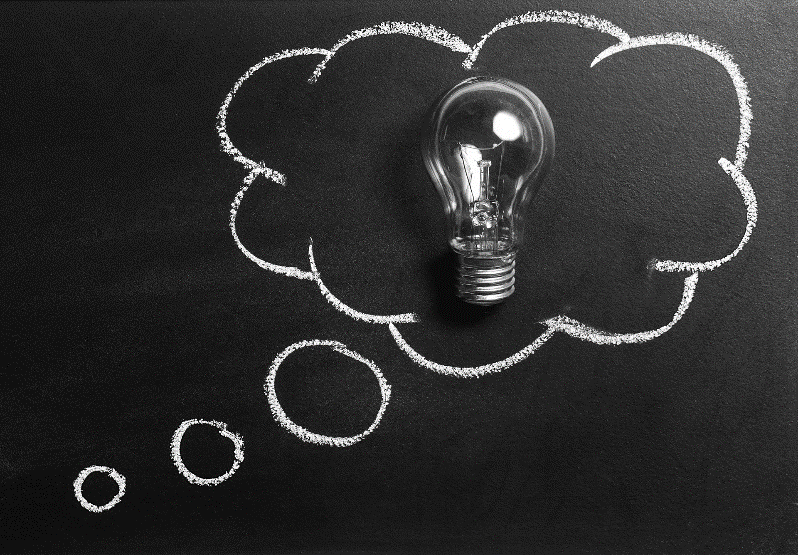
**Visual metaphors have dramatic effects on your *own* creativity.**

Why are metaphors so compelling? Andrew Tate, a neuroscientist and writer for Canva, the graphic design website, says it likely starts in infancy. The world is ultimately abstract to us when we’re young and we must try and convert strange ideas into something more tangible: ‘putting two and two together’ and getting… well, not always four. But, the act of trying new things, learning what fits, and bootstrapping off those ideas makes us such good learners. Metaphors are ways of taking weird things in the world and relating them back to ideas we already understand.

You’ve likely been told to ‘think outside the box’ when challenged with brainstorming solutions. Many of us are familiar with the ‘Aha!’ moment this brings, when we suddenly get a spark of insight and can solve a problem that’s been bugging us. We’ve seen illustrations of a lightbulb popping on when a new thought comes, illuminating understanding. But consider if imagining a lightbulb came first. A study in [2010](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103110000648) found that exposure to an illuminating light bulb activates insight, suggesting we are so used to the idea that a bright lightbulb is linked to clever thinking that we cannot help but think smarter when we see one (figure 4.X).

Figure 4.X

Source: <https://pixabay.com/en/thought-idea-innovation-imagination-2123970/>

Another research team looked at the metaphor ‘think outside the box’ and creative thinking. They literally built a box for their participants to sit either inside or outside of. In the creativity test afterwards, the people lucky enough not to get put in the box, but sat outside it, were more creative.

Recent [research](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1057740813000946) explored how simple visualizations of metaphors could increase, or decrease, creativity. While taking an online creativity test, some participants saw a neutral image – a fish, for example – in a banner across the top of the screen. For others, a visual metaphor appeared such as a brain hovering over a box (i.e. ‘thinking outside the box’). The people with the floating brain got higher scores on the tests than the fish people.

Visual metaphors can also decrease creativity. Instead of the fish or the brain-over-box image, a third group saw an inverse metaphor, such as a burnt-out bulb instead of a bright one. They ended up worse on the creativity tests than even the neutral group.

The takeaway: Visual metaphors can have dramatic effects on your audience *and* on your own creativity.

Drawn from Andrew Tate, <https://designschool.canva.com/blog/creative-metaphors/>