

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF **COPYWRITING**



## NICK KOLENDA

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# Introduction

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Writing copy is tough.

Writing *persuasive* copy is even tougher.

When you need to persuade someone through writing, you can feel lost:

- ▶ Which words should you use?
- ▶ How should you frame the offer?
- ▶ How do you sell without appearing sleazy?

I hear ya.

Luckily, copywriting is an art *and* science. In this article, I'll teach you a bunch of copywriting tactics backed by academic research (in psychology, marketing, and linguistics).

Whether you're writing a blog article or designing an advertisement, you'll learn which words — based on scientific evidence — will **maximize the persuasiveness of your message**.

Throughout the majority of illustrations, I'll be referencing a hypothetical productivity app. Hopefully the consistent example will help you apply the tactics to your own projects.

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# Part 1: Conveying Your Message

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Persuasion isn't the only goal of copywriting. You also need *clarity*.

This part will teach you how to convey your message in the *clearest*, most effective way possible.

## STRATEGY: BOOST THE CLARITY

Clarity is crucial. If your content is unnecessarily complex, your readers will perceive you to be less intelligent ([Oppenheimer, 2006](#)).

Researchers attribute that finding to *processing fluency*. Your opinion of content is influenced by the ease and speed with which you process it.

When readers have trouble processing your content, they experience negative emotions. Those negative feelings, in turn, get misattributed to you. To increase processing fluency — and prevent those harmful evaluations — you need to simplify your message.

In this section, you'll learn a few research-backed techniques to boost the clarity (and persuasiveness) of your content.

## TACTIC: CHOOSE ACTIVE VOICE (OVER PASSIVE VOICE)

In passive sentences, the subject is the *recipient* of the action. In active sentences, the subject *performs* the action.

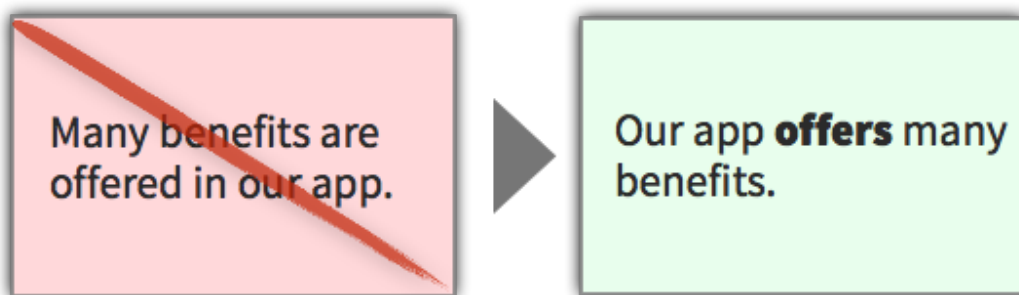
► **PASSIVE:** Some interesting tactics are explained in this article.

► **ACTIVE:** This article explains some interesting tactics.

Compared to passive sentences, active sentences are more persuasive. Why? [Hosman \(2002\)](#) explains that passive sentences are grammatically complex, weakening persuasion...

**“Sentences with more complex grammatical structures [are] more difficult to understand or comprehend. This comprehension difficulty could affect the persuasion process negatively, presumably because comprehension is an antecedent to persuasion...” (pp. 373)**

Active sentences increase *processing fluency*. Because readers can digest your message more easily, they experience a positive subtle emotion (which gets misattributed to you and your content).



**TACTIC: CHOOSE ACTIVE VOICE (OVER PASSIVE VOICE)**

## **TACTIC: DESCRIBE INFORMATION USING POSITIVE FRAMES**

In addition to active sentences, *positive framing* can also boost the clarity of your message.

Negative framing describes an absence — what *isn't* happening. Positive framing, on the other hand, describes something more tangible.

### **Example 1**

- ▶ **Negative Frame:** Don't be late.
- ▶ **Positive Frame:** Arrive on time.

### Example 2

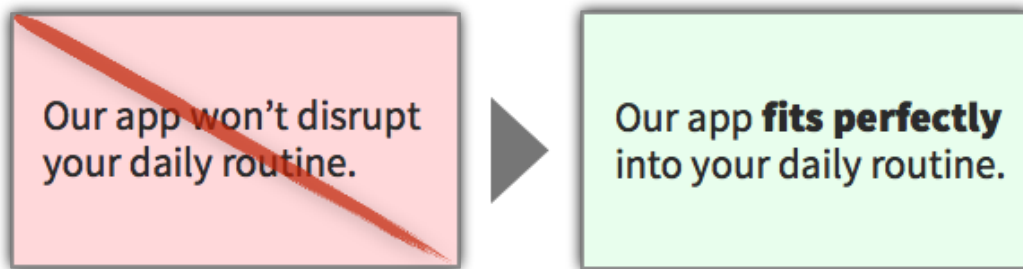
- ▶ **Negative Frame:** Don't drink excessively.
- ▶ **Positive Frame:** Drink responsibly.

### Example 3

- ▶ **Negative Frame:** Don't use negative frames.
- ▶ **Positive Frame:** Use positive frames.

Since we need more mental resources to process negative frames, they reduce comprehension and degrade the impact of your message ([Jacoby, Nelson, & Hoyer, 1982](#)).

You might need to use negative frames occasionally. But you should use positive frames for the majority of your sentences.



**TACTIC:** DESCRIBE INFORMATION USING POSITIVE FRAMES

## TACTIC: ADD COHERENCE MARKERS THROUGHOUT YOUR COPY

Consider two modified versions of an advertisement for Dove (see [Kamalski, 2007](#)):

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ 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.



Those passages illustrate *coherence markers*.

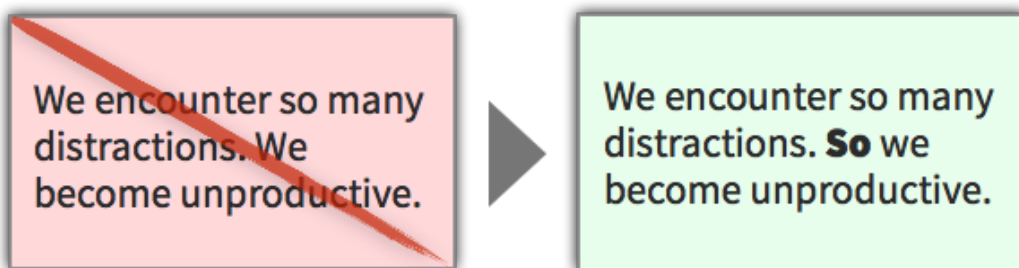
**COHERENCE MARKERS** – Words and phrases that connect ideas

You can use coherence markers in two ways:

1. **REFERENTIAL COHERENCE**– You describe an object that you referenced in a previous sentence (e.g., the second Dove passage changes “it” to “your skin”)
2. **RELATIONAL COHERENCE** – You convey a causal connection (e.g., *but, therefore, so, as a result, that is why, consequently*)

Coherence markers don’t add semantic meaning, so many advertisers remove them to condense their copy.

However, research shows that coherence markers boost clarity and persuasion ([Kamalski, 2007](#)). So keep those subtle words and phrases throughout your copy (like the “so” at the beginning of this sentence).



