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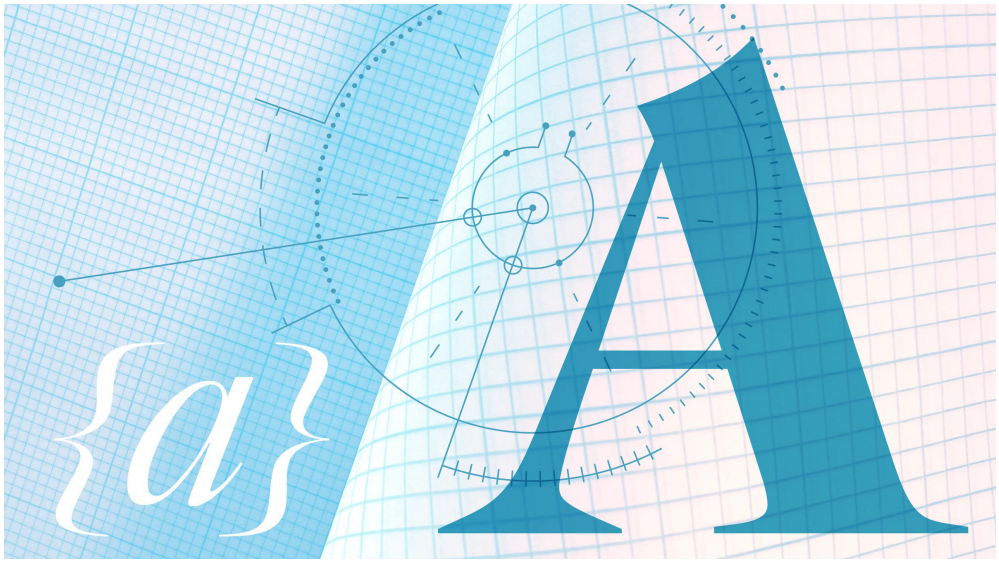
Persuasion



3 Rhetorical Techniques to Increase Your Impact

There's a reason "your" is in this headline. **by Jonah Berger**

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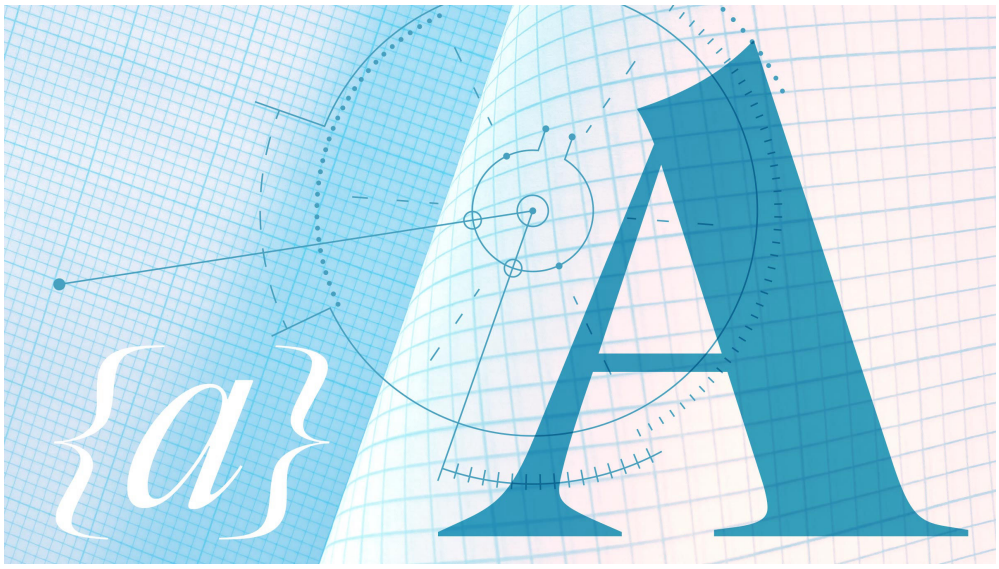

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Almost everything we do involves words. From emails and power points to phone calls and pitch meetings, words are how we persuade, communicate, and connect.

But certain words are more impactful than others. They're better at changing minds, captivating audiences, and driving action. What are these magic words, and how can we take advantage of their power?

Turn Actions into Identities

When asking people to do things, we often use verbs. We ask someone to "help" us revise a PowerPoint deck, for example, or "share" their thoughts at a meeting. Similarly, when trying to increase voter turnout, mailings might encourage voters to please go and "vote."

Using verbs is a logical way to request action, but it turns out that a subtle linguistic shift can increase our influence. Rather than asking people to "help," research finds that asking them to be a "helper" increased helping by almost a third. And rather than asking people to "vote," research finds ask them to be a "voter" increased turnout by 15%.

Turning actions (i.e., helping or voting) into identities (i.e., being a helper or voter) makes people more likely to take action because it turns that action into an opportunity to claim a desired identity. Everyone wants to see themselves positively: intelligent, competent, helpful, and efficacious. So framing actions as opportunities to confirm desired identities encourages people to behave accordingly.

Want people to listen? Ask them to be a listener. Want them to lead? Ask them to be a leader.

The same goes for undesired behaviors, but in the opposite direction. Want people to behave more ethically? Rather than saying "don't cheat," saying "don't be a cheater" more than halved the amount of unethical behavior. Trying to get people to stop littering? Rather than saying "Don't litter" say "Don't be a litterbug." Trying to get kids to tell the truth? Rather than saying "Don't lie" saying "Don't be a liar" should be more effective.

The impact of turning actions into identities, though, goes far beyond persuasion. Imagine I told you about two people: Rebecca and

Fred. Rebecca goes running and Fred is a runner. Who do you think likes running more?

