

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF

COPYWRITING



How to choose the right
words and syntax

Nick Kolenda

The Psychology of Copywriting: How to Choose the Right Words and Syntax

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Vividness



Choose Words That Are Easy to Imagine

Help customers imagine the benefits they would receive from your product.

Help customers visualize an experience.

For example, describe cookies in terms of “bags” or “pieces” (rather than “ounces” or “grams”; Monnier & Thomas, 2022).

Or write concrete instructions:

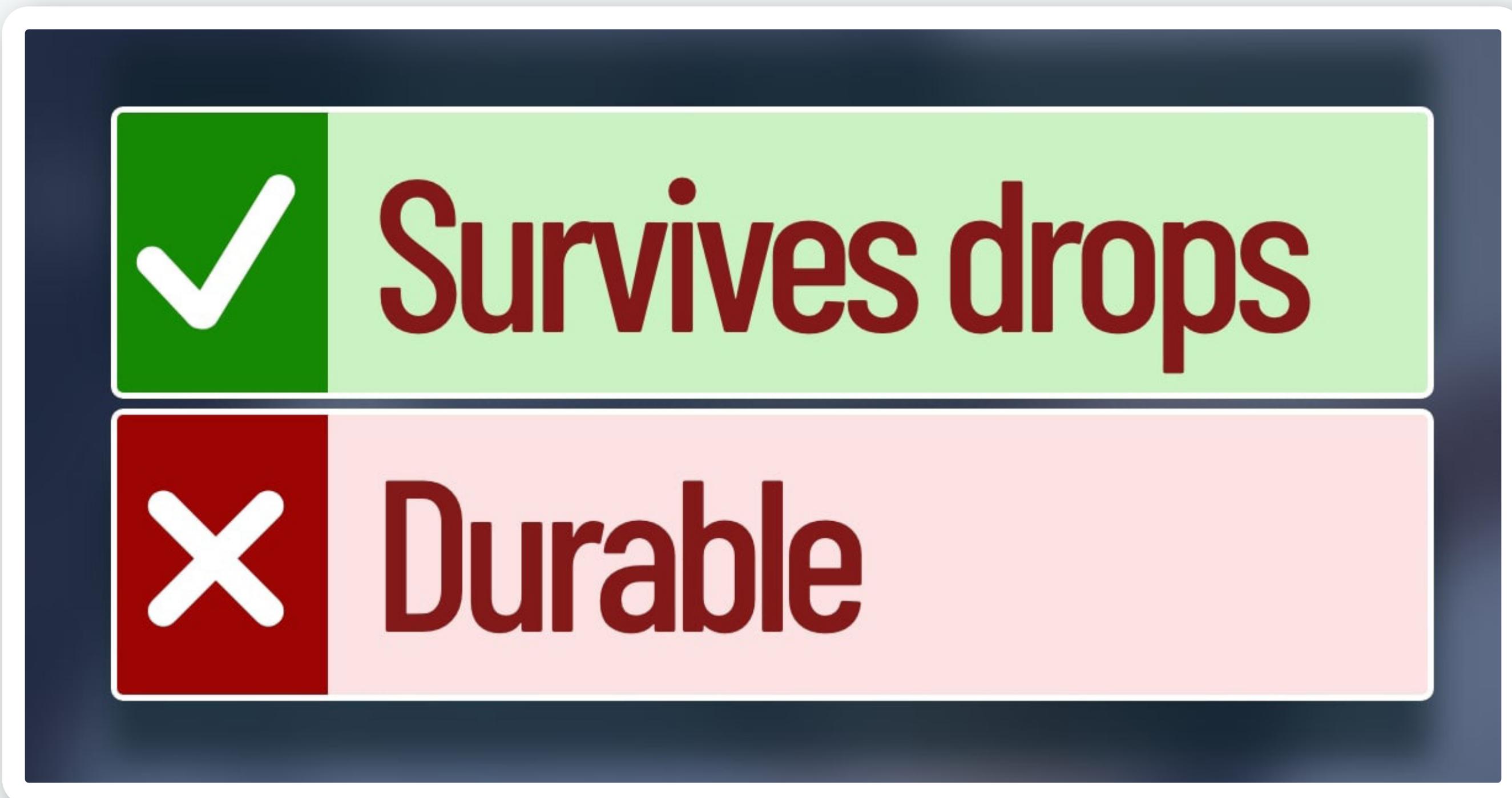
- » **Vague:** Sign up for an account
- » **Concrete:** Create a username and password

Apply this technique in your own life. Stop writing vague tasks in your calendar: What does “study” mean? Memorize notecards? Read a textbook?

Instead, write a concrete task – *Review past exams* – so that you can visualize this behavior. If you can visualize the behavior, it will seem easier to do.

Monnier, A., & Thomas, M. (2022). Experiential and Analytical Price Evaluations: How Experiential Product Description Affects Prices. *Journal of Consumer Research*.





Replace Vague Benefits With Concrete Examples

Vague benefits are difficult to imagine.

Try visualizing those words: *quality, powerful, high-performance, fast, easy, reliable, durable, revolutionary, premier, best, excellent*

You're probably struggling because each word has different interpretations. The term "durable" can mean:

- » **Material:** Is it strong material? How strong?
- » **Impact:** Can it withstand damage? How much damage?
- » **Weight:** Is it heavy? Or stable?
- » **Lifespan:** Will the product last? How long?

Write concrete benefits that portray a single idea. Why is your software "easy" to use? Does it offer minimal features? Is the interface beautiful? Is the onboarding quick? Can you automate tasks? Can novices use it?





Tailor Your Words to the Scenario

Customized responses are more persuasive.

While chatting with customer support, you might hear: *I can't add a new product to your order. But you can cancel the current order, and then add a new item.*

But this specialist should customize these examples: *I can't add those jeans to your order. But you can cancel the shoes, and then add the jeans to your order.*

Custom responses are more persuasive (Packard & Berger, 2021).

Or consider a clothing store. If a customer is trying a shirt, the salesperson could say:

- » **THAT** looks great!
- » That **TOP** looks great!
- » That **SHIRT** looks great!
- » That **GREEN TEE-SHIRT** looks great!

Each subsequent example instills a more concrete image.





Look for placeholder words in your copy, and replace them:

- » **Vague:** This *service* can...
- » **Concrete:** This *website audit* can...

Packard, G., & Berger, J. (2021). How concrete language shapes customer satisfaction. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 47(5), 787-806.





Offer Relevant Applications of a Product

Concrete examples (e.g., leftovers) are more persuasive than broad examples (e.g., food).

Compare these two insurance plans:

- » Death by terrorism
- » Death by any reason

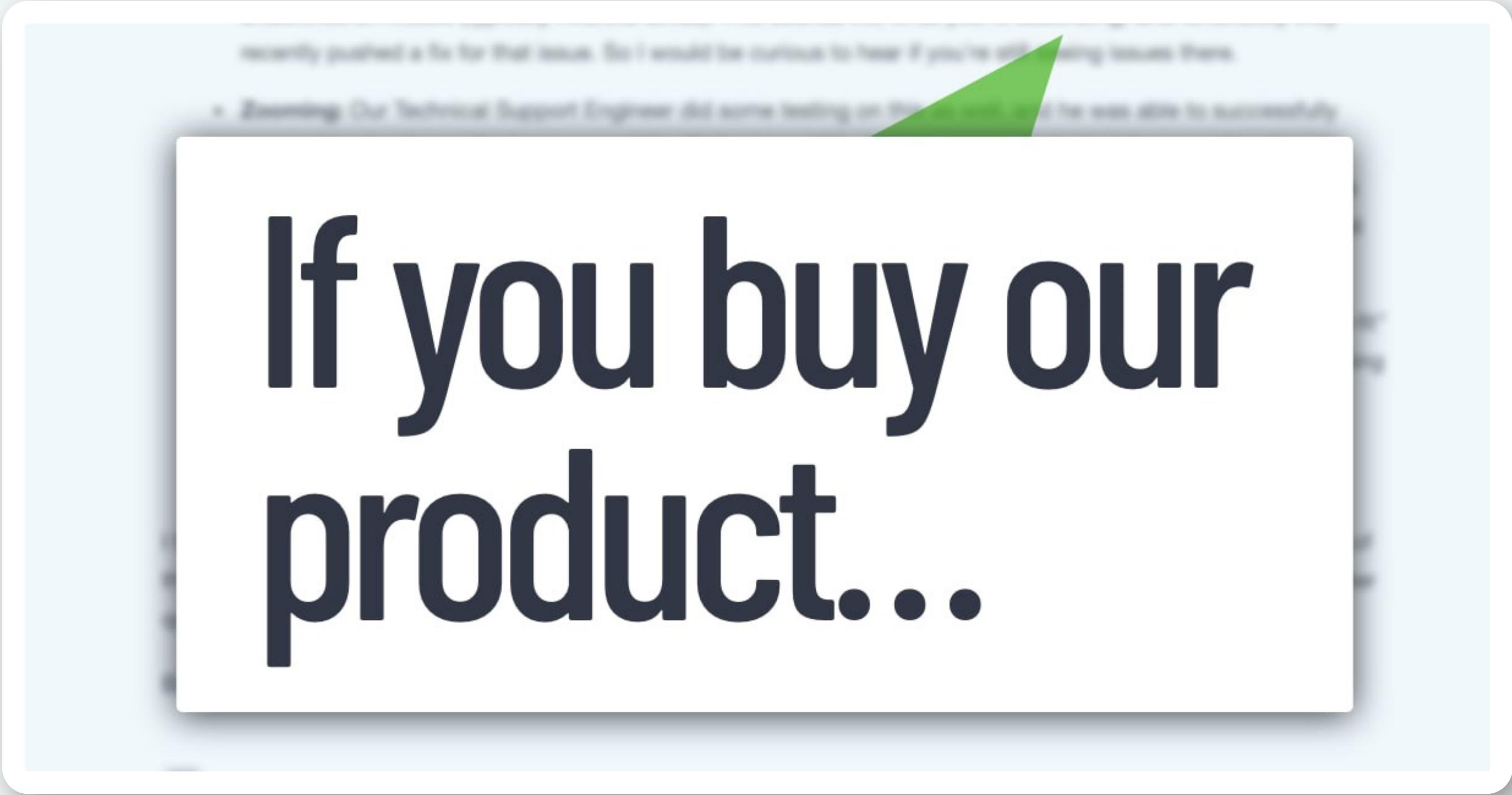
The second plan is economically better, but people preferred the first plan because they could imagine this scenario (Johnson, Hershey, Meszaros, & Kunreuther, 1993).