**TACTIC:** ADD COHERENCE MARKERS THROUGHOUT YOUR COPY

## **TACTIC: MAXIMIZE THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR WORD CHOICES**

[Hosman \(2002\)](#) explains the connection between persuasion and *lexical diversity*. Readers prefer messages that contain a variety of different words.

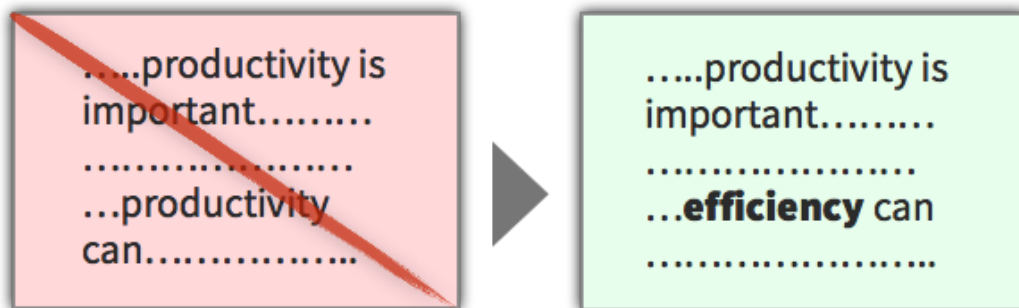
In particular, he emphasizes the *type-token ratio (TTR)*:

$$\text{TYPE-TOKEN RATIO (TTR)} = \frac{\text{NUMBER OF DIFFERENT WORDS}}{\text{TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS}}$$

“A low TTR means that a speaker’s vocabulary is relatively redundant, while a high TTR means that it is relatively diverse.” ([Hosman, 2002](#), pp. 374)

Readers perceive messages with a high TTR to be more interesting. And they evaluate communicators more favorably.

You should still avoid *complex* language. Just incorporate simple — yet *varied* — word choices.



**TACTIC:** MAXIMIZE THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR WORD CHOICES

## STRATEGY: PROVIDE A CONCRETE MENTAL IMAGE

Words are meaningless. On the surface, they represent arbitrary symbols — a mere conduit that conveys our meaning.

Images, on the other hand, don’t require translation. *Their meaning is immediate.*

Not surprisingly, images generate a larger emotional impact than words ([Hinojosa et al., 2009](#)).

To increase the persuasiveness of your content, you should transform important written content into a mental image. How can you do that? This section will teach you a few techniques.

## TACTIC: USE METAPHORS TO CONVEY INTANGIBLE CONCEPTS

Given the importance of concrete features, you'll notice a problem when it comes to marketing. Try to visualize the following features:

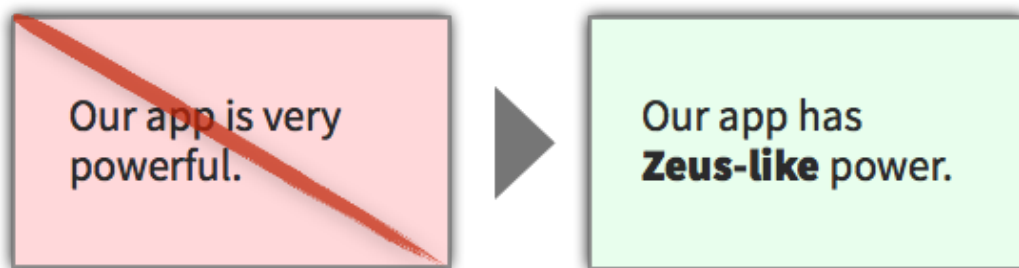
- ▶ Quality
- ▶ Powerful
- ▶ Reliable

Having trouble? Me too. You can't visualize intangible concepts. And your readers share the same difficulty.

That's where metaphors can help. For example...

“...life insurance companies use ideas associated with various symbols such as umbrellas (Travelers), rocks (Prudential Insurance Company), and hands (Allstate) to convey qualities of protection, sturdiness, and support” ([Zaltman, 2008](#), p. 35).

Metaphors tangibilize the intangible. They provide your reader with a concrete mental image, enhancing the impact and persuasiveness of your message ([Sopory & Dillard, 2002](#)).



**TACTIC: USE METAPHORS TO CONVEY INTANGIBLE CONCEPTS**

## TACTIC: TRANSFORM GENERIC CLAIMS INTO CONCRETE TERMS

Generic claims are the plague. They're everywhere.

(thumbs up to anyone who recognized the coincidentally timed metaphor)

Everywhere you look, you find statements like...

- ▶ Our support team is very quick
- ▶ Our customers love us
- ▶ Our software is very reliable

*Yada yada yada.*

Don't get me wrong — the underlying messages are great. But it sounds like you're *selling*, rather than *telling*.

Watch what happens when you transform those generic claims into concrete terms:

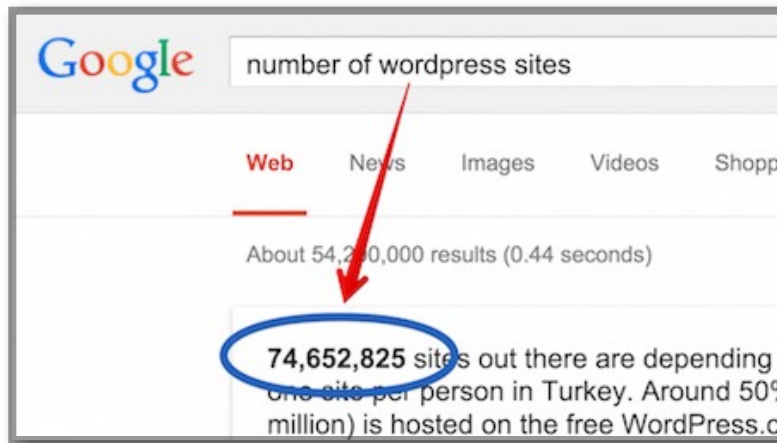
- ▶ We'll get you an answer within 24 hours
- ▶ 568 companies love our software
- ▶ You'll have 100 percent uptime...guaranteed.

Suddenly your message becomes more believable and persuasive. In this case, you're *telling*, rather than *selling*.

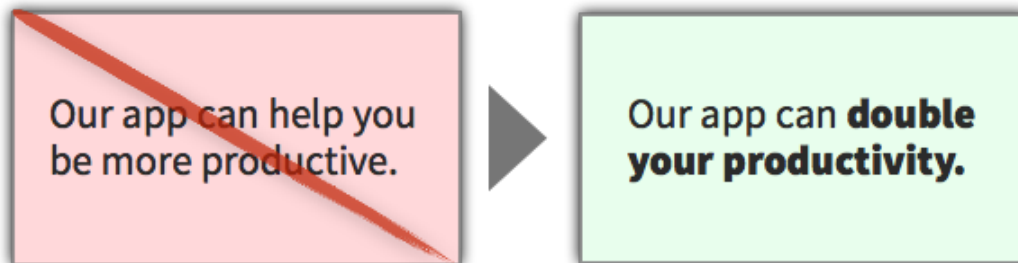
When possible, you should also incorporate large numbers. According to a study by [Startup Moon](#), headlines with large numbers are more likely to go viral.

So don't talk about the security flaw the harms "many" Wordpress users. That's so generic.