There are many ways to say the same thing. Someone who has left leaning political beliefs, for example, could be described as being "liberal" or being "a liberal." Someone who likes dogs a lot could be described as "loving dogs" or being "a dog lover."

These may seem like small variations, but in each case, the latter evokes a category. If someone is described as liberal, that adjective suggests they hold left leaning beliefs. But describing someone as "a liberal" suggests they fall into a particular group or type. They are a member of a specific set of people, which suggests something more permanent.

Working on a resume and want to show how dedicated you are? Don't just describe yourself as being hard-working. Saying you're a hard-worker should lead to more favorable impressions. Want to help a colleague get promoted? Describing them as an innovator rather than innovative, should make them more likely to be considered.

How do we know all this? From the new science of language. Technological advances in natural language processing, computational linguistics, and machine learning, combined with the digitization of everything from cover letters to conversations, have revolutionized our ability to analyze language, yielding unprecedented insights.

Turning actions into identities is just one insight gained from the power of magic words, but there are dozens more.

Speak with Certainty

Look at great leaders, powerful orators, or famous startup founders, for example, and they're often seen as quite charismatic. Whenever they

open their mouths, people listen. They're great salespeople, have an amazing ability to make complex things simple, and can motivate any audience to take action.

But looking across such individuals, they often have a particular thing in common: They speak with a great deal of certainty. They say that answers are *unambiguous*, results are *guaranteed*, and a certain course of action will *definitely* work. Even in a domain like financial advising, for example, where objective performance is paramount, research finds that people prefer advisors who express greater certainty.

When people speak with certainty, listeners are more likely to think they're right. Which advisor will do the best job? It's hard to know for sure, but if one speaks with certainty, it's harder to believe they could be wrong. After all, they just seem so confident.

Rather than speaking with certainty, though, most of us do the opposite. Whether leading a team, for example, or pitching a client, we often hedge what we're saying. We say things like "this solution *might* work," "*I think* this strategy will be effective," or "it *seems to me* like this is the best course of action."

And while hedging can be beneficial in some ways, it often decreases our impact. Qualifying statements make listeners less likely to follow our advice or adopt a recommended course of action. Hedging hurts because it makes communicators seem less confident.

Does that mean we should never hedge? No. But it certainly means we should use them more deliberately. If the goal is to signal uncertainty, great, but sometimes we're so used to qualifying statements that we toss in a hedge just because. And that's a mistake.

There are also particular types of hedges we can use to signal uncertainty without hurting persuasion. Compared to general hedges (e.g., "it *seems* like this will work"), for example, our research finds that personal hedges (i.e., "it *seems to me* like this will work") are more persuasive because they convey confidence. They suggest the communicator is confident enough to associate what they're saying with themselves, which makes others more likely to listen.

Similarly, if the goal is to convey certainty, use definites instead. Saying a person is *essential*, a strategy is *obviously* impactful, or course of action is *clearly* the best all remove any shred of doubt.

Definites suggest that things are 110% clear. The speaker is confident and that the course of action is obvious. Making listeners more likely to follow them, and whatever they suggest doing.

The Power of "You"

Even a simple word like *you* can have powerful effects.

A few years ago, a big technology company asked me to analyze their social media posts to figure out what was working and what wasn't. Automated textual analysis of thousands of posts found that words like *you* increased engagement. Posts that used *you*, or other second person pronouns like *yourself*, were liked more and received more comments.

We found that words like "you" can act as a stop sign, flagging something as relevant and worthy of attention. Whether online on social media, or offline in one-to-one conversations or meetings, *you* makes audiences feel like someone is speaking directly to them, so they're more likely to stop what they're doing and listen.

But when we performed a similar analysis on customer support articles (e.g., pages on how to set up a new laptop, or troubleshoot a device), we found that words like *you* had the opposite effect. There, *you* hurt rather than helped, making readers feel like content was less helpful.

Because while *you* suggests information is personally relevant, it can also suggest responsibility or blame. Compared to "if the printer isn't working..." for example, saying "if *you* can't get the printer to work..." suggests that the printer not working is somehow the user's fault. That the problem lies not with the printer, but with the user who can't seem to get it to do what it's supposed to.

Not surprisingly, then, while *you* helps on social media by drawing attention, it hurts in customer support pages where it can suggest the user is at fault. Words not only convey information, they signal who is in control, and who is responsible, in both good ways and bad.

Questions like "Did you check when the paperwork is due?" or "Did you feed the dog?" can feel accusatory. The intent may be benign, just a request for information, but they easily be interpreted differently. Who said it was *my* responsibility, or why wouldn't *I* take care of it?

A subtle shift (e.g., "Has the paperwork been submitted?") is less likely to generate blowback. By focusing on the action, rather than the actor, it removes any suggestion of reproach. I'm not suggesting it's *your* job, I just want to find out whether it happened so I can do it if it hasn't.

Same with statements like "I wanted to talk, but you were busy." The statement may be true. We wanted to talk, and the other person was busy. But phrased that way suggests someone is to blame. That not only is it bad they were busy, but it's their fault the conversation didn't occur.

Dropping the *you,* and switching to something like "I wanted to talk but it didn't seem like the best time," avoids any finger pointing. Now it's clear that it's no one's fault, and we seem caring rather than demanding. Avoiding accusatory *yous* helps avoid placing unintended blame.

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Some people are great speakers. When they open their mouths, everybody listens. Other people are great writers. They have a magical way with words, capturing our imagination, and holding our attention.

But what about the rest of us? Are we just out of luck?

Not quite. Because being a great writer or speaker isn't just something you're born with, it's something you can learn how to do. Words have an amazing impact. And by understanding when, why, and how they work, we can use them to increase ours.

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