Selling food containers? Don't force customers to think of applications. Replace "food" with concrete examples: *soups, sauces, stews, meats, fruits, veggies*.

Selling copywriting services? You might list broad services - *landing pages, product descriptions, emails* – but these applications are insufficient because customers still need to think of examples. Mention specific types of emails: *product launches, onboarding sequences, promotional discounts, newsletters*.

Johnson, E. J., Hershey, J., Meszaros, J., & Kunreuther, H. (1993). Framing, probability distortions, and insurance decisions. *Journal of risk and uncertainty*, 7(1), 35-51.





recently published in the New York Times. But I would like continue to know if you're still buying issues there.

» Download Our Technical Support Engineer did some testing on this weekend and he was able to successfully...

If you buy our product...

Immerse Readers into the Hypothetical Behavior

Depict a hypothetical scenario of the desired action.

Read this sentence:

- » If you win the lottery, what would you do?

The IF portion is hypothetical, but winning the lottery now feels more realistic because you imagined this scenario.

... if-then statements trigger a mental simulation process in which people suppose the antecedent (if statement) to be true and evaluate the consequent (then statement) in that context . . . evaluating a conditional will heighten belief in its antecedent more than in its consequent (Hadjichristidis et al., 2007, p. 2052).

Running a giveaway contest? Ask people what they would do if they won the prize or money. This imagery will entice them to participate because they will feel more likely to win.

But this technique can work in any scenario:

- » If you watch this course...
- » If you work with our team...
- » If you create an account...

Hadjichristidis, C., Handley, S. J., Sloman, S. A., Evans, J. S. B., Over, D. E., & Stevenson, R. J. (2007). Iffy beliefs: Conditional thinking and belief change. *Memory & cognition*, 35(8), 2052-2059.





Depict Information With Positive Frames

Negative frames instill a mental image of the negative event.

Negative frames depict the *absence* of events. Our product:

- » ...doesn't leak.
- » ...has no BPA.
- » ...won't scratch your car.

Good intentions? Yes. Persuasive? No.

Negative frames are harmful because they depict the negative event (Jacoby, Nelson, & Hoyer, 1982). It resembles the phrase: *Don't think of a pink elephant*. People read the previous sentence by imagining a pink elephant.

Instead, write sentences that depict pleasant events.

- » **Negative:** Our cream won't hurt your skin.
- » **Positive:** Our cream is soft and gentle on your skin.

If you need to mention the absence of an unpleasant event, morph this word into a positive framing:

- » Leak-proof
- » BPA-free
- » Scratch-free

“Doesn’t leak” generates an image of something leaking, but “leak-proof” generates an image of durable material.



Jacoby, J., Nelson, M. C., & Hoyer, W. D. (1982). Corrective advertising and affirmative disclosure statements: their potential for confusing and misleading the consumer. *Journal of Marketing*, 46(1), 61-72.





Distribute Semantically Related Words

Each word will strengthen activation for the related words.

Your brain is a web of knowledge. Activating one concept will activate concepts that are connected to it (Collins & Loftus, 1975).

Read these words: DEEP, SALTY, FOAM

These ideas are related to SEA. While reading those words, you activated the concept of SEA because of “spreading activation” (Topolinski & Strack, 2008).

Apply this idea in your writing. In the previous sentence, I could replace “idea” with “technique” because technique has a stronger relationship with the term “apply.”

Fill your sentences with semantically related words so that every concept becomes more activated. Selling a coffee brewer? You could say:

- » If you make coffee...
- » If you brew coffee...

Not only is “brew” more vivid, but it also relates to “coffee.” Reading “brew” activates the idea of “coffee” even before you reach this word. This syntax will be easier to read, more enjoyable, and more truthful (see Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009).

Alter, A. L., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2009). Uniting the tribes of fluency to form a metacognitive nation. *Personality and social psychology review*, 13(3), 219-235.



- Collins, A. M., & Loftus, E. F. (1975). A spreading-activation theory of semantic processing. *Psychological review*, 82(6), 407.
- Topolinski, S., & Strack, F. (2008). Where there's a will—there's no intuition. The unintentional basis of semantic coherence judgments. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 58(4), 1032-1048.





Remove Meaningless Words From Product Descriptions

Products seem more expensive (yet worse in quality) when described with unfamiliar words.

Do you know what *zal* means? Me neither.

Researchers found that meaningless descriptions (e.g., *zal* fried chicken) reduced sales. These products seemed more expensive, yet worse in quality (Baskin, & Liu, 2021).

It's not just *zal*. Marketers sprinkle impressive words (e.g., *industrial*, *disruptive*, *esoteric*) in their copy, yet these words remain meaningless to many customers.

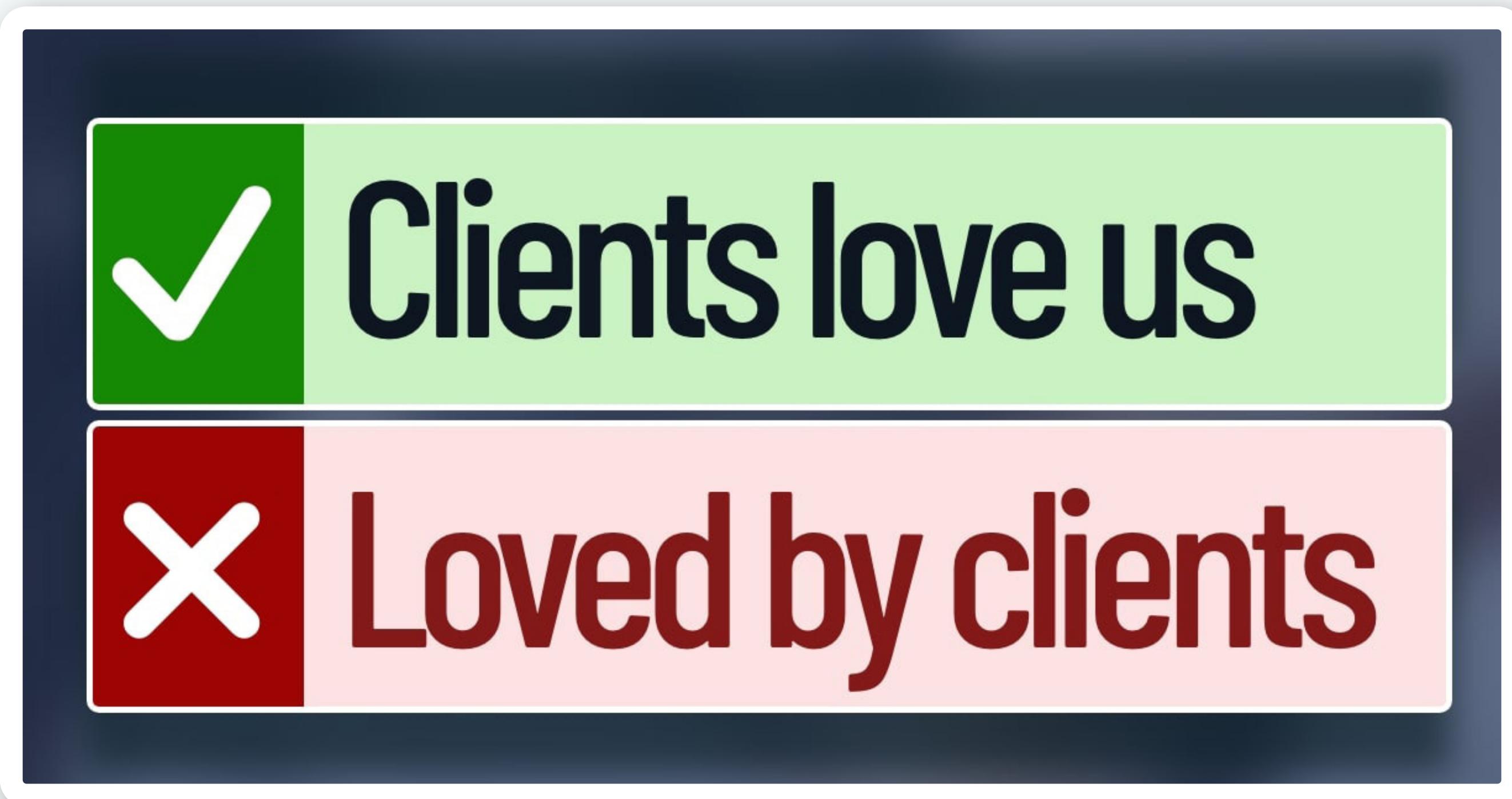
Exceptions might exist, but you could probably remove these words from your materials:

