

Magic Words

What to Say to Get Your Way

by **Jonah Berger**



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and Agency

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Almost everything we do involves words. But while we spend a lot of time using language, we rarely think about the specific language we use. While getting our point across is obviously important, the particular words used to do so often seem inconsequential. Natural language tools have transformed the social sciences, providing insight into all types of human behavior. The author parsed customer service scripts to uncover the words that increase customer satisfaction, dissected conversations to understand why some go better than others, and scrutinized online articles to identify writing that keeps readers engaged.

Along the way, he learned the power of magic words. Yes, what we say matters, but some words are more impactful than others. The right words, used at the right time, can change minds, engage audiences, and drive action. In *Magic Words: What to Say to Get Your Way*, author Jonah Berger uncovers the hidden science behind how language works and more importantly, how we can use it more effectively to persuade others, deepen relationships, and be more successful at home and at work using six types of magic words.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The power of magic words
- How to activate identity and agency
- How to ask the right questions
- The importance of harnessing similarities, and differences

Activate Identity and Agency

People can be described in various ways. Peter is old, and Scott is young. Susan is female, and Tom is male. Jessica is a morning person, Danny loves dogs, and Jill is a coffee drinker. There are many ways to say the same thing.

Someone who has left-leaning political beliefs, for example, could be described as being “liberal” or as being “a liberal.” Someone who likes dogs a lot could be described as “loving dogs” or being a “dog lover.”

These may seem like small variations, but in each case, the latter describes a category. If someone is described as liberal, it suggests that they hold left-leaning beliefs. But describing someone as “a liberal” suggests they fall into a particular group or type. They are a member of a specific set of people.

Category labels often imply a degree of permanence or stability. Rather than noting what someone did or does, feels or felt, category labels hint at a deeper essence: Who someone *is*. Regardless of time or situation, this is the type of person they are. That they will always be that way. Things that could be seen as temporary states often seem more enduring or fundamental when expressed using category labels. Losing is bad. Being a loser is even worse.

In all these cases, labels involve a particular part of speech: nouns. The trait “liberal” is an adjective, but the category “a liberal” is a noun. Saying that someone “runs a lot” uses “run” as a verb, while saying someone is a “runner” turns the action, a verb, into an identity, a noun. Across a variety of topics and domains, research finds that turning actions into identities can shape how others are perceived.

Want people to listen? Ask them to be a listener. Want them to lead? Ask them to be a leader. Rather than saying “Don’t lie,” saying, “Don’t be a liar” should be more effective. Turning actions into identities is one way to apply the broader category, language of identity and agency. But there are three other ways to encourage desired actions in ourselves and in others.

Change Can’ts to Don’ts: Having trouble sticking to your goals or resisting temptation? Try saying “I don’t eat sweets right now” instead of “I can’t.” This increases our feeling of empowerment and makes us more likely to achieve our goals.

Turn Shoulds into Coulds: Asking what we “could do” instead of what we “should do” encourages divergent thinking, helps us be more creative, and helps us get out of a rut.

Talk to Yourself: When nervous or anxious, try talking to yourself like a friend or family member would. It distances us from tough situations, reducing anxiety and increasing performance.

Pick Your Pronouns: Think carefully about using pronouns like “I” and “you.” They can draw attention and take ownership, but they also suggest responsibility and blame.

Convey Confidence

Speaking with power makes people seem confident. It makes them seem more certain, self-assured, and knowledgeable, which makes audiences more likely to listen and change their minds. When one speaks with power, they lay out a perspective or ideology that seems so convincing that it’s hard to disagree. They seem so confident about what they are saying that it’s hard to believe things could be any other way. But speaking with power or confidence isn’t something you’re born with, it’s something you can learn and there are four ways to do it.

Ditch the Hedges

Words like “might” or “could” are called hedges. They are used to express ambiguity, caution, or indecisiveness. We note that we *think* something will work, that a solution *could* be effective, or that an alternate approach *might* work better. But without realizing it, hedging can undermine our impact, because while we’re sharing our thoughts and recommendations, by hedging, we’re simultaneously undercutting them. We’re suggesting that we’re not sure those thoughts and recommendations are worth pursuing. To convey confidence, then, ditch the hedges.

