



Plug-In Phrases Power Pack

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1. You Had Me At (X)	1
2. Born To (X)	6
3. No (X) Left Behind	11
4. Choose Your Weapon	16
5. (X) Is My Love Language	22
6. Not every idea for a T-Shirt is a T-Shirt Idea.	29
7. (X) Made Me Do It.	33

1. You Had Me At (x)

Originally from the film *Jerry Maguire* ("You Had Me At Hello") - this phrase has entered the popular consciousness, and is regularly remodeled.

For example - in TV series *Parks and Recs*:

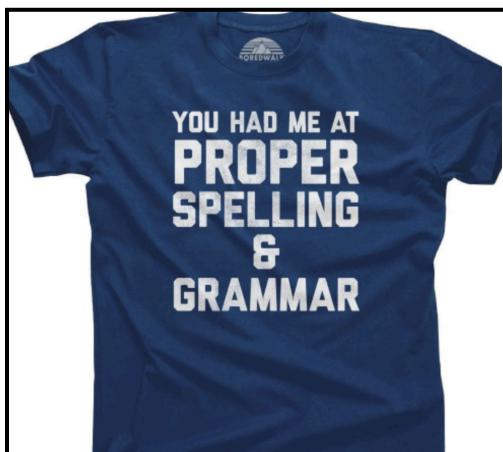


...and across plenty of simple T-Shirt designs...





...Through to more advanced T-Shirts...





How To Use It

Because it's an easily understood statement, many niches, hobbies or topics will simply work right off the bat (*literally, just drop it in*).

eg:

- You Had Me At **Tacos**
- You Had Me At **Knitting**
- You Had Me At **The Roman Empire**

But there's also a few easy ways you can take it to the next level...

1. Alliteration

As a short phrase, any word beginning with a "H" or "M" is going to help it roll off the tongue.

eg.

- You Had Me At **Merlot**
- You Had Me At **Haggis**

2. Overflow The Blank

People are expecting the phrase to end with 'Hello' - (about as short and abrupt a word as there is) - so ending instead with an *absurdly* long phrase / title / name or anything else creates a good juxtaposition (*see tank design above*).

eg.

- You Had Me At **Lofi hip hop mix- Beats to Relax/Study to**
- You Had Me At **Caesar Divi Nervae Filius Nerva Traianus Optimus Augustus**

3. Salutations

'Hello' is obviously a greeting or salutation - so are there any other 'greetings' or forms of salutation that your target market uses -or would recognise / appreciate? (*Don't forget different languages too*)

eg.

- You Had Me At **Hola**
- You Had Me At **Woof**
- You Had Me At **Hail Ceaser**
- You Had Me At **GM**

Bonus: Inversions

Finally - because the format of the phrase is so well known, we can 'invert' it to give us an additional framework:

You **Lost** Me At (X)

eg.

- You Lost Me At **Leviticus**
- You Lost Me At **Love Thy Neighbour**

(*simply drop in something your target market doesn't like - or doesn't understand or follow*).

2. Born To (X)

A simple little fill-in-the-blank framework with a lot of potential.

It's well known, and easily recognisable because of a few big hits:

- Born To Run (*Bruce Springsteen*)
- Born To Be Wild (*Steppenwolf*)
- Born To Die (*Lana Del Rey*)
- Born To Kill (*Movie / TV Series*)

And this phrase translates well to the world of T-Shirts - because it works as a phrase that 'labels' the wearer, or speaks with the wearer's 'voice' - eg. "*I was born to (X)*".