- » **Beverage:** *full-bodied*
- » **Restaurant:** *artisanal*
- » **Furniture:** *industrial*
- » **Tech:** *disruptive*
- » **Fashion:** *esoteric*
- » **Beauty:** *opulent*
- » **Household:** *eco-friendly*
- » **Luxury:** *avant-garde*

Baskin, E., & Liu, P. J. (2021). Meaningless descriptors increase price judgments and decrease quality judgments. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 31(2), 283-300.



Continuity



Construct Sentences With Active Voice

Active sentences position causes before effects. This sequence matches our real-world experience.

Active sentences unfold seamlessly with each new word.

- » **Active:** Tim hugged Greg.
- » **Passive:** Greg was hugged by Tim.

Passive sentences unfold in reverse. They require an ambiguous placeholder for the subject:



Passive voice can be helpful when you need to emphasize the object of a sentence. Otherwise, write active sentences.

Likewise, begin sentences with something concrete. Avoid



vague words:

- » There are _____
- » This is _____

Vague words are hazy and intangible, obscuring the subject of the sentence.



ndry, and you ne

Bind Sentences With Connective Words

Connective words maintain the flow of mental imagery.

“Coherence markers” bind sentences together:

- » **Additive:** *and, or*
- » **Temporal:** *then, next*
- » **Adversative:** *but, though*
- » **Causal:** *because, so*

Without them, sentences remain disconnected from each other.

Researchers compared two ads for Dove:

- » **No Markers:** Your skin’s natural oils keep it silky and supple. As you age, it becomes less elastic and the production of oil slows down. Aging can cause dull, dehydrated skin.
- » **Coherence Markers:** Your skin’s natural oils keep it silky and supple. **But** as you age, your skin becomes less elastic and the production of oil slows down. **That is why** aging can cause dull, dehydrated skin.

Readers preferred the second version (Kamalski, 2007).

Causal markers (*because, so*) are especially persuasive because they signal justification. Many people operate on autopilot – subconsciously, they look for words like “because” to determine whether a behavior is justified (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978).



Kamalski, J. (2007). Coherence Marking, Comprehension and Persuasion on the processing and representations of discourse (Doctoral dissertation, Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics).

Langer, E. J., Blank, A., & Chanowitz, B. (1978). The mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action: The role of "placebic" information in interpersonal interaction. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 36(6), 635.



—. This —



Begin Sentences With the Previous Object

Start sentences by referencing the preceding object.

Read these sentences:

- » The knife is in front of the pot. The glass is behind the dish. The pot is on the left of the glass.

Confusing, right? Each sentence requires a new mental image.

But if we swap the last two sentences:

- » The knife is in front of the pot. The pot is on the left of the glass. The glass is behind the dish.

Much better. A single narrative is unfolding across these sentences.

... subjects try to integrate each incoming sentence into a single coherent mental model (Ehrlich & Johnson-Laird, 1982, p. 296).

Ehrlich, K., & Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1982). Spatial descriptions and referential continuity. *Journal of verbal learning and verbal behavior*, 21(3), 296-306.





Constrain Your Writing to a Single Interpretation

Arrange your words so that only one interpretation is possible.

Read the bold portion from this description of a kitchen bundle:

*From a microwave oven, coffee maker, mini refrigerator, serveware and utility cart to help you **prepare and serve food** to wall decals, rugs and letterboards to bring decorative flair to your space, this dorm room kitchen collection ensures your limited space is effectively utilized.*

That bold portion translates into this image:



Arrange your words so that one – *and only one* – interpretation is possible. Otherwise, readers need to decipher the intended meaning, which slows their reading speed.



Framing

About

Who We Help

Contact

Teachers

Trainers

Students

Isolate Segments With Different Needs

Create separate pages for each customer segment to address their specific needs.

Customers buy kitchen appliances for different reasons:
Some want functionality, others want aesthetics.

However, dilution effects occur. Describing the aesthetics of your blender weakens the perceived benefits of your functionality.

To solve this problem, either:

- » Create different brands for each segment.
- » Push segments toward different pages.

Do you sell presentation software?

Keep your copy laser-focused on specific needs. Create pages for teachers, managers, speakers, students, and other segments so that everyone is directed to a page that addresses their exact needs.



...but you
are free...

Emphasize Their Autonomy in the Decision

Customers resist if they believe you are trying to persuade them.

People engage in *psychological reactance*: If they sense that their freedom or autonomy is being restricted, they actively fight this restriction (Brehm, 1966).

To influence behavior, you need to obscure persuasive motives.

One solution is to emphasize their autonomy. People donated 4x more money after hearing the phrase: *but you are free to accept or refuse* (Guégen & Pascual, 2000).

Brehm, J. W. (1966). A theory of psychological reactance.

Gueguen, N., & Pascual, A. (2000). Evocation of freedom and compliance: The "but you are free of..." technique. *Current research in social psychology*, 5(18), 264-270.





Describe Benefits Indirectly

Communicate safety with certifications and endorsements, rather than telling customer your product is safe.

Compare these sentences:

- » Tim was sitting in a soft chair.
- » Tim sank endlessly in his soft chair.

Each sentence has a different meaning:

- » **Tim was sitting in a soft chair.** This statement *asserts* that the chair is soft. In order to trust this statement, you need to trust the source of the message.
- » **Tim sank endlessly in his soft chair.** This statement *implies* that the chair is soft. Skeptical readers might assume that Tim didn't sink endlessly into his chair, but they are no longer questioning the softness of the chair.

Smart customers consider reciprocals of statements. Read this sentence:

- » Our product is safe

Customers needs to trust the marketer. Many customers will be skeptical of this source.

Instead, communicate safety with certifications, endorsements, and indirect language so that readers *infer* that your product is safe. If customers infer this safety, then *they* are the source of the message. Not the marketer.



Another example:

- » **Tide will clean your clothes really well.** Customers think: *Hmm, does it clean clothes really well? Can I trust this person?*
- » **The freshness of the outdoors. Now in liquid form.** Customers think: *Hmm, freshness of the outdoors? What does that mean? Must be brisk and refreshing.*

In the second example, readers generate the meaning. And, naturally, they trust themselves more than marketers.



recently published in the *Net Neut* issue. So I would be curious to hear if you're still seeing issues there.

- **Browsing:** Our Technical Support Engineers did some testing on this feature, and they were able to successfully zoom when testing on the browser, mobile, Outlook, and Mail clients. The conclusion is that the zoom functionality may be affected by the device it's being used on. And we're continuing to monitor all of these areas.

We **take longer**, but
we're **higher quality**.

Mention Drawbacks of the Behavior

Readers prefer “two-sided arguments” that describe benefits and drawbacks.