In their place, use definites. Words like “definitely,” “clearly,” and “obviously” remove any shred of doubt. Definites do more than signal a lack of uncertainty. They suggest that things are 110 percent clear.

Don’t Hesitate

In regular everyday speech, most of us say things like “uh,” “um,” and “er,” a lot. It’s a common verbal tic we use when we’re collecting our thoughts or trying to sort out what to say next. And it’s an easy crutch to lean on. But while they’re fine once in a while, when used too often, these hesitations or filler words can weaken whatever is being said. Indeed, research finds that hesitations are even more detrimental than hedges. They make people seem less powerful and authoritative and less effective at getting across whatever they are trying to communicate.

Showing that we are conflicted or uncertain makes us seem less threatening and opens people up to other perspectives.

Rather than saying “um” or “uh,” take a second to pause. People will perceive us more positively and be more likely to follow our suggestions.

Turn Pasts into Presents

Verbs are an indispensable part of communication and they vary in their tense, indicating when an action takes place. In many situations, tense is determined by the situation, but in others, people can choose what verb tense to use. When talking about a job candidate, for example, someone can say that the candidate “seems” or “seemed” good. A new vacuum “cleans” or “cleaned” well. Beaches at a vacation destination “are” or “were” amazing. And a shift in verb tense can influence persuasion.

Present tense boosts impact. Past tense suggests that something was true at a particular point in time and further, that what is being conveyed is subjective as well. Present tense, in contrast, suggests something more general and enduring. Turning pasts into presents will make others more likely to listen to what we have to say.

Know When to Express Doubt

While speaking with power can make us seem more certain and increase the chance people follow our suggestions, there are some situations where being more circumspect is actually more effective.

Coming face-to-face with someone with whom you strongly disagree can quickly turn into a heated argument. Expressing doubt about a contentious issue increases persuasion. Particularly among people with strong beliefs, hearing someone else isn’t sure about their opinion encourages them to change their mind in that direction, too.

One reason change is so hard is that people are unwilling to even consider information that goes against their beliefs. As a result, when dealing with opposing viewpoints, being a bit more indirect can often be more effective. Showing that we are conflicted or uncertain makes us seem less threatening and opens people up to other perspectives.

Ask the Right Questions

In any social interaction, there are a seemingly infinite number of questions that could be asked. And while some questions facilitate social connection, others seem less beneficial. Ask someone an embarrassing or intrusive question, for example, and they might not be interested in talking to us again. How do we know the right types of questions to ask? There are four strategies.

Follow Up

Asking questions can signal that we’re interested in someone’s viewpoint, that we care about their perspective, and want to learn more. But not all types of questions lead the asker to be perceived positively. Follow-up questions encourage conversation partners to elaborate further, to say more, provide more details, and give more texture.

And no matter who they are talking to, follow-up questions are perceived more positively than other types because they demonstrate that someone listened, understood, and wants to know more. If you want someone to like you, don’t just ask questions, ask the *right* questions.

Deflect Difficulty

Difficult questions come up all the time and it often feels like there is no good option for answering them. Our first instinct is to answer honestly, to respond directly and completely, and tell the truth.

Doing so, however, is often costly. In negotiations, for example, someone who discloses private information may be explored by their counterpart. Similarly, in job interviews, someone who tells the truth about their prior compensation or reason for leaving may be offered less money or be passed over for the position.

Responding to a difficult question with a related question flips the script. Rather than seeming evasive, this makes us seem interested and engaged. Rather than making us look disagreeable and untrustworthy, it makes us look like we care and want to know more. And they do all this while deflecting attention.

Avoid Assumptions

How we ask sensitive questions has a big impact on whether we actually uncover the truth. Questions like “The car doesn’t have any problems, does it?” presume that there aren’t any issues.

While they do directly ask about problems, they simultaneously communicate the assumption that no problems exist. Compared to a general question, one way to ask about potential problems is to flip the assumption, presuming that problems exist rather than don’t. Questions like “What problems does it have?” do exactly that. This makes it much harder for the question to be evaded.