Here are a few examples following that '*Born to [VERB]*' model:





How To Use It

Find a **verb** related to your topic or niche - something your target wearer ‘does’ - and drop it in.

eg:

- Born To Hunt
- Born To Code
- Born To BBQ

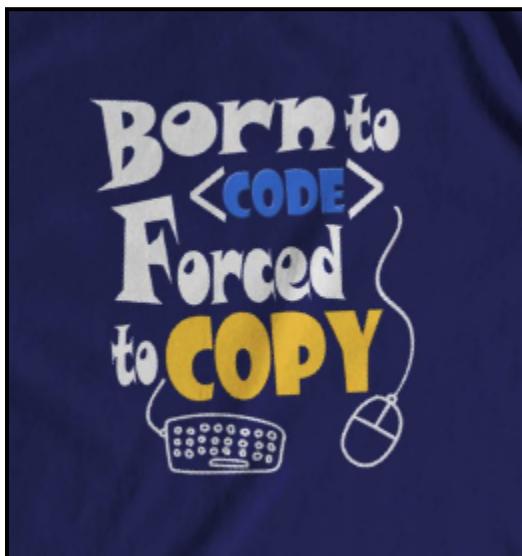
Bonus points for alliteration matches (*such as ‘Born To BBQ’ above*).

There’s also a ‘**Level 2**’ version of this phrase:

- Born To (X), Forced To (Y)

eg:





There are a couple of ways you can use this - the first is:

- Born To *{thing I like to do}*, Forced To *{Thing I don't like to do}*

eg.

- Born To Ride, Forced To Study
- Born To Farm, Forced To Go To Nursery (*that was a kids shirt I saw*)

- Born To **Cook**, Forced To Do The Dishes

It may help to first think of activities your target market or niche *doesn't like* to do - and that should help you fill out the rest.

For example, gardeners might say: '*Born To Plant, Forced To Weed*'.

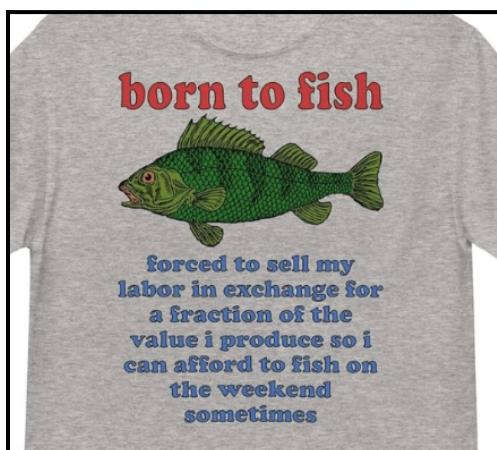
The second tactic - a little more left-field - is to find a 2-part phrase that you can squeeze into this framework.

eg.

- '*Keep Calm and Carry On*' → Born To **Keep Calm**, Forced To **Carry On**
- '*F Around And Find Out*' → Born To **F Around**, Forced To **Find Out**
- '*Talk Softly And Carry A Big Stick*' → Born To **Talk Softly**, Forced to **Carry A Big Stick**

And finally...

Because this phrase framework is so well known, you *could* try throwing in a lengthy diatribe or definition - instead of just a single word (*turning the 'short and sweet' nature of the phrase on its head*). eg:

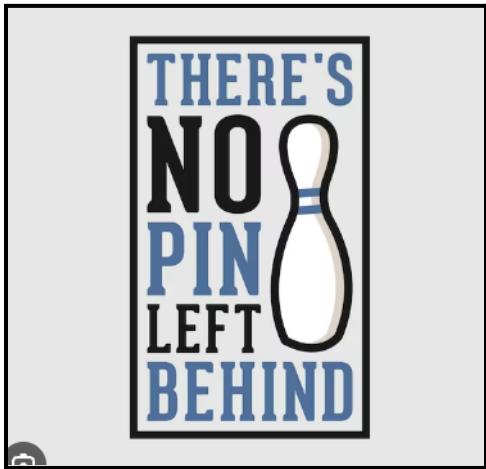


3. No (x) Left Behind

As in:

- No **Child** Left Behind
- No **Man** Left Behind
- No **Troll** Left Behind
- No **Toy** Gets Left Behind

Example Designs:





There's a few categories where this phrase works very easily with funny results.

1. Food

Because food should be consumed...and not left behind.

eg.

- No **Slice** Left Behind
- No **Taco** Left Behind
- No **Beer** Left Behind (*alliteration!*)
- No **Morel** Left Behind (*also works because you have to 'search' for morels...*)
- No **Gabagool** Left Behind

2. Things That Should Be Destroyed / Erased / Completed

eg.