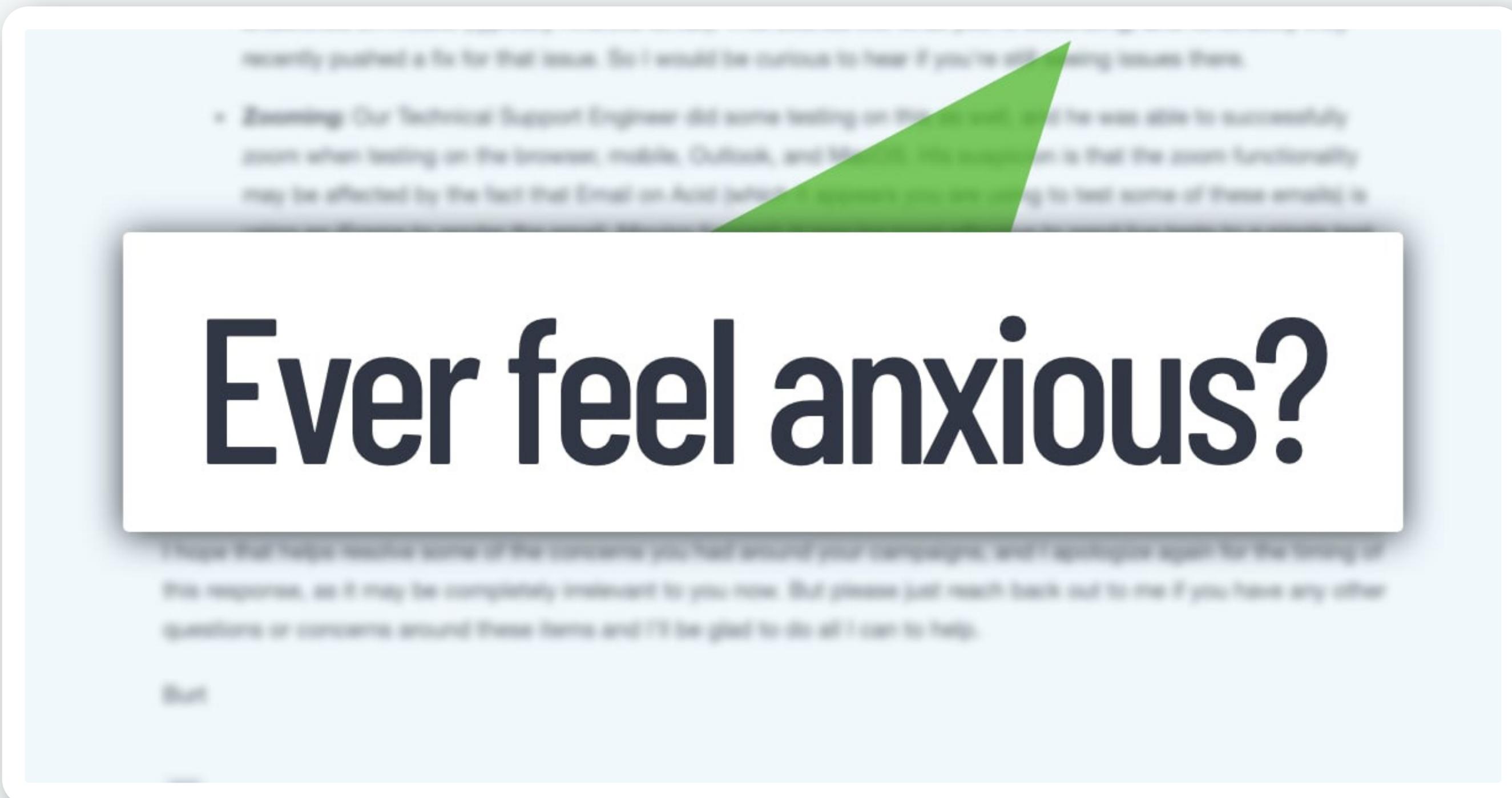
Amazon shows positive *and* negative reviews.



Readers feel more comfortable buying this product because the decision feels more cautious and informed (see Rucker, Petty, & Brinol, 2008).

Rucker, D. D., Petty, R. E., & Brñol, P. (2008). What's in a frame anyway?: A meta-cognitive analysis of the impact of one versus two sided message framing on attitude certainty. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 18(2), 137-149.





Ask Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are persuasive because they generate an implicit response.

Do you ever use rhetorical questions – like this one?

You should. They work (see Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981).

Rhetorical questions tend to invite a response from the message recipient, over or otherwise...[This] may increase the certainty of one's attitudes through an implicit response (Blankenship & Craig, 2006, p. 124)

Readers become more engaged, and they evaluate your message more carefully.

Blankenship, K. L., & Craig, T. Y. (2006). Rhetorical question use and resistance to persuasion: An attitude strength analysis. *Journal of language and social psychology*, 25(2), 111-128.

Petty, R. E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Heesacker, M. (1981). Effects of rhetorical questions on persuasion: A cognitive response analysis. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 40(3), 432.



**Wash your hands
to protect patients**

Demonstrate an Impact on Other People

Hospital staff were more likely to wash their hands when a message framed the benefits toward patients (vs. themselves).

Consider two messages in a hospital bathroom:

- » Hand hygiene prevents **you** from catching diseases.
- » Hand hygiene prevents **patients** from catching diseases.

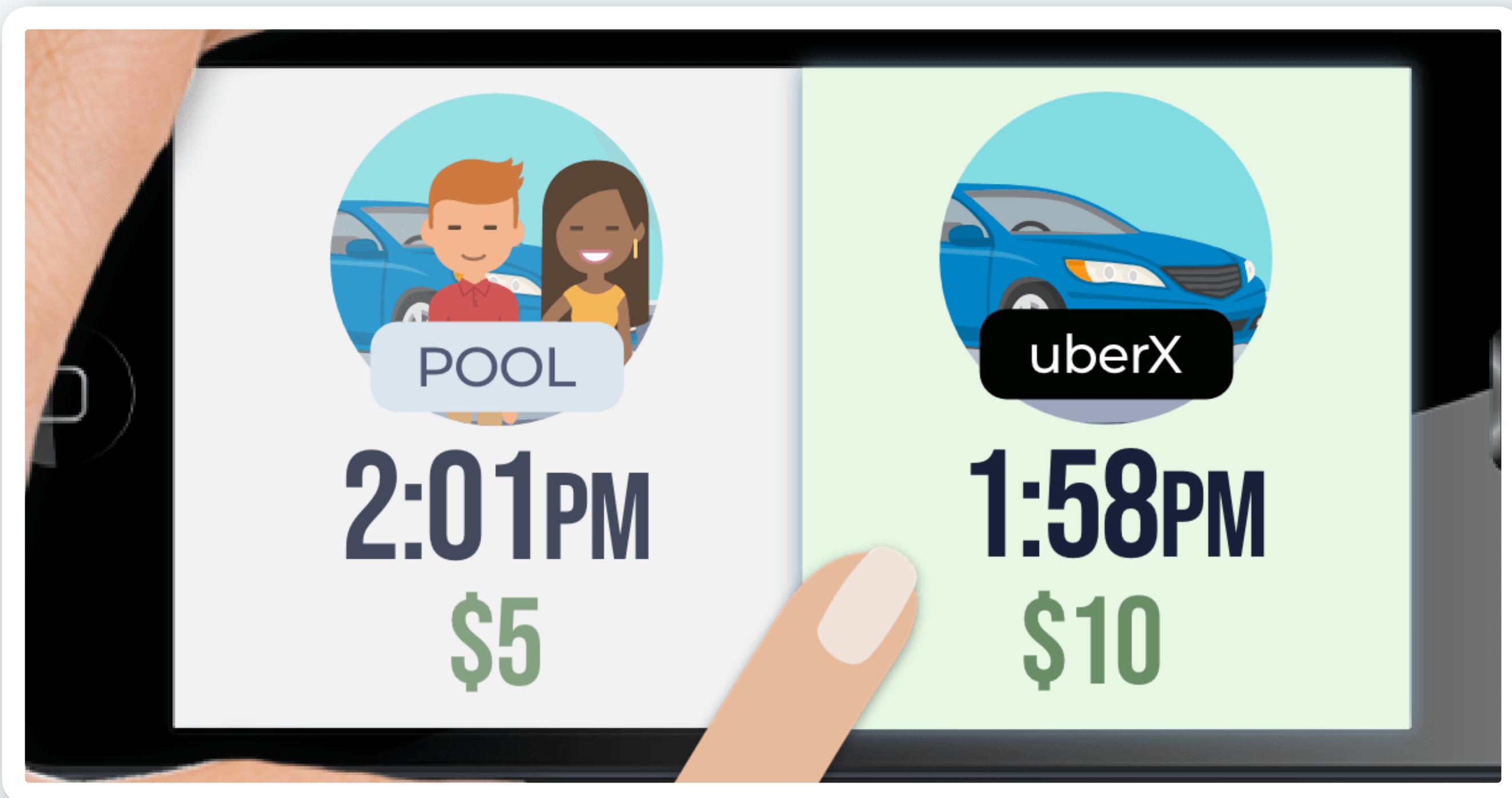
The second message was more effective (Grant & Hofmann, 2011).