Instead, do a quick search for the *actual* number of websites:



Now you have a better headline: *75 Million Websites Are Vulnerable to a Security Flaw in Wordpress.*



**TACTIC:** TRANSFORM GENERIC CLAIMS INTO CONCRETE TERMS

## TACTIC: CONVEY PERCENTAGES IN TERMS OF PEOPLE

When we provide statistics, we're usually trying to emphasize the importance of an issue.

[Slovic, Monahan, and MacGregor \(2000\)](#) examined the role of framing in percentages. They gave the following messages to separate groups of clinicians:

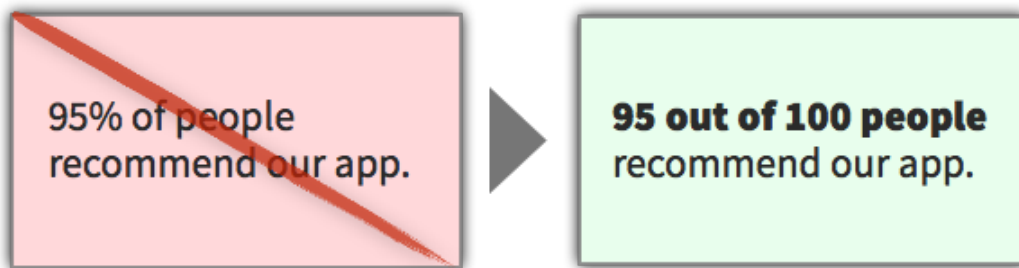
- ▶ Patients similar to Mr. Jones are estimated to have a 20% chance of committing an act of violence.
- ▶ 20 out of 100 patients similar to Mr. Jones are estimated to commit an act of violence.

Both messages are essentially the same. However, twice as many clinicians refused to discharge the patient when they were exposed to the second message.

To maximize the impact of your statistics, you should convey percentages in terms of people:

▶ **Don't Say:** 90 percent of people

▶ **Say This:** 9 out of 10 people



**TACTIC:** CONVEY PERCENTAGES IN TERMS OF PEOPLE

## **TACTIC: DEPICT THE FAMILIAR OR EMOTION-INDUCING PERSPECTIVE**

Describing a story? Then you need to choose a perspective:

▶ **INSIDER:** "John came into..."

▶ **OUTSIDER:** "John went into..."

So...which is better?

You need to consider two factors: *familiarity* and *emotion*.

If your main goal is *comprehension*, then choose the perspective that generates the most *familiarity* with readers.

Consider these sentences:

▶ **SENTENCE 1:** The man *went into* the prison

► **SENTENCE 2:** The man *came into* the prison

If you've never been to prison, then **SENTENCE 1** — the outside perspective — will be more effective ([Jiang & Wyer, 2009](#)). Since that framing is congruent with your experience, it increases processing fluency.

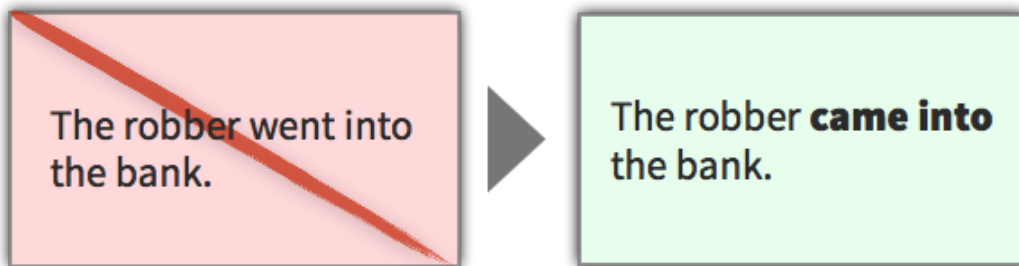
But what if you're trying to generate an *impact* on readers? In that case, choose the perspective aligned with the most *emotion*.

Consider these sentences:

► **SENTENCE 1:** The robber *went into* the bank

► **SENTENCE 2:** The robber *came into* the bank

In **SENTENCE 2**, readers construct the mental image based on the perspective of bank customers — the emotional perspective. So that sentence generates a stronger impact ([Jiang & Wyer, 2009](#)).



**TACTIC:** DEPICT THE FAMILIAR OR EMOTION-INDUCING PERSPECTIVE

## **TACTIC: EMPHASIZE TANGIBLE USES FOR LEFTOVER SAVINGS**

Do you offer a low-priced product? Then you could mention the amount of money that customers could save:

► Save \$215 each year

► Reduce costs by 15%

And those are good...but they're intangible. So they could be better.

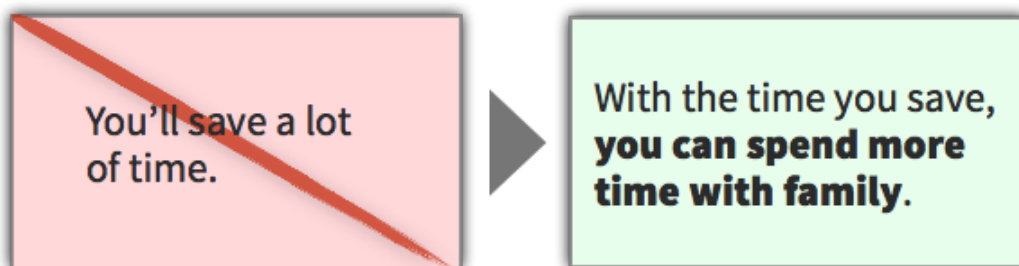
[Frederick et al. \(2009\)](#) recommend emphasizing specific uses for that leftover cash:

“...firms may better promote low-price products by cueing consumers to think about the leftover cash and possible attractive uses for it. For example, Volkswagen could emphasize the economy of purchasing their vehicle in terms of the new wardrobe of clothes one would then be able to afford...” ([Frederick et al., 2009](#), pp. 559-560)

In turn, the savings become tangible. *Customers can visualize the benefits.* So they're more likely to appreciate the value of your offering.

The same concept applies with time:

You could also emphasize a *hedonic* alternative (e.g., vacation). Those alternatives will be more persuasive (see my [article on choice psychology](#)).



**TACTIC:** EMPHASIZE TANGIBLE USES FOR LEFTOVER SAVINGS

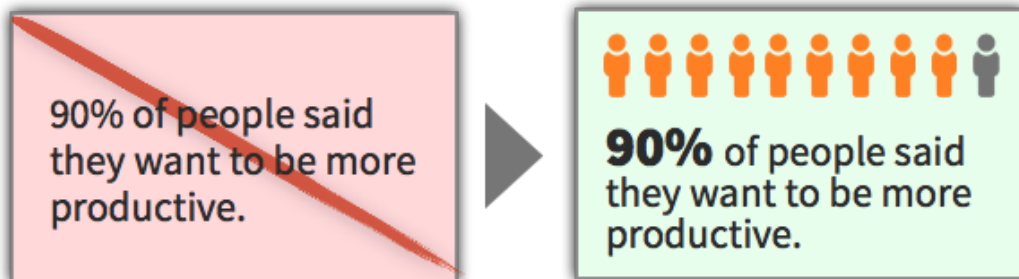
## **TACTIC: TRANSFORM NUMERIC INFORMATION INTO SEMANTIC VISUALS**

Our brain has trouble evaluating *numeric* information:

“Numeric information in general may be more difficult to evaluate because it is abstract, its meaning changes dramatically from one context to another (9°F versus 9 billion dollars versus 9% wrong on an exam), and numbers are often used to convey small, unfamiliar differences.” ([Peters et al., 2009](#), pp. 4)



When possible, transform numerical attributes into a semantic visual. For example, [Peters et al., \(2009\)](#) found that people could evaluate a hospital's quality more effectively when numerical attributes were presented in a good/bad scale.