- No **Pins** Left Behind (*Bowling Pins*)
- No **Mines** Left Behind (*Land Mines - not funny, but appropriate for a bomb disposal expert*)
- No **Homework** Left Behind (*Teachers*)
- No **Recycling** Left Behind (*Environmentally Friendly*)
- No **Termites** Left Behind (*Pest Control*)

3. People or Animals

You'll often see this phrase used for semi-serious slogans for charitable or awareness purposes - but that can also be played upon for funny results.

eg.

- No **Teacher** Left Behind
- No **Girl** Left Behind
- No **Homie** Left Behind
- No **Lefty** Left Behind (*Left handed*)
- No **Cow** Left Behind (*for farmers - or maybe BBQ?*)
- No **Sheep** Left Behind (*Parable of the Lost Sheep?*)

We can push the food connection further for some sarcastic/ironic results - for example:

Things That Can Be Eaten But Shouldn't Be

- No **Tide Pod** Left Behind
- No **Silica Gel** Left Behind
- No **Drug** Left Behind

(You could adapt this approach to create a design to ridicule or mock a particular person or group - eg. "Ralph Wiggum - No Crayon Left Behind").

Things That Can Be Destroyed But Shouldn't Be

- No **Evidence** Left Behind
- No **WhatsApp Messages** Left Behind (*Nicola Sturgeon?*)

Finally - for bonus points - you could find a word that creates an internal rhyme (or near rhyme) when inserted - eg:

- No **Grind** Left Behind
- No **Rind** Left Behind (*Bacon rind*)
- No **Wine** Left Behind

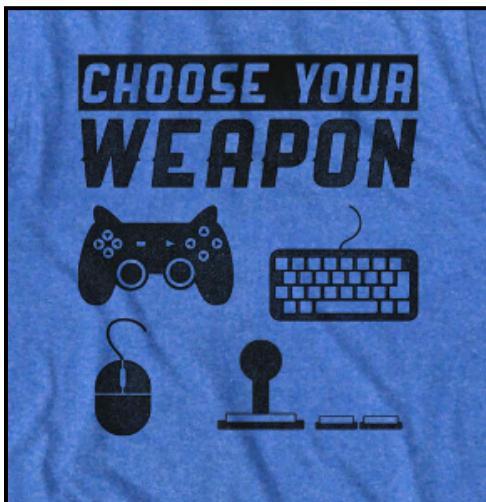
4. Choose Your Weapon

This is an adaptable framework that works well for T-Shirt designs (posters too) - and across a wide variety of niches, topics, hobbies etc.

Unlike previously shared Plug-In Phrases (Fill in the blank phrases) - here the text will almost certainly remain the same - but the content will change depending on the topic or niche.

Some examples:







How To Use It:

As you can see - this framework relies on you having some form of 'Weapons' related to your topic or niche.

- Cooking -> Cooking Utensils (*Knives, Spatula etc.*)
- Gardening -> Gardening Tools (*Hoe, Spade, Rake etc.*)
- Coffee -> Coffee Gear (*Perculator, Grinder etc.*)

Not every topic or niche will have something that fits so easily - but with a bit of thought you should be able to come up with something.

Your most fertile areas will be subjects, topics or obsessions where there are objects that people **collect, use or categorise**:

- Collectibles (*Stamps, Trainers, Coins, Plants...*)
- Things (Objects) That People Use (**Designers** use pens, pencils, graphics tablets... **Fishermen** use different rods, lures, bait... **Golfers** use different clubs... etc.)
- Things People Categorise (*think of reference posters that are 'collections of things' - like sea creatures, food, trees etc.*)

For example - different types of **mushroom**. You could do a 'Choose Your Weapon' with the mushroom types labeled (*or maybe just do poisonous mushrooms?*)