People are optimistic. Even if your product will prevent something negative, people won't expect this negative event to occur. Your product will seem unnecessary.

Nobody expects a car accident to happen, so they might feel unmotivated to buy something that prevents one. Describe how this decision (or lack thereof) will impact other people. Suddenly readers are no longer gambling their own safety – they are gambling the safety of their family and loved ones.

Grant, A. M., & Hofmann, D. A. (2011). It's not all about me: Motivating hand hygiene among health care professionals by focusing on patients. *Psychological science*, 22(12), 1494-1499.





Keep Waiting Periods From Passing a Round Number

1:58 PM feels sooner than 2:01 PM

Researchers analyzed 1.8 million Uber rides, and they found that customers prefer UberX (the more expensive solo ride) if it arrives within the same hour (e.g., 1:58pm).

Crossing a time bracket (e.g., 2:01pm) feels longer, even if the difference is trivial (Donnelly, Compiani, & Evers, 2022).

This effect resembles “charm pricing” in which \$4.99 feels cheaper than \$5.00. Your brain overemphasizes the unit difference.



Much like a one-cent difference, a one-minute difference can be deceptively powerful.

In additional studies, those researchers confirmed that events seem longer when they span more time boundaries:

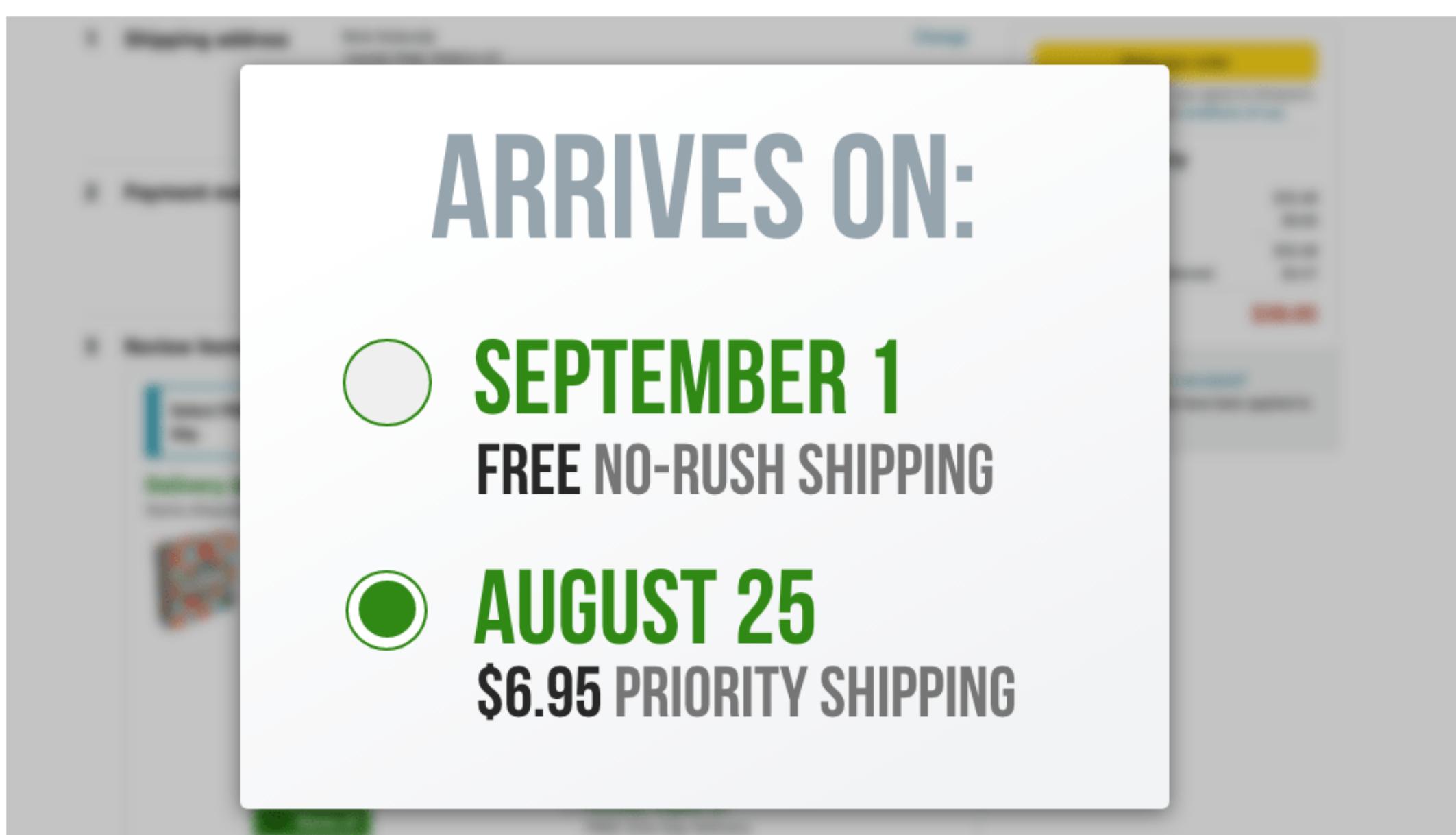


TIME SEEMS SHORTER	TIME SEEMS LONGER
7:00 – 9:30	7:30 – 10:00
3:00 – 5:15	2:45 – 5:00
3:00 – 4:45	2:45 – 4:30
10:00 – 12:30	10:30 – 1:00
1:00 – 5:30	1:30 – 6:00

Some actionable techniques:

1. Shipping

Suppose that today is August 23. If you buy something online, you might upgrade to expedited shipping so that your product arrives within August.



2. Store Hours

Perhaps you should extend store hours from 8:30pm to 9:00pm. This extra 30 minutes will feel like 60 minutes because it reaches a new time bracket.

3. Length of Benefits

Billing cycles align with time periods – for example, access to customer support might end on the final day of a month (e.g., August 31). Why not shift this timeline? Extending this benefit by a single day (e.g., September 1) could drastically raise the perceived value. It feels like an extra month.

4. See Results By

When will customers receive benefits? Frame this value within the current time bracket (e.g., end of the [month, quarter, year]).

Always frame the right category of time:

categories are quite flexible...the description “take off in the morning, be in your hotel before lunch” makes lunch a salient boundary and thus likely minimizes the difference between a 10:58 and 11:02 arrival. (Donnelly, Compiani, &



Evers, 2022, p. 837)