**TACTIC:** TRANSFORM NUMERIC INFORMATION INTO SEMANTIC VISUALS

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# Part 2: Motivating Your Readers

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Conveying your message is important. No doubt. However, your copy will usually have an underlying goal.

Oftentimes, you'll want readers to complete an action — whether it's buying your product, donating money, or caring about your cause.

In this part, you'll learn strategies to make your message more persuasive (and influence readers to complete your call-to-action).

## STRATEGY: TRIGGER A POSITIVE EMOTION

In Part 1, you learned techniques to boost the clarity of your writing. With a greater ease of processing, readers *indirectly* experience a positive emotion. This section will teach you how to *directly* trigger a positive emotion in your reader.

## TACTIC: INCORPORATE YOUR READER'S NAME

As humans, we experience *implicit egotism*, a natural tendency to be self-centered. We nonconsciously gravitate toward stimuli that resemble ourselves.

- ▶ People named **DENNIS** are more likely to become **DENTISTS** ([Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002](#))
- ▶ People named **LOUIS** are more likely to live in **ST. LOUIS** ([Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002](#))
- ▶ People named **JONATHAN** consumed a larger portion of a drink called "JOITOKI" ([Holland et al., 2009](#))

Upon hearing your own name, certain brain regions become activated — including the middle frontal cortex, middle and superior temporal cortex, and cuneus ([Carmody & Lewis, 2006](#)).

Apply that insight to your copy. By incorporating your reader's name, you'll trigger a positive emotion, enhancing his or her perception of your message.

When sending email blasts, don't forget to merge field options. Not only should you insert people's name into the header of the email, but you should also sprinkle their name throughout the body of your email.



**TACTIC:** INCORPORATE YOUR READER'S NAME

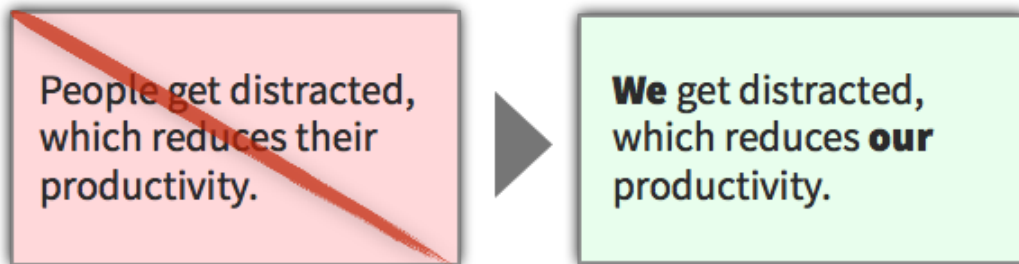
## **TACTIC: USE 1ST PERSON PLURAL PRONOUNS**

We're also influenced by ingroups — people who share a similar social identity ([Van Bavel, Packer, & Cunningham, 2008](#)).

[Perdue et al. \(1990\)](#) studied the impact of language and ingroups. They showed various nonsense syllables (e.g., *xeh*, *yof*, *laj*) to participants. The researchers paired each syllable with a pronoun — either an ingroup pronoun (e.g., “us”) or an outgroup pronoun (e.g., “them”).

By the end, participants couldn't remember the specific pairings. Nonetheless, they developed an unconscious preference for nonsense syllables that were paired with an ingroup pronoun. Due to classical conditioning, the positive emotions from ingroup pronouns were transferred to the nonsense syllables.

When you use 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronouns (e.g., *us*, *we* *our*), you trigger a subtle — yet positive — emotional response in your readers. Those positive emotions will then become misattributed to your content.



**TACTIC: USE 1ST PERSON PLURAL PRONOUNS**

## STRATEGY: DEEMPHASIZE YOUR PERSUASION ATTEMPT

Persuasion strategies should always be subtle. If readers feel like you're trying to persuade them, they develop *psychological reactance* ([Brehm, 1966](#)). Instead of listening to your arguments with an open mind, they resist your persuasion attempt.

To prevent that reactance, *you need to be stealthy*.

How do you remain stealthy? This section will explain a few tactics that will disguise your persuasion attempt — without being manipulative.

### TACTIC: EMPHASIZE THEIR FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

[Carpenter \(2013\)](#) analyzed 42 different persuasion studies. Turns out, four specific words make a powerful impact:

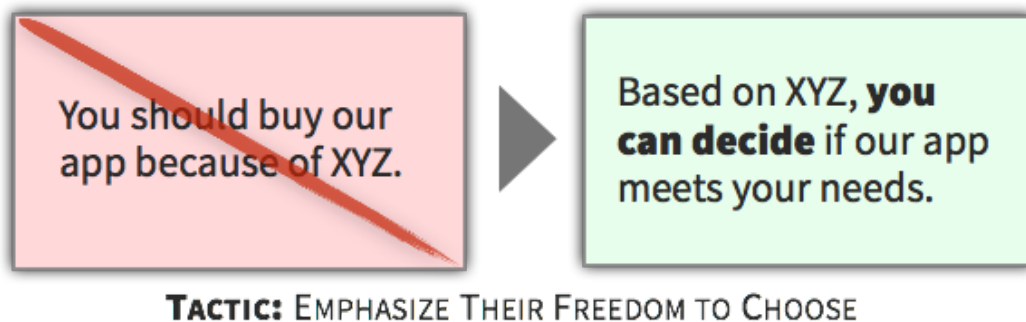
*"...but you are free..." (BYAF)*

In the original study, [Guégen and Pascual \(2000\)](#) asked people on the street to donate money. The researchers quadrupled the amount of compliance when they incorporated the BYAF phrase, *"...but you are free to accept or refuse."*

When writing copy, always emphasize your reader's freedom to choose:

- ▶ It's up to you
- ▶ It's your call
- ▶ Whenever you're ready

That framing reduces psychological reactance. With more freedom, your readers will develop a stronger *genuine* desire to complete your call-to-action.



## TACTIC: DESCRIBE THE DRAWBACKS OF YOUR MESSAGE

Some copywriters are scared to include drawbacks in their copy.

And it makes sense. If you want people to complete your call-to-action, why would you describe negative features? Seems counterproductive.

Nevertheless, research shows that two-sided arguments are more persuasive ([Rucker, Petty, & Brinol, 2008](#)).

**TWO-SIDED ARGUMENT** – An argument that gives benefits *and* drawbacks

That's why you see companies like Amazon displaying both positive and negative reviews up front:



When you present both sides of an argument, people perceive you to be more rational. It seems like you chose a side carefully, so readers feel more comfortable joining your side.

You'll also take advantage of the *spotlight effect* ([Heath & Heath, 2013](#)). We tend to focus on information in front of us, while ignoring information offstage. By incorporating some negative information, **your readers also assume that those drawbacks are the *only* drawbacks to your argument.**

Also, give your drawbacks a positive spin. For example, you can use this tactic to reinforce your target market. Explain that your offering doesn't have a particular feature because you put more attention in another area (an area that your target market values).