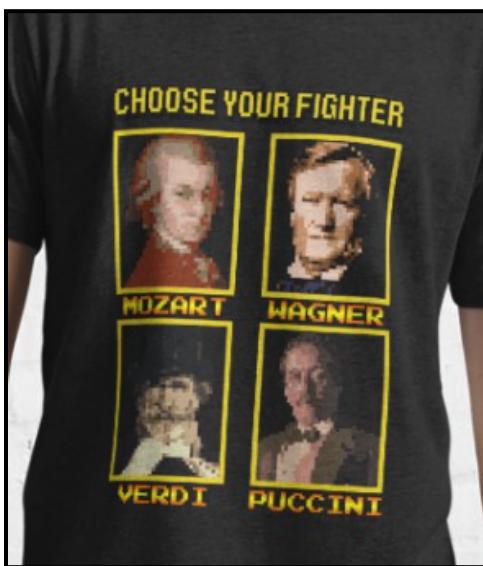
For history buffs, you can take 'choose your weapon' literally (*like this meme*) - and create a whole series based on different historic eras or wars (*Roman, Viking, etc*).

Choose Your Fighter

A slight variation on the above - this time leaning towards the use of people, characters or animals.

Examples:





As you can see - this can work very much like 'Choose Your Weapon' (*with a few silhouette vectors or simple images*) - or as a more detailed 'video game' style.

Either way, the principle and foundations are the same - we just need a group of related characters (or items) that we can throw together.

(Works especially well if you have characters who are in competition with one another in some way - like the classical composers example above).

So there you have it - 2 idea frameworks for the price of one - and an easy one to add to your repertoire of jumping off points.

Bonus tip - adaptable frameworks like this are everywhere. If I see a phrase or saying being applied across different niches or topics, then I know it will almost certainly work for many others too. So it's worth taking a note when you see something like that - as you could be sitting on an idea goldmine.

5. (x) Is My Love Language

This Plug-In Phrase (*fill-in-the-blank*) is what I would call a 'proven winner'.

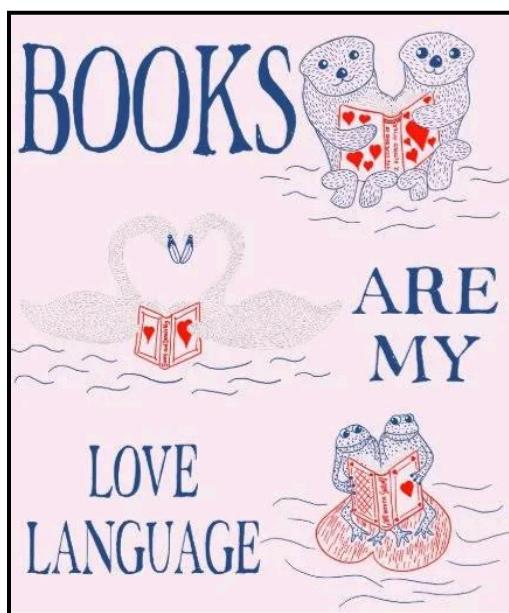
That means it works as a vanilla, generic framework for 'almost anything'; assorted food stuffs, hobbies, etc...

Eg:

- **Tacos** Are My Love Language
- **Coffee** Is My Love Language
- **Fishing** Is My Love Language

...but there are also some meatier possibilities if we dig a little deeper.

First, some examples:





How To Use It

Besides the obvious - this phrase works well with *activities* - and in particular those related to **speech, language or sound** in some way.

Eg:





Here are some of my own ideas riffing on this 'language' angle (*may or may not have already been done*):

- **Meow** Is My Love Language (*For cat lovers*)
- **Elvish** Is My Love Language (*Tolkien fans*)
- **Old English** Is My Love Language (*again for the Tolkien fans? I've been reading a lot of Tolkien...*)
- **Raawr** Is My Love Language (*Dinosaurs*)
- **Japanese** Is My Love Language (*you could write out Japanese as 日本語 - and do a whole series on this basis for any language with different characters, runes, hieroglyphics etc...*)

'Wrong Fit' Activities

If you have an activity that is aggressive / violent / controversial in some way - then that may make for a fun fit (*because of the juxtaposition of that thing vs. 'love language'*).