5. Meetings

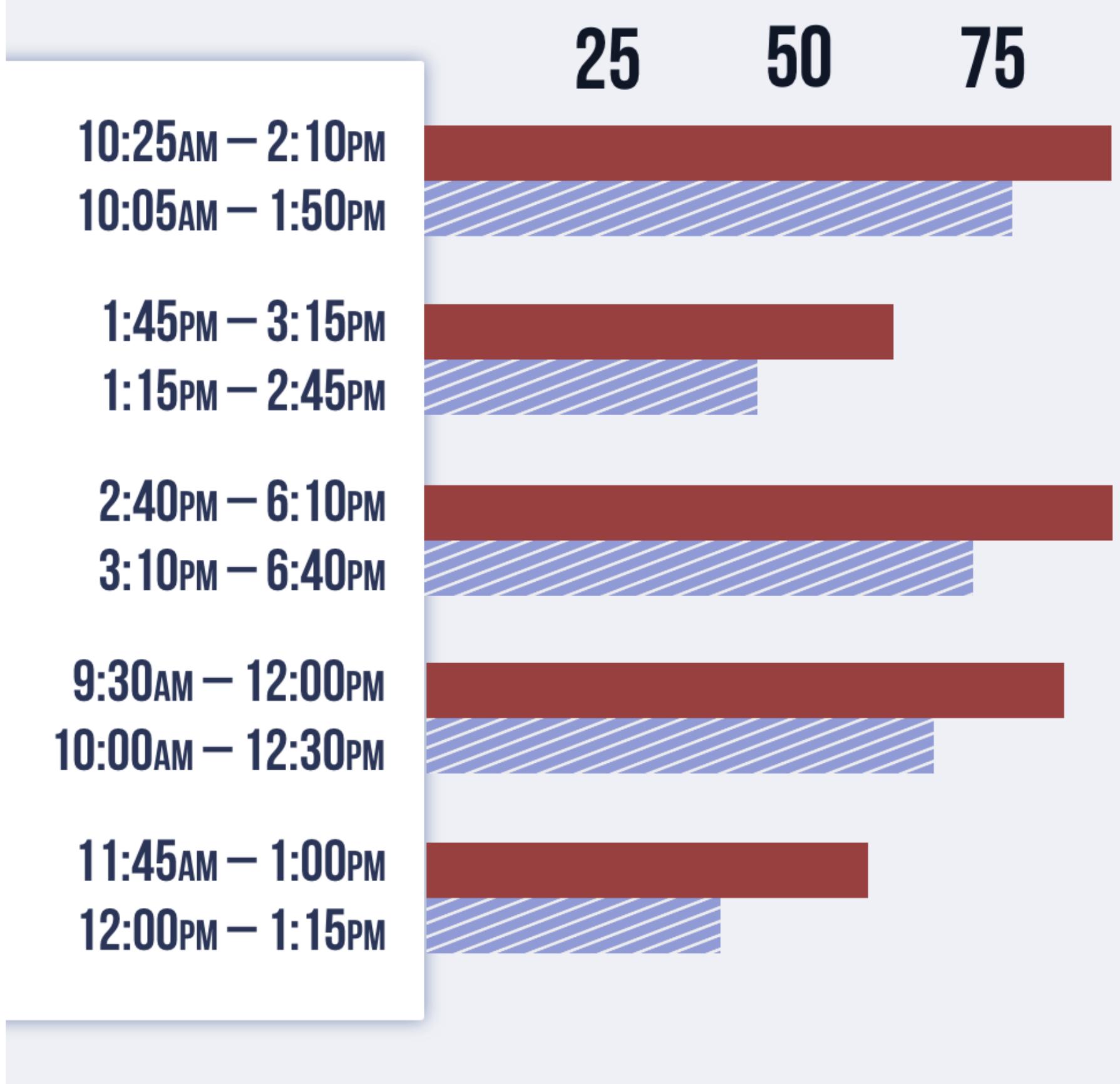
Scheduling a 45-min meeting?

Recipients will prefer 1:00pm to 1:45pm (vs. 1:30pm to 2:15pm).

However, meetings seem more productive when they span more time brackets. Workers in Amazon's Mechanical Turk estimated they could accomplish more tasks during these seemingly larger time windows.



"HOW MANY TASKS CAN YOU FINISH?"



6. Life Decisions

Would a 17-year old be tempted to pursue a 2-year degree that finishes in their teens? Would an 18-year-old be less intimidated by a 4-year degree because both options (2-year vs. 4-year) would end in their twenties?

Summary

Choose the right time brackets for events: Minimize brackets for negative events (e.g., layovers), but maximize them for



positive events (e.g., lunch break).

Donnelly, K., Compiani, G., & Evers, E. R. (2022). Time periods feel longer when they span more category boundaries: Evidence from the lab and the field. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 59(4), 821-839.





125% longer battery

⌚ **Feels like 25%**

"125% More" Feels Like "25% More"

A "more" percentage feels like an "of" percentage.

Customers believe that:

150% more than [number] = 150% of [number]

But these variations are different:

- » 150% of 100 = 150
- » 150% more than 100 = 250

Customers equate these statements, but they differ by a full 100 percent. That's why it's called the *Off by 100% Bias* (Fisher & Mormann, 2022).



Therefore, be careful with percentages that depict a relative change. Suppose that you increased a product's battery life from 4 hours to 9 hours.

- » **Don't say:** Battery lasts 125% longer.
- » **Say:** You doubled the battery life.

The latter is technically smaller, but it sounds bigger.



Fisher, M., & Mormann, M. (2022). The off by 100% bias: the effects of percentage changes greater than 100% on magnitude judgments and consumer choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 49(4), 561-573.





Choose the Right Type of Scarcity

Each type of scarcity (supply, demand, time) affects behavior in different ways.

Researchers analyzed 131 studies on scarcity, and they found that certain types of scarcity perform better with different products (Barton, Zlatevska, & Oppewal, 2022).

- » **Supply:** Restricting supply (e.g., limited editions) boosts sales for experiences and luxury brands because these products become status symbols.
- » **Demand:** “Only 2 left” communicates high demand and social proof, which boosts sales for rational products.
- » **Time:** Seasonality boosts sales of indulgences (e.g., chocolate) because customers can more easily rationalize these purchases (*Well, it's only available now...*). Deadlines are also effective for large purchases because customers feel motivated to begin researching the product.

Barton, B., Zlatevska, N., & Oppewal, H. (2022). Scarcity tactics in marketing: A meta-analysis of product scarcity effects on consumer purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing*, 98(4), 741-758.





Mention the Growing Popularity of a Behavior

People are more likely to comply with a request if they believe this behavior is growing in popularity.

Social norms are persuasive, but what if a behavior isn't popular?

For example, in the United States, less than 15% of people eat enough fruits and vegetables. Mentioning this small percentage will *discourage* people from eating fruits and vegetables because it points the social norm in the wrong direction.

A new technique – the *uptrend effect* – solves this hurdle. Simply mention the relative increase in people following a behavior (Costello, Garvey, Germann, & Wilkie, 2023).

Researchers offered free apples at an outdoor event.

Some participants saw a sign that said: "...the number of Americans eating enough fruit (2 servings/day) has been increasing over time!"

And it worked. People were more likely to take the fruit.

They replicated this effect across 7 studies, including a Facebook ad campaign.

Why does it work? Because people equate a growing trajectory with a large absolute size, even if the true size is small (e.g., 15% of people).

Costello, J. P., Garvey, A. M., Germann, F., & Wilkie, J. E. (2023). EXPRESS: The Uptrend



Effect: Encouraging Healthy Behaviors Through Greater Inferred Normativity.
Journal of Marketing Research, 00222437231167832.



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Linguistics

It's Easy: _____

↑
Short Sentence

Align the Semantic Meaning With Linguistic Meaning

If you want to depict something as easy,
your sentence should be easy to read.

Linguistic traits convey meaning.

For example, prices seem numerically larger if the font size is larger (Coulter & Coulter, 2005). You think: *Hmm, something feels big, It must be the price.*

Same with copywriting. Read this sentence from a coffee brewer:

- » The K-Mini® brewer is effortlessly simple to use - just add fresh water to the reservoir, pop in your favorite K-Cup® pod, press the brew button and enjoy fresh brewed, delicious coffee in minutes.

The message? Brewing coffee is simple. The problem? This sentence is long and complex.

If you want to portray a process as quick and simple, you need a sentence that – itself – is quick and simple. Like this version:

- » The K-Mini® brewer is simple to use: **Just add water, pop in your favorite pod, and press the brew button.** Enjoy fresh brewed, delicious coffee in minutes.

Readers will conceptualize the bold portion as the steps. And this portion feels much shorter than the previous version.

Always match your linguistic traits with the intended



meaning. **Want to portray...**

- » **...a variety of features?** Insert a variety of words.
- » **...consistent quality?** Repeat a phrase.
- » **...fun experience?** Insert words that are fun to say (e.g., *hullabaloo, bamboozle, whippersnapper*).

Coulter, K. S., & Coulter, R. A. (2005). Size does matter: The effects of magnitude representation congruity on price perceptions and purchase likelihood. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 15(1), 64-76.





Push Descriptive Words Closer to Their Referent

A chair seems softer when the words “chair” and “soft” are closer together.

You group objects that are close together:



Same with words. While reading sentences, you don't translate individual words into a mental image. You translate *clusters* of words.

For example, researchers tested language near a price: They placed “\$199” near the phrase “high-performance.” In this arrangement, readers translated the collective entity (\$199 *and* high) into a single image, which made the price seem higher (Coulter & Coulter, 2005).

Always consider the distance between words.

- » Customers find that the chair is comfortable.
- » Customers find the chair comfortable.

The chair seems more comfortable in the second version. Why? Because readers merge “chair” and “comfortable” into a cluster, and they translate this entity into a mental image. In the first version, these two words are separated from each other, so they generate distinct images.



Coulter, K. S., & Coulter, R. A. (2005). Size does matter: The effects of magnitude representation congruity on price perceptions and purchase likelihood. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 15(1), 64-76.





Bufferil Eases Pain

Sequence Words in Alphabetical Order

Something just feels right, and we attribute this feeling to the semantic meaning.

Read this slogan:

- » Bufferil eases pain

Subconsciously, this slogan feels pleasant because each word is positioned in alphabetical order (King & Auschaitrakul, 2020). Something just *feels right*, and you misattribute this feeling to the product.