**TACTIC:** DESCRIBE THE DRAWBACKS OF YOUR MESSAGE

## TACTIC: MENTION THE COMPETING ALTERNATIVES

As humans, we usually determine our attitudes based on our behavior:

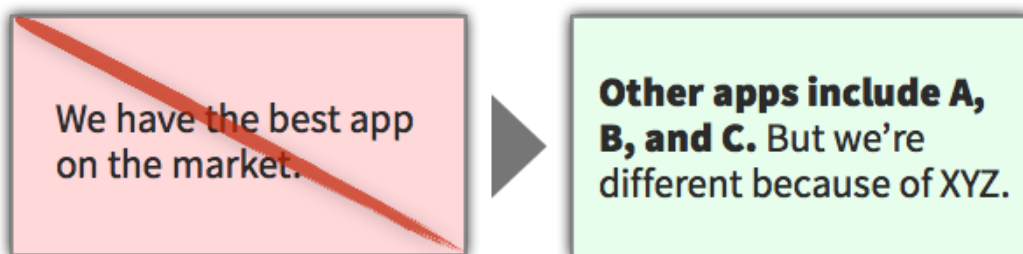
- ▶ If we're eating, we infer that we're hungry
- ▶ If we're smiling, we infer that we're happy
- ▶ If we're sitting upright, we infer that we're confident

Even if we weren't experiencing those emotions, the mere behavior triggers those emotions within us ([Wilson, 2002](#)).

If you don't mention your competition, readers are more likely to search for competing solutions. *That's bad.* In the mere act of searching, they're more likely to infer that your solution is less attractive ([Ge, Brigden, & Häubl, 2015](#)).

By mentioning your competition, you prevent that search from happening. **Readers feel like they've already done their homework, so they're more likely to stick with your solution.**

When mentioning the competition, don't admit defeat. Simply mention the alternatives so that you can explain the difference(s) in your solution.



**TACTIC: MENTION THE COMPETING ALTERNATIVES**

## TACTIC: PROLONG THE START OF YOUR PITCH

When we write copy, we feel a natural urge to emphasize our solution. Why wouldn't we? If we want readers to complete our call-to-action, shouldn't we describe the benefits of it?

Absolutely. But...never start your pitch immediately. Always disarm your readers first.

When people start reading your copy, they shouldn't recognize an underlying motive or call-to-action. If readers sense that you're trying to persuade them, they'll be more likely to reject your benefits and arguments ([Petty & Cacioppo, 1979](#)).

So what do you do? Start by agitating the problem. Explain *why* the underlying problem is difficult or painful. Once you hook them in, THEN reveal your solution.



## **TACTIC: USE INDIRECT CLAIMS TO EXTRACT INFERENCES**

If you're a seasoned copywriter, you've heard the advice. *Write copy that is clear and direct.*

Sound familiar?

So then...why do you rarely see direct claims?

Flip through a magazine. You'll never see an ad saying, "*Tide will clean your clothes really well.*"

Sure, you could argue that those words don't grab attention. And that's true.



But direct claims are also less persuasive. Why? The answer involves *self-generated inferences* (see [McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005](#)).

- ▶ Direct claims are explicit. There's no other interpretation.
- ▶ Indirect claims — such as metaphors — require interpretation. We *infer* meaning. *And that's key*. By making an inference, WE generate the meaning.

Compare these headlines:

- ▶ **DIRECT:** Tide will clean your clothes really well
- ▶ **INDIRECT:** The freshness of the outdoors. Now in liquid form.

With the **DIRECT** headline, there's no other meaning. Thus, you need to rely on the information source (i.e., the biased advertiser)

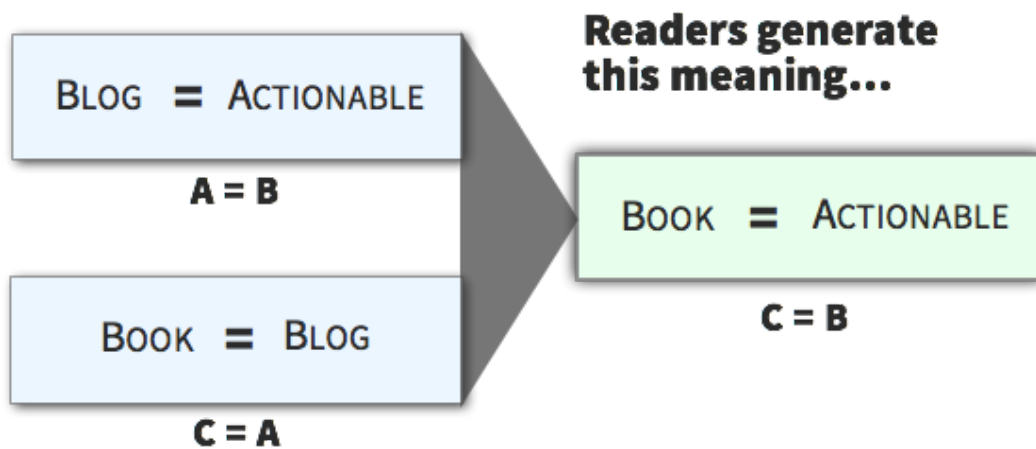
With the **INDIRECT** headline, YOU construct the meaning. For example, you might imagine the outdoors, associating a brisk and refreshing emotion with Tide. Regardless of the inference, YOU generate the meaning. YOU become the source. So your brain places more trust in the information.

You don't need to use metaphors or figurative language. You just need to adjust your syntax. For example, if I wanted to pitch my book, [Methods of Persuasion](#), I could emphasize the benefits indirectly:

- ▶ **DIRECT:** "My book is jam-packed with actionable content."
- ▶ **INDIRECT:** "My blog articles are jam-packed with actionable content. My book is no different."

In the first example, I say that my book is jam-packed with actionable content. It's a direct claim. There's no missing gap.

In the second example, I use logical reasoning to extract a self-generated inference. I essentially say that  $A=B$  and  $C=A$  (to *imply* that  $C=B$ ):



That syntax avoids a direct claim. Since the meaning is generated by readers — rather than me — they develop a stronger belief in that statement.

## STRATEGY: AGITATE THE PROBLEM

Your solution should always relieve some type of pain that the reader is experiencing. If you want readers to appreciate your solution, you need to remind them of the pain.

So poke the wound. *Show that it hurts.*

- ▶ Why is the underlying issue important?
- ▶ Why is it problematic?
- ▶ Why should readers care?

We're biologically structured to avoid pain. So if you can trigger that feeling of frustration and pain, your readers will be more apt to pursue your solution to resolve that pain.

How can you do it? This section will explain a few techniques.

## TACTIC: EMPHASIZE THEIR DISDAIN FOR THE PROBLEM

Opposing attitudes can be stronger than supporting attitudes.

For example, we show stronger support for political candidates when our attitude is framed as *opposing* the other candidate, rather than supporting the original candidate ([Bizer & Petty, 2005](#)).

Instead of convincing readers about the benefits of your solution, *emphasize their disdain for the underlying problem*.