Eg:



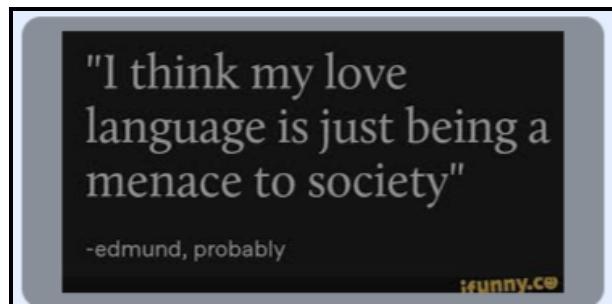


My ideas based on 'wrong fit' activities/things:

- **Gaslighting Is My Love Language**
- **Mansplaining Is My Love Language**
- **Smashing The Patriarchy Is My Love Language**
- **Cold Hard Cash Is My Love Language**
- **My Love Language Is A Million Dollars In Unmarked Bills**

Top Tip: Many short and simple frameworks like this one have been turned into memes or jokes on twitter and elsewhere online - so you can find some inspiration just by googling ** is my love language* (for example) and scrolling google images. Here's some of what I found:





Final thought: These fill in the blank phrases are often most useful when you have a topic or niche already in mind - but don't overlook the inspiration that can come just by 'digging into' a phrase with no pre-disposed direction.

For example - it doesn't matter that something like '**Gaslighting is my Love Language**' doesn't have an easily related niche - because a joke like that works in-and-of-itself.

So, if you're always thinking 'niche first' (*rather than 'idea first'*), you're going to miss a lot of potential opportunities.

6. Not every idea for a T-Shirt is a T-Shirt Idea.

I have long advised designers of T-Shirts (*or aspiring designers of T-Shirts*) to design **FOR** the product: to make designs that **look like T-Shirt designs**.

Because if your design ‘fits’ (*if it ‘looks like a T-Shirt’*) - it’s going to be much easier to make sales.

There are, of course, practical ways to achieve a design that looks *like* a T-Shirt design - limited colour palette, relatively simple graphics, no gradients (without halftones) etc...

But before you even GET to that part (*the actual designing part*) - there’s the IDEA side - which must come first.

Many designers are doing their best to squeeze concepts that **aren't great T-Shirt concepts** into designs that **do look like T-Shirts**.

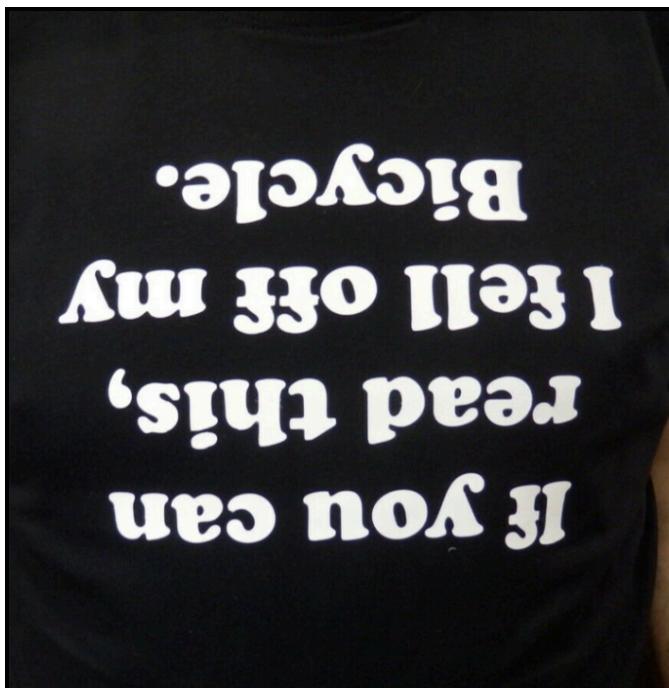
And whilst the finished design may well *look* like a T-Shirt design - that's going to have a negligible impact on sales if the **concept itself doesn't work as a T-Shirt**.

And this is a shame - because there are a lot of idea types that really ‘work as T-Shirts’, right out of the box.

Some are so closely intertwined with the medium that the concept wouldn’t even *work* on another product.