Start Safe, Then Build

Developing close relationships often involves self-disclosure. Eventual friends or partners don’t start close. They start by exchanging pleasantries, making chitchat, and filling conversational space. But what often separates relationships that evolve into something more is the ability to move past that. To go beyond the small talk and get to something deeper. To reveal things about oneself, learn things about someone else, and truly connect. And questions can help.

Mutual vulnerability fosters closeness, but getting to that point is tough. Start with questions that aren’t too big, but also don’t stay too small. Start safe and then build, becoming increasingly probing and revealing. Reciprocal self disclosure strengthens interconnectedness and can bring two people closer together.

Leverage Concreteness

In customer service, outcomes can be quite different even when the calls themselves have similar structures. Even when controlling for what people call about, customer demographics, and dozens of other factors, how agents talk plays an important role. A certain way of speaking boosts customer satisfaction. To understand that way of speaking, we have to understand a fourth type of magic words: what’s known as *linguistic concreteness*. There are three ways to apply it.

Make People Feel Heard

In many situations, the same thing can be talked about in more or less concrete ways. The more concrete the description, the more specific, vivid, and easier it is to picture or imagine. A service representative discussing a refund could say, we’ll send you *something*, a *refund*, or your *money*. The latter versions use more concrete language. The words used are

more specific, tangible, and real. Abstract, generic responses help save time and effort because they’re applicable to almost any situation. But that wide applicability has a downside.

People, whether customers or otherwise, want to feel heard. They want to feel like someone is listening to their concerns and going to address them. But for someone to feel heard, three things have to happen. First, they have to feel like the other person *paid attention* to what they’ve said. Second, they have to feel like the other person *understood* what they said. And third, the other person has to *demonstrate that they listened*.

This last part is key. Imagine talking to someone who provided no response. They might have attended to everything we said, but without some sort of outward signal that indicates they listened, it’s impossible to know whether or not they actually did. To make people feel heard, we have to *show* them that we listened. Concrete language provides that signal.

Make the Abstract Concrete

When estimating what others know or don’t know, people often use their own knowledge as a starting point. They assume that others know just as much as them. While we have spent lots of time thinking about something, or know a lot about it, we often fail to account for the fact that others may not be in the same position. Consequently, we often talk in ways that fly right over their heads. This is called the curse of knowledge and abstractness is the cause.

The more people learn about something, the more they naturally start to think about it abstractly. They may understand the problem, but they use such abstract language to explain it that the solution is completely unintelligible. We need to make the abstract concrete, helping people understand, and act on, what we’re saying.

Know When It’s Better to be Abstract

There are some situations, however, in which abstract language is better. While concrete language is often useful, if our goal is to come off as powerful, or make something seem like it has growth potential, using abstract language is better. It helps things stay high level and communicate the big picture. This is relevant in pitch language, for example, when a startup is trying to convey how their idea will more broadly impact the world.

Employ Emotion

Great stories often have ingredients or guidelines that help make them more engaging. Hearing about someone’s

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difficulties or tough times can give us inspiration or hope, believing that anything is possible. There is value in employing emotion and there are four ways to do that.

Build a Roller Coaster

Stories are an integral part of everyday life. We tell stories about everything from what we did over the weekend to why we think we're perfect for a job. And when we're not telling stories, we're consuming them, through books, movies, shows, and podcasts. Some stories, though, are better than others. They're more interesting, engaging, and captivating. They keep listeners on the edge of their proverbial seats, waiting to find out what happens next.

When it comes to stories, tension is key. Many successful stories seem to follow a predictable structure. Characters have to overcome various trials and tribulations before they reach the happy ending. Low points, or depths of despair, make the high points that much more powerful. Victories are savored more when they're snatched from the jaws of defeat.

The Value of Volatility

Highlighting the hurdles, or going from low to high, and back again, makes stories more engaging. And they are even more so when the ride is bumpy. Interrupting positive things with negative ones can actually increase enjoyment. The less positive moments make the following positive ones new again and thus more enjoyable.

Emotionally volatile stories are unpredictable. Things might generally get better, but at any moment it's hard to know whether they'll get better or worse. And this unpredictability makes the ride more stimulating and increases liking.