If you're writing copy to promote your productivity app, don't start with benefits. Start with the negative emotions that readers experience from a lack of productivity:

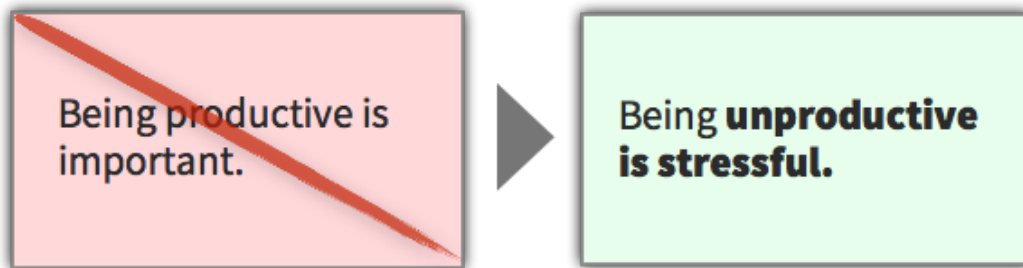
- ▶ You feel stressed and overwhelmed
- ▶ There aren't enough hours in the day
- ▶ You miss important deadlines
- ▶ Your boss thinks you're incompetent
- ▶ You spend less time with your family

Readers begin empathizing with those descriptions. They imagine themselves experiencing those negative emotions. *They become frustrated*.

Once they develop that opposition, *then* present your solution.

If the beginning of your copy promotes your solution, you'll kill that empathy process. Readers will become closed-minded, resisting any benefits that you offer.

So always start by triggering your reader's disdain for the underlying problem.



**TACTIC:** EMPHASIZE THEIR DISDAIN FOR THE PROBLEM

## **TACTIC: ASK RHETORICAL QUESTIONS TO ENGAGE READERS**

Do you ever use rhetorical questions in your writing — like this one? If not, you should.

On the surface, they seem innocent. But don't be fooled. Rhetorical questions make your arguments more persuasive ([Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981](#)).

Why are they persuasive? Because they generate an implicit response:

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

Through their implicit response, readers consider your arguments more carefully. *They become engaged.* Assuming that your arguments are valid, readers will be more persuaded by them.



**TACTIC:** ASK RHETORICAL QUESTIONS TO ENGAGE READERS

## TACTIC: USE 2ND PERSON PRONOUNS

Earlier, I mentioned the benefits of incorporating your reader's name into the copy.

When you can't use that technique, you can achieve similar effects by using 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns, such as *you* and *your*.

[Burnkrant and Unnava \(1995\)](#) tested that assumption by giving participants different messages in a calculator advertisement:

- ▶ **FRAME 1:** "If a mistake was made..."
- ▶ **FRAME 2:** "You know that calculator technology..."

The second frame — because it used "self-referencing" language — generated a more favorable evaluation of the calculator.

Those 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns enhanced the relevance of the issue, thereby agitating the problem more effectively.



**TACTIC: USE 2ND PERSON PRONOUNS**

## TACTIC: DEMONSTRATE AN IMPACT ON OTHER PEOPLE

Self-referencing language can be very persuasive. However, you can achieve an equally — if not *more* — powerful effect by demonstrating an impact on other people. Especially when the impact is negative.

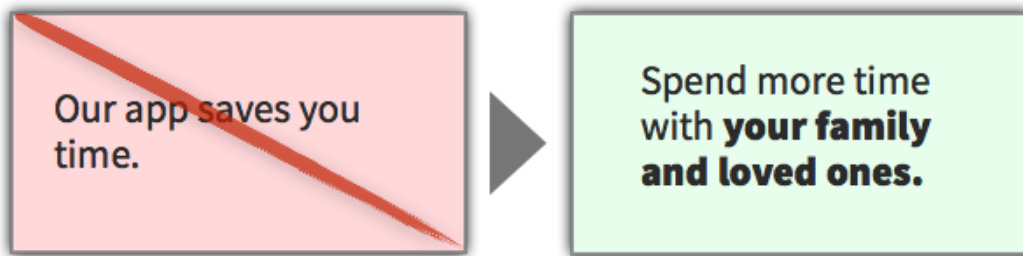
Consider two messages that were presented in a hospital:

- ▶ **FRAME 1:** Hand hygiene prevents *you* from catching diseases.

► **FRAME 2:** Hand hygiene prevents *patients* from catching diseases.

The second frame influenced more hospital staff to wash their hands ([Grant & Hoffman, 2011](#)).

When possible, explain how other people will be negatively affected if readers don't complete your call-to-action.



**TACTIC: DEMONSTRATE AN IMPACT ON OTHER PEOPLE**

## **TACTIC: LABEL YOUR READERS WITH A NOUN**

Nouns generate stronger and more stable preferences. For example, [Walton and Banaji \(2004\)](#) gave participants various statements:

- Jennifer drinks coffee a lot
- Jennifer spends a lot of time indoors
- Jennifer watches baseball a lot

Those statements emphasize verbs. They answer the question: what does Jennifer *do*?

The researchers gave different statements to other participants:

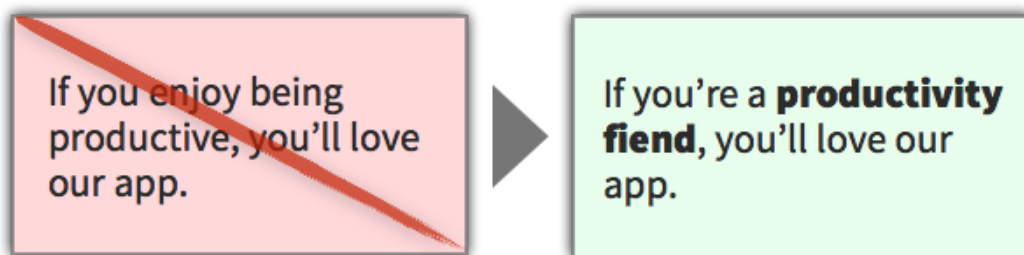
- Jennifer is a coffee-drinker
- Jennifer is an indoors person
- Jennifer is a baseball fan

Those statements emphasize nouns. They answer the question: who *is* Jennifer?

Both sets of statements convey the same meaning. However, the second set generated a stronger impact. With nouns, those traits seemed central to Jennifer's identity.

How can you use that tactic? For one, you could label your audience with a funky noun (any Beliebers reading this?). But you don't need to go that far.

Here's a simpler idea. If you're a blogger, instead of thanking readers for *doing* something (e.g., reading your content), thank them for *being* something (e.g., being a fan of your content). That second frame will generate a stronger impact on their attitude toward your content.