For example:





These designs rely on the **medium** to make sense - they are not just cute graphics or random funny sayings whacked onto cotton. **You can't put them on a mug or a poster.**

Some practical ways you can find these more 'T-Shirt exclusive' concepts:

- Use **Plug-In Phrases** (*such as those above - or others containing 'Shirt' or similar*) to brainstorm around your target market or niche. (eg. '*My Other Shirt Is (X)*', '*This Is My (X) Shirt*', '*(X) Ruined This Shirt*' etc.)
- Think about what the **wearer** would like to say or express (*In other words, speak with the wearer's voice - in the first person*) - and about what **situations** or **scenarios** said wearer is likely to be in (eg. *Cyclist falls off bike*).
- Where possible, consider **faux-physical**, '**real world**' **elements** you might incorporate into the design (eg. *blood splatters, fake tears in the shirt fabric, intentional design and spelling mistakes* - etc).

There are degrees to this. The above examples are almost all '**T-Shirt first**' concepts - but there are many more frameworks that are certainly highly T-Shirt *friendly*.

And if you make such frameworks your first port of call when looking for ideas - you'll make life a lot easier for yourself (*because such concepts are quicker to produce, and much more likely to sell*).

Of course, not all your designs will have such a close relationship between concept and medium - but when you DO find an idea that ticks these boxes - it's almost certainly worth prioritizing.

7. (X) Made Me Do It.

The most famous examples of this Plug-In Phrase (*fill-in-the-blank*) - include:

- **Gangster Rap** Made Me Do It
- **The Devil** Made Me Do It

And here's a bunch of T-Shirt examples based on this same framework:





...As you can see, this is fairly versatile - but there are a few 'core' angles that will give you the best results:

- **The ‘influential character’ angle** - a person or individual that has the force or power to cause someone to do something (through raw power, fear or love/obsession). *Eg. The Devil, My Cat, Bigfoot, Brad Pitt.*
- **The ‘intoxicant’ angle** - a substance or consumable that causes people to act differently in some way (through intoxication, or just desire for said thing). *Eg. Whiskey, Long Island Iced Tea, Drugs, Tacos.*
- **The ‘Impersonalised force’ angle** - an ‘ism’, category or belief that can be blamed for one’s bad behaviour; perhaps unreasonably. *Eg. Gangster Rap, Video Games, TikTok, The Moon, OCD.*

How To Use This

You can start with the raw Plug-In Phrase and the angles above, and simply brainstorm any potential fits. (eg. ‘what’s an example of an **{influential character}** related to **{your chosen niche/topic/market}**’)

Of course, you don’t *have* to have a ‘niche’ in mind first - you can just take the above angles and see what emerges.

Some that came to *my* mind after a few mins of thought:

- **The Hat Man** Made Me Do It
- **Mercury In Retrograde** Made Me Do It
- **Neuralink** Made Me Do It
- **Global Warming** Made Me Do It
- **ChatGPT** Made Me Do It

Top Tip: When you have a phrase like this with at least a few ‘well known’ completions (*Gangster Rap, The Devil*) - you can drill down into *those* to help find funny juxtapositions.

For example: **Gangster Rap Made Me Do It**

Q: ‘Gangster Rap’ is.... what, exactly?

A: A music genre.

So are there any examples of other ‘music genres’ that are quite not like Gangster Rap?

If so...switch them out.

Eg...

- **Sea Shanties** Made Me Do It
- **Blue Grass** Made Me Do It
- **Lo Fi Hip Hop Beats To Study And Relax To** Made Me Do It

These work precisely because '**Sea Shanties**' are so unlike **Gangster Rap**...but are like Gangster Rap in one sense (*music genres*).

This principle alone can bring you a treasure trove of great ideas, if you know where to look.

ENJOYED THIS?

You can get much more here...

- [**The Ideas Workshop**](#) is my comprehensive video course and membership that teaches you how to adapt and use all of my idea generation techniques. ([join here](#)).
- [**Idealy**](#) is my idea-generating software, which is my secret weapon for generating the best ideas before the competition does.
- Free goodies like this on my weekly email newsletter - at michaeessek.com/newsletter

Enjoy!



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