We can leverage this in job interviews, conversations, or in public settings. Sharing our imperfections can be an asset. Explaining how we overcame adversity is viewed as strength. Leveraging emotional volatility can help turn any story into a great one.

Consider the Context

Whenever people express an attitude or opinion, they can do so in various ways. They can say they *loved*, *hated*, *liked*,

or avoided a movie. They can say a restaurant was *awesome*, *amazing*, *mediocre*, or *terrible*.

These words not only indicate how much someone liked something, they also suggest that the evaluation is based on emotions versus other factors. But rather than emotional language always being persuasive, whether it encourages action depends on the *type of thing* we're trying to persuade people about.

Emotionality is good for hedonic things, like movies and restaurants, but it is bad for more utilitarian ones. When marketing a product, selling an idea, or even pitching ourselves, we often use positive language. But that's not enough. We need to consider the context. If we are talking about a product, service, or experience in terms of practical functionality, less emotional words will be more persuasive.

Activate Uncertainty

Keeping an audience engaged is challenging, as anyone who has ever made a presentation or created content can attest. The distinction between attracting and holding attention is key. Senders don't just want people to open their emails, they want them to read them. Leaders don't just want employees to attend their presentations, they want them to listen to and internalize what was said.

Differences in certainty have an important impact on sustained attention. Uncertainty leads people to stick around to resolve what they don't know. If they aren't sure what will happen next or how something will end, they stay tuned to find out. This can be activated to deepen engagement, particularly around seemingly less stimulating subject matter.

Harness Similarity (and Difference)

To truly understand language, and its impact, we have to put it in context. We have to examine how the words one person uses relate to the words other people are using. Because rather than suggesting that some words are good and others are bad, it highlights the importance of *linguistic similarity*. To harness its power, we need to know three things.

When to Signal Similarity

Organizational culture has become a hot topic. Building a strong culture, maintaining it, and hiring applicants who fit. Like all groups, online or otherwise, organizations have terminology and linguistic norms. Different tribes have different lingo. Startup founders talk about “pivoting,” retailers talk about “omnichannel,” and Wall Street traders talk about “pikers” and being “junked up.”

Similarity shapes success. Using similar language can lead to better performance evaluations, higher bonuses, and a greater likelihood of being promoted. Daters who talk similarly are more likely to go on a second date and students who write similarly are more likely to become friends. Using similar language can facilitate conversation, make people feel connected, and increase their perception that they are a part of the same tribe. All of which can increase liking, trust, and a variety of positive downstream outcomes.

When to Be Different

In analyzing thousands of songs to determine what makes a hit and what doesn't, words and how they are used in an overall theme matters. Country songs, for example, sing a lot about girls and cars but not so much about body movement. Rap songs talk a lot about street cred and not so much about love. Dance and rock songs talk more about fiery love, while pop songs talk more about uncertain love. In analyzing the link between atypicality and success, the most successful are atypical.

A country song about girls and cars, for example, tends to do pretty well, but one that is more about atypical themes like dance moves or street cred is even more likely to be a hit. The more differentiated a song's lyrics are from its genre, the more popular it tends to be. In fact, even looking at cases where the same song charts in two different genres, the song ends up being more popular on the chart where it is more atypical. Difference drives success.

When Similarity is Good and Difference is Better

Using similar language seems to pay off at the office, but using different language makes songs more successful. So when is similarity good and when is difference better? Similarity can be good and bad. Similarity feels familiar and safe but can also be boring. Difference can be exciting and stimulating but can also be risky. Consequently, whether similarity or difference is better depends on what is valued in a particular context.

Are you working in a domain where creativity, innovation,

or stimulation is valued? Linguistic differentiation may be beneficial. Are you doing a job where familiarity, fitting in, and safety are desired? Linguistic similarity may be better.

How to Plot the Right Progression

Just as atypical lyrics make songs more interesting to listen to, a faster plot progression makes a story more stimulating. Rather than just plodding along, moving faster between more differentiated topics and ideas is more exciting, which leads audiences to react more favorably.