**TACTIC: LABEL YOUR READERS WITH A NOUN**

## **TACTIC: PROPERLY FRAME A LENGTH OF TIME**

Which seems longer:

- ▶ 7-21 days
- ▶ 1-3 weeks

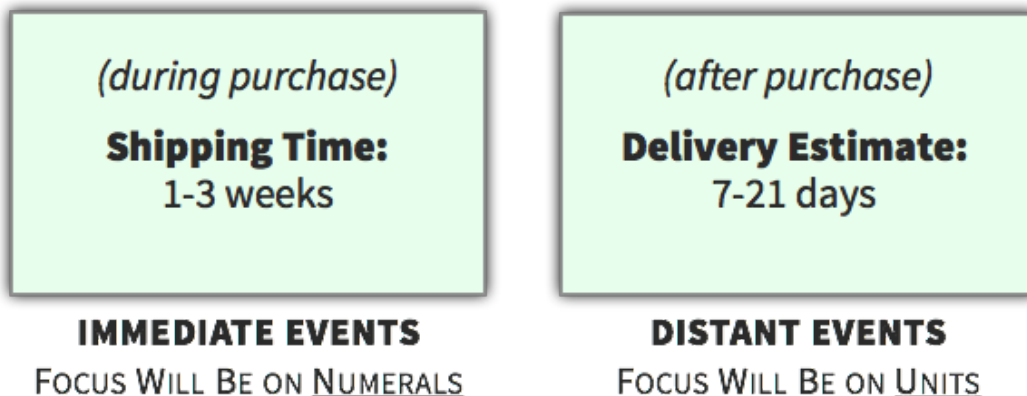
Both durations are the same. So which one generates a larger impact? [Monga and Bagchi \(2012\)](#) argue that it depends on the *immediacy* of the decision:

- ▶ **IMMEDIATE DECISIONS:** People develop a concrete mindset. In turn, they place greater weight on **NUMERALS**.
- ▶ **DISTANT DECISIONS:** People develop an abstract mindset. In turn, they place greater weight on **UNITS**.

Once you identify the immediacy of your decision, adjust the framing of your numbers and units:

**“If units are salient, managers ought to use large units to magnify positive changes (e.g., increase in fiber content) or small units to understate negative changes (e.g., increase in delivery time). If numbers are salient, they ought to do the opposite.”**([Monga & Bagchi, 2012](#), pp. 186)

Consider the shipping time for an online purchase. During the purchase process (i.e., an immediate event), customers will be focused on numerals. So you should minimize those numbers (e.g., 1-3 weeks). Afterward, when customers are waiting for the delivery (i.e., a distant event), they'll be focused on units. So you should minimize the units (e.g., 7-21 days).



## STRATEGY: PROVIDE THE PROPER SUPPORT

Once you've agitated the problem, then — and *only* then — should you offer your call-to-action. This section will teach you the best way to present your offering (and persuade readers to complete your CTA).



## TACTIC: MATCH THEIR PROMOTION / PREVENTION MINDSET

Why are people completing your call-to-action? Are they trying to gain something or prevent something?

Consider your productivity app. Why is your target market buying it?

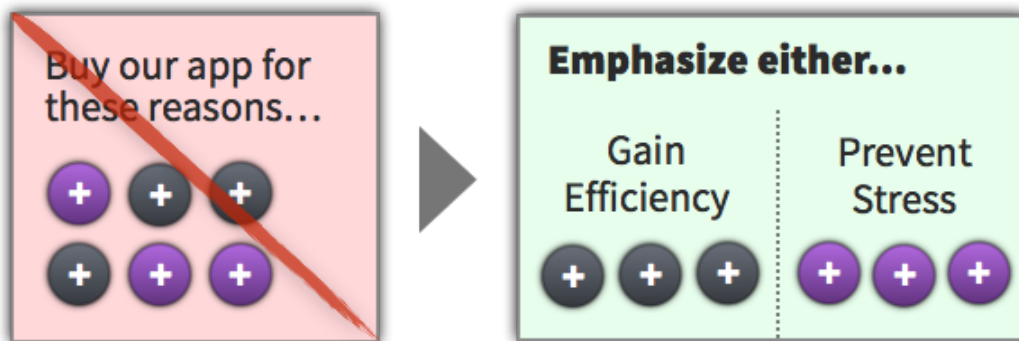
- ▶ **PROMOTION:** To be more efficient
- ▶ **PREVENTION:** To prevent feeling overwhelmed

Your copy should match their mindset.

With congruent copy, you increase processing fluency ([Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010](#)). People can digest your message more easily, so they experience a stronger reaction to it.

Ideally, you should be capturing the exact wording from interviews with your target customers. Once you know their mindset, then you can agitate the problem more effectively:

- ▶ If customers want to gain efficiency, explain how your app can help them accomplish more tasks in less time
- ▶ If customers want to prevent feeling overwhelmed, explain how your app can alleviate the stress that they're feeling



**TACTIC:** MATCH THEIR PROMOTION/PREVENTION MINDSET

## TACTIC: AVOID HEDGES, DISCLAIMERS, AND TAG QUESTIONS

You want to deemphasize your persuasion attempt. However, you don't want to use weak language.

In your copy, avoid hedges, disclaimers, and tag questions — which reduce your credibility ([Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005](#)). Here are some examples:

### Hedges

- ▶ Possibly
- ▶ Seems
- ▶ Might

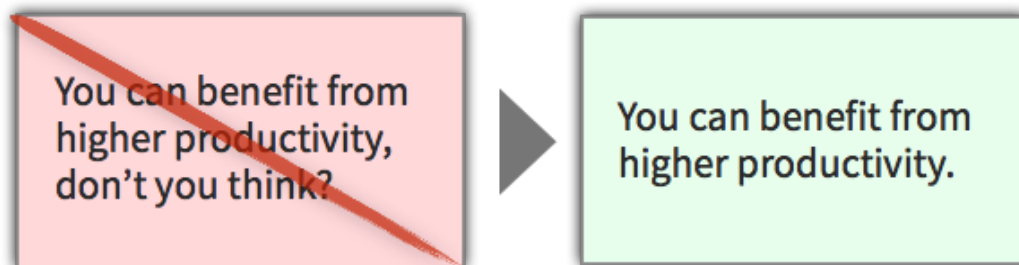
### Disclaimers

- ▶ "I'm not positive, but I think..."
- ▶ "I'm not an expert, but..."
- ▶ "It could go either way, but..."

### Tag Questions

- ▶ "...don't you think?"
- ▶ "...wouldn't it?"
- ▶ "...right?"

This tactic assumes that your main goal is persuasion. If your main goal is clarity, then you can ignore it.



**TACTIC: AVOID HEDGES, DISCLAIMERS, AND TAG QUESTIONS**

## TACTIC: INCLUDE WORDS THAT SIGNAL JUSTIFICATION

In [Thinking Fast and Slow](#), Kahneman popularized the extent of our irrationality. We believe that our decisions are based on careful reasoning. But that's not the case. Most of our decisions — even important ones — are quick and mindless.

Even if two arguments contain the same reasoning, merely including the word “because” will make one argument stronger than the other ([Langer, Blank & Chanowitz, 1978](#)).

Why? When an argument contains *any* justification, we mindlessly assume that the justification is valid (so we're more persuaded by it).

But you don't need to rely on the word “because.” Since the real culprit is justification, you can use other words that trigger the perception of justification:

- ▶ You should do XYZ, **so that** \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ You should do XYZ **due to** \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ **Since** \_\_\_\_\_, you should do XYZ.

When most readers encounter those signals, they'll automatically assume that your justification is valid.



**TACTIC:** INCLUDE WORDS THAT SIGNAL JUSTIFICATION

## TACTIC: POSITION STRONG BENEFITS TOWARD THE BEGINNING

Don't overlook the sequencing in your message. Always position strong benefits or arguments toward the beginning of your message.

You might be familiar with the *primacy effect*, which explains how information has a stronger impact when it's presented at the beginning of a sequence ([Murdock, 1962](#)).