King, D., & Auschaitrakul, S. (2020). Symbolic sequence effects on consumers' judgments of truth for brand claims. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 30(2), 304-313.



Was _____ing



Portray Actions With Imperfect Verbs

Imperfect verbs (e.g., was painting) are more vivid because they depict ongoing actions.

Compare these sentences:

- » John painted houses.
- » John was painting houses.

People who read “was painting” believe that John painted more houses (and spent more time painting; Matlock, 2011). “Painted” depicts the completed job, whereas “was painting” depicts the ongoing work.

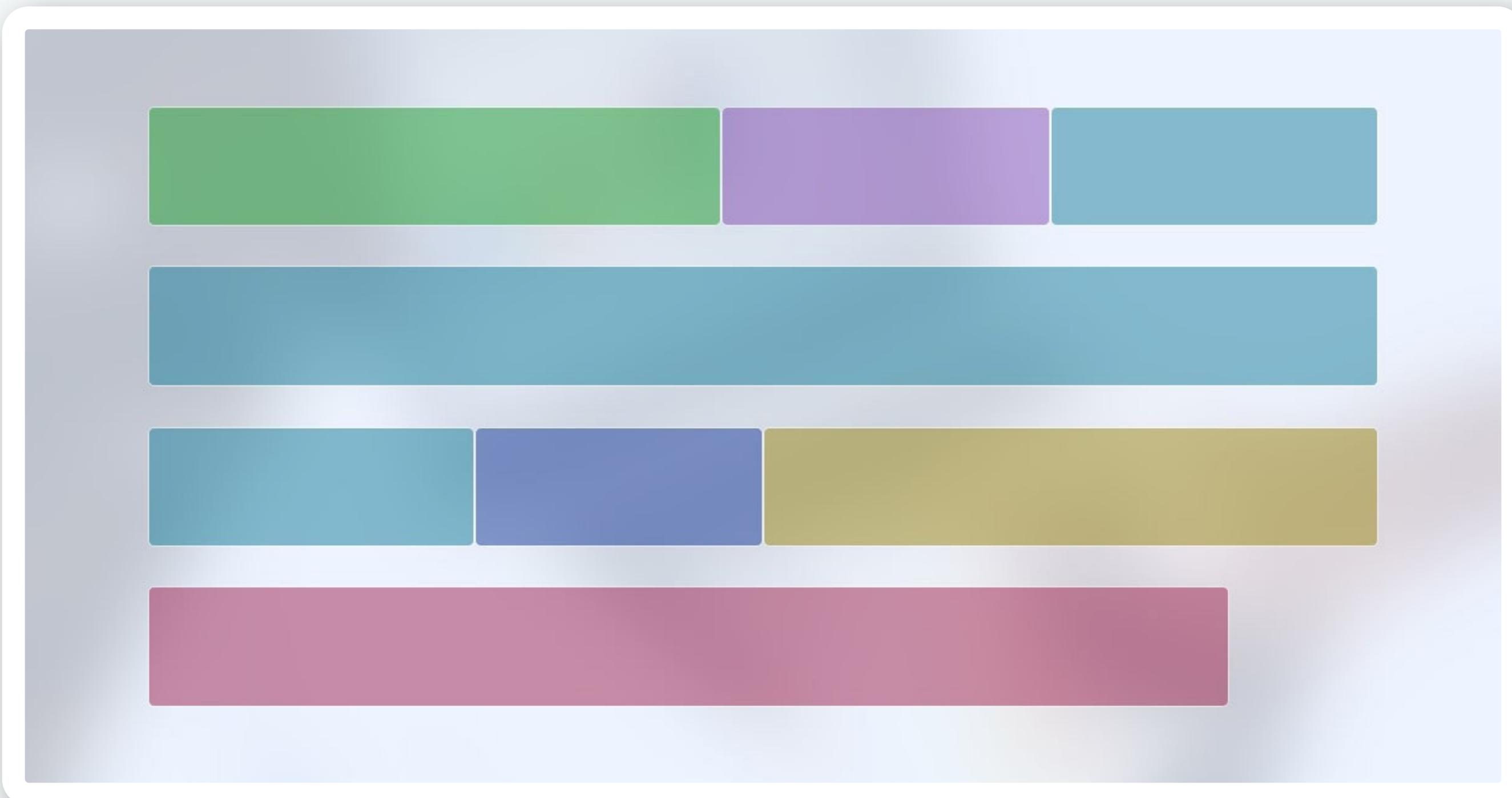
During a criminal trial, an attorney could say:

- » The defendant pointed the gun.
- » The defendant was pointing the gun.

If juries hear the second version, they’re more likely to convict because they can imagine the defendant pointing the gun.

Matlock, T. (2011). The conceptual motivation of aspect. *Motivation in Grammar and the Lexicon*, 27, 133.





Diversify Your Words, Syntax, and Emotions

Inject variety into your writing.

Eating the same food – even if you enjoy it – eventually becomes repetitive and boring (Rolls, Rolls, Rowe, & Sweeney, 1981).

Same with writing. Readers lose interest if they encounter the same linguistic traits, so inject variety:

- » **Words.** Readers prefer a mixture of words (Hosman, 2002).
- » **Lengths.** Let's write short sentences. Notice how the writing seems fine. Heck, it might seem engaging. But soon you'll notice something. This writing is becoming repetitive. Your brain wants a change. It wants a long sentence. These short sentences are boring. So let's write a long sentence. Notice how this long sentence feels refreshing and invigorating because of its lengthy prose—it feels like you're breathing air for the first time during this paragraph.
- » **Emotion.** Based on 4,000+ movies and 30,000+ articles, content is more successful when it shifts unpredictably between emotions (Berger, Kim, & Meyer, 2021).

Berger, J., Kim, Y. D., & Meyer, R. (2021). What makes content engaging? How emotional dynamics shape success. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 48(2), 235-250.

Hosman, L. A. (2002). Language and persuasion. *The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice*, 371-390.

Rolls, B. J., Rolls, E. T., Rowe, E. A., & Sweeney, K. (1981). Sensory specific satiety in man. *Physiology & behavior*, 27(1), 137-142.





Alternate the Phonetic Flow of Words

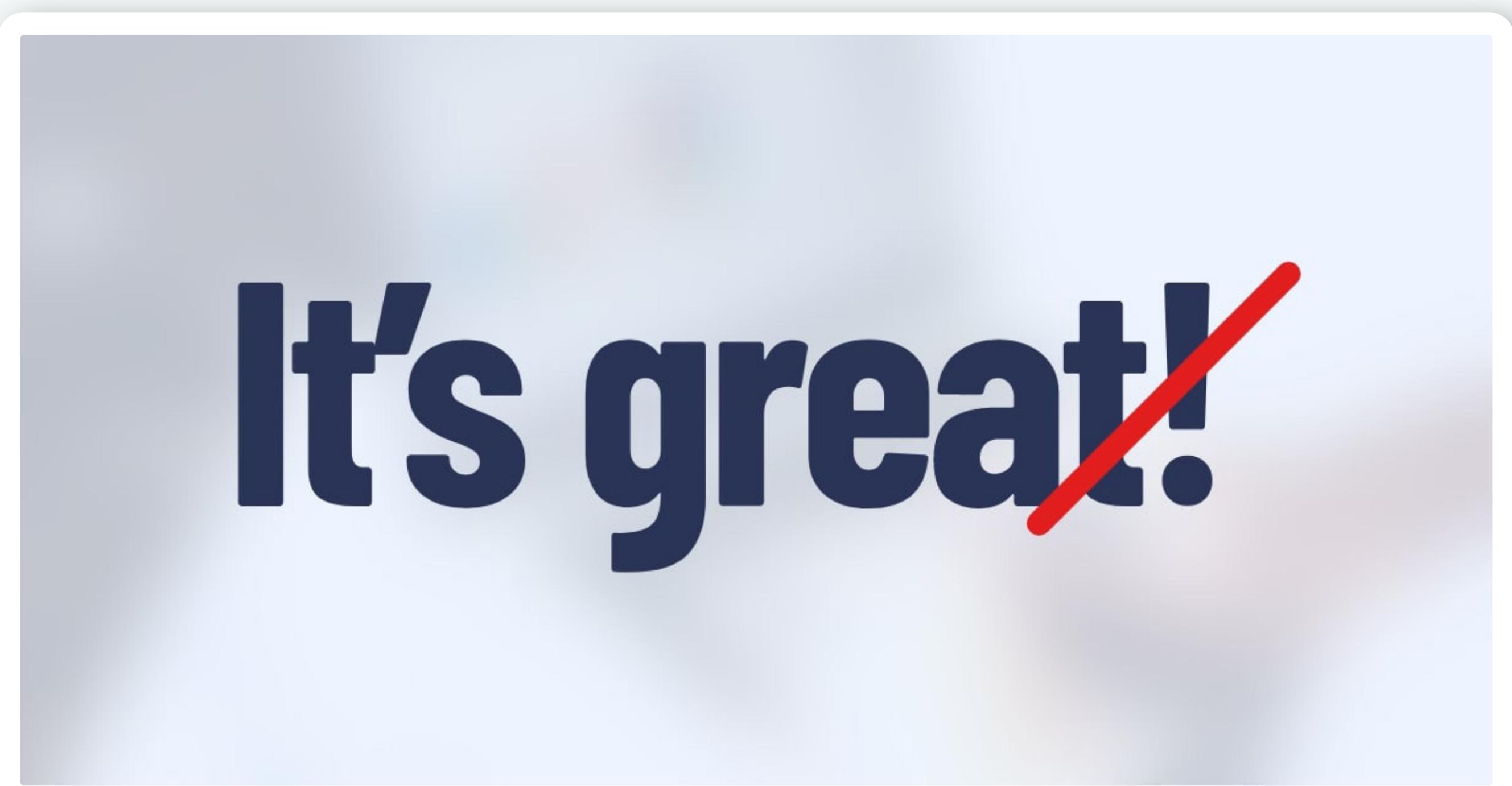
You read by speaking internally. If something is hard to say aloud – Red leather, yellow leather – it will be hard to read.