Your first benefit will establish expectations for your readers. A strong reason will raise their expectations for the remaining information. Those expectations, in turn, will taint their perception (to be more favorable).

Your initial arguments will also have a stronger impact on long-term memory. When readers recall the benefits of your solution, they'll be more likely to remember the initial reasons that you gave. So you want those reasons to be strong.



**TACTIC: POSITION STRONG BENEFITS TOWARD THE BEGINNING**

## TACTIC: FOR PREVENTION NEEDS, USE SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISONS

Similarly, people evaluate information differently — depending on promotion vs. prevention needs.

- ▶ With **PREVENTION** needs, people focus on **ACCURACY**
- ▶ With **PROMOTION** needs, people focus on **PROGRESS**

In turn, certain argument styles are more effective. [Wan, Hong, and Sternthal \(2009\)](#) found that simultaneous arguments (e.g., comparison tables) work better for prevention needs. Those side-by-side comparisons reinforce the accuracy of the decision.

Conversely, sequential arguments (e.g., lists of benefits) work better for promotion needs. Those consecutive structures mimic the perception of progress.

	BRAND A	BRAND B
Price	\$9.99	\$7.99
ABC	No	Yes
DEF	<b>x</b>	<b>✓</b>
GEH	Yes	No

**PREVENTION NEEDS**  
USE COMPARISON TABLES

REASONS TO BUY	
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
4.	_____
5.	_____

**PROMOTION NEEDS**  
USE LISTS OF BENEFITS

## TACTIC: FOR IMMEDIATE DECISIONS, USE “PREVENTION” AND “HOW” FRAMES

When writing copy, consider the decision timeline. *When* do readers need to act? That answer should dictate the framing in your copy.

[Mogilner, Aaker, & Pennington \(2008\)](#) found that people value different criteria — depending on the decision timeline:

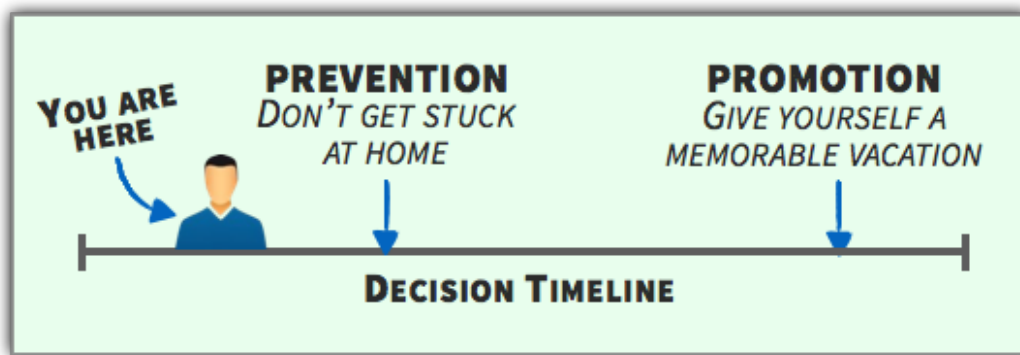
- ▶ **IMMEDIATE DECISIONS:** People worry about *reaching* a goal (i.e., feasibility)
- ▶ **DISTANT DECISIONS:** People worry about reaching a *pleasurable* goal (i.e., desirability)

Your copy should agitate those pain points.

For example, [Mogilner, Aaker, & Pennington \(2008\)](#) tested different ad framing — prevention vs. promotion — for a travel service.

- ▶ **PREVENTION** ads performed better for **IMMEDIATE** decisions (i.e., last-minute vacations). This framing agitates the *feasibility*.
- ▶ **PROMOTION** ads performed for **DISTANT** decisions (i.e., vacations that were months away). This framing agitates the *desirability*.

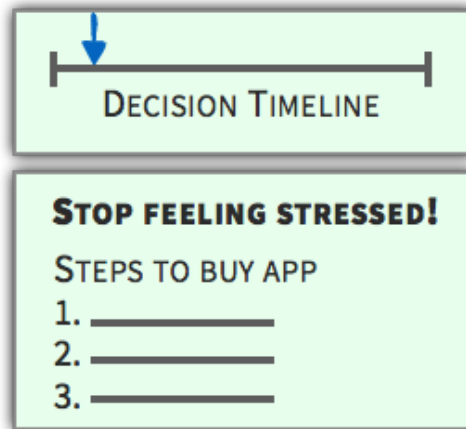
When the ad copy matched their mindset, people were willing to pay a higher price for the travel service.



Likewise, the decision timeline could also influence your choice of “how” vs. “why” framing. For example, [Kim, Rao, & Lee \(2009\)](#) found that political candidates perform better when “how” appeals are closer to the voting decision:

“In three experiments, we show that abstract, “why” laden appeals are more persuasive than concrete, “how” laden appeals when voters’ decision is temporally distant, and the reverse is true when the decision is imminent...” ([Kim, Rao, & Lee, 2009](#), pg. 1)

A productivity app would be a simple — usually immediate — purchase decision. Thus, you should emphasize a “prevention” frame, while accentuating *feasibility*. You could explain “how” the app increases productivity (i.e., feasibility of benefits). Or you could outline steps on “how” to buy the app (i.e. feasibility of purchase).



**TACTIC:** FOR IMMEDIATE DECISIONS, USE  
“PREVENTION” AND “HOW” FRAMES

## TACTIC: REDUCE THE INHERENT TYPE OF RISK

Don’t write copy haphazardly.

Rather than spew random information, choose arguments that will generate the *strongest* impact.

So...which arguments should you choose? You’ll want arguments that minimize risk. And every situation has different *types* of risk.

For example, [Lantos \(2011\)](#) describes **9 types of risk**. Identify your risk. Then adjust your copy accordingly.

RISK TYPE	DESCRIPTION	TACTIC
<b>Financial</b>	Loss of money	<i>Guarantees</i>
<b>Social</b>	Approval of others	<i>Testimonials</i>
<b>Ego</b>	Loss of prestige	<i>Endorsements</i>
<b>Functional</b>	Won’t work	<i>Free Trials</i>
<b>Physical</b>	Safety concerns	<i>Certifications</i>
<b>Psychological</b>	No gratification	<i>Emotional Copy</i>
<b>Time</b>	Learn how to use	<i>24/7 Support</i>
<b>Effort</b>	Exertion in use	<i>Clear Instructions</i>
<b>Obsolescence</b>	Become outdated	<i>Low-Cost Upgrade</i>

**TACTIC:** REDUCE THE INHERENT TYPE OF RISK

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# Conclusion

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Copywriting is a science. With a few *small* changes, you can make a *large* impact on the persuasiveness of your message.

But you should be realistic. At the end of the day, writing is still an art.

You can't transform a crappy painting into a masterpiece with a few brush strokes. Likewise, you can't transform crappy copy into a persuasive message with a few minor tweaks. *You need good copy at the heart of your message.*

If you can't write compelling copy, then prioritize that goal. Pick up some books to improve your writing skills:

- ▶ [The Elements of Style](#) by William Strunk and E.B. White
- ▶ [On Writing Well](#) by William Zinger
- ▶ [The Only Grammar Book You'll Ever Need](#) by Susan Thurman

Once you have the foundational skills, *then* you can make those extra tweaks to maximize the impact of your message.

And if you're still hungry for more copywriting content, you might enjoy my [article on negotiation](#).