How can you write with flow? You should **AVOID**:

- » **Words with Similar Beginnings.** People are slower to read a sentence like: *The sparrow snatched the spider swiftly off the ceiling* (McCutchen, Bell, France, & Perfetti, 1991). This [patio set](#) includes “sling-style seating” and “space-saving storage” – which are examples to avoid.
- » **Words With Similar Endings.** You should avoid “sling seating” too because these words repeat the same -ing ending. “Sling chairs” would be better.
- » **Similar Adjoiners.** You should avoid “chairs sling” because these words share an “s” between them.
- » **Groups of Many Small Words.** Avoid a headline like: “Free you up to do the things you love.” It has a long string of small words.

McCutchen, D., Bell, L. C., France, I. M., & Perfetti, C. A. (1991). Phoneme-specific interference in reading: The tongue-twister effect revisited. *Reading Research Quarterly, 87-103.*





It's great!

Delete Exclamation Points

If you need an exclamation mark to convey excitement, your writing isn't exciting enough.

Your inner speech has vocal traits.

For example, you read slower or faster based on the author of the passage (and how fast they speak; Alexander & Nygaard, 2008).

Punctuation matters, too. Inner speech is more emphatic for exclamation points, which can sound weird in mundane contexts:

» I sat down!

It seems obvious, yet marketers insert these marks into mundane contexts – *Buy Now!* – to trigger excitement. Despite good intentions, this syntax can backfire because readers need to exclaim these trivial statements, which – inevitably – feels weird. Visitors then misattribute this negative emotion to the decision: *Hmm, something doesn't feel right. It must be the product.*

I would avoid exclamation marks altogether. Your writing should be strong enough to trigger the desired emotion without punctuation.

Alexander, J. D., & Nygaard, L. C. (2008). Reading voices and hearing text: Talker-specific auditory imagery in reading. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 34(2), 446.





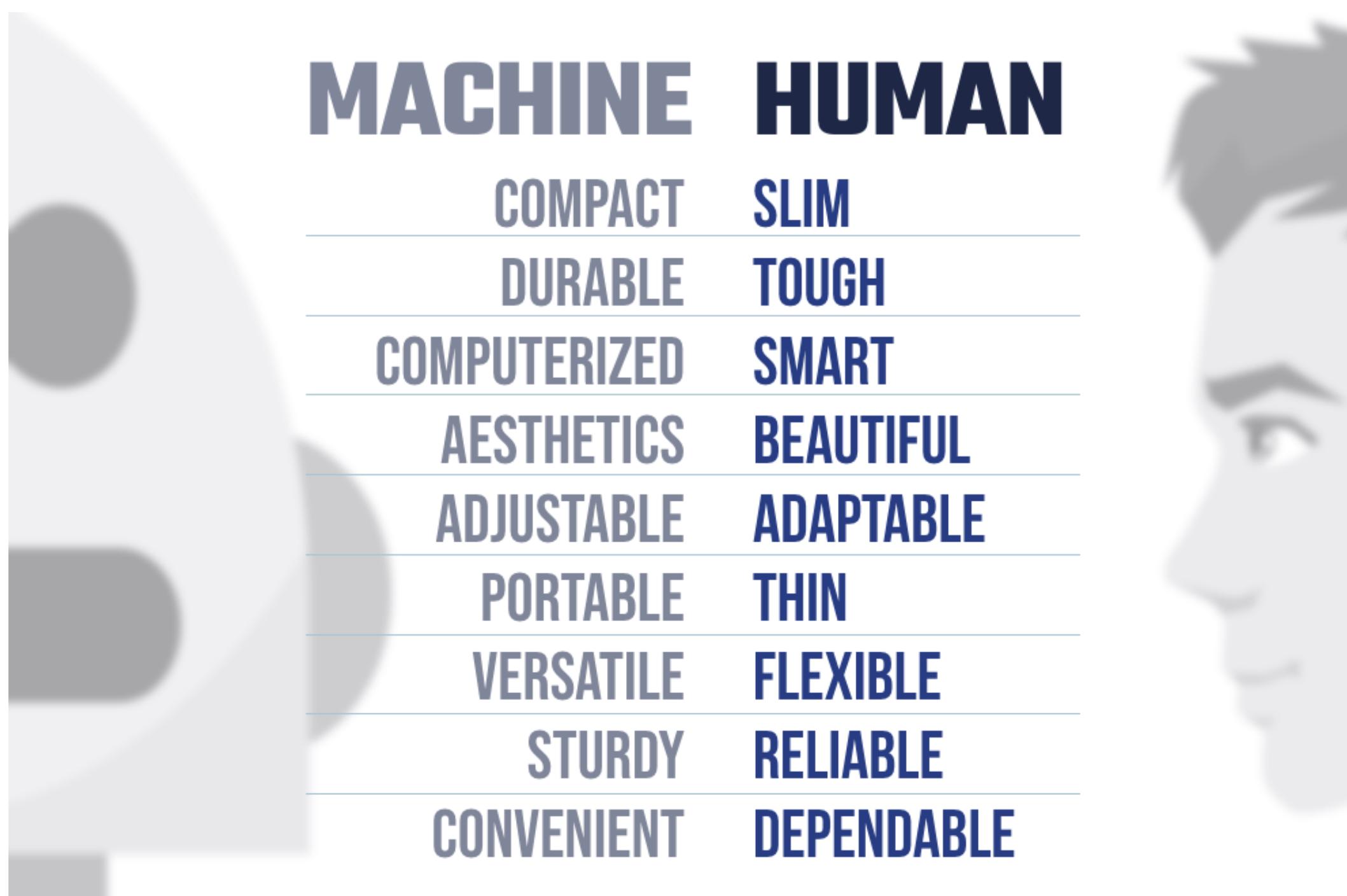
Existing Customers Prefer Humanlike Descriptions

Loyal customers prefer humanized words (e.g., intuitive, elegant) because they identify with these products.

Some marketers depict mechanical features (e.g., computerized phone) with human language (e.g., smartphone).

Mercedes-Benz depicts vehicles as “intelligent” and “daring,” while BMW depicts vehicles as “intuitive” and “elegant.”

Other examples:



MACHINE	HUMAN
COMPACT	SLIM
DURABLE	TOUGH
COMPUTERIZED	SMART
AESTHETICS	BEAUTIFUL
ADJUSTABLE	ADAPTABLE
PORTABLE	THIN
VERSATILE	FLEXIBLE
STURDY	RELIABLE
CONVENIENT	DEPENDABLE

Does this language really work? A recent study tested it.

In a Facebook ad that was shown 156,510 people, clicks were higher when the product — an iPhone — was described as strong and beautiful. Clicks were lower with mechanical terms, such as durable and dazzling (Weiss, 2022).

But the researcher found a caveat: This effect only worked for existing iPhone customers who identified with the brand.



Why? When customers become attached to a brand, they blur the boundaries between self and product. In other words, iPhone customers are grouping this phone inside their self-identity, endowing it with a human essence. Seeing a humanized description feels more natural because this framing matches their deeper conceptualization.

The takeaway? Loyal customers prefer humanized descriptions of products because their personal identity has fused with them. Deep inside their brain, these products feel human.

Weiss, L. (2022). Egocentric processing: The advantages of person-related features in consumers' product decisions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 49(2), 288-311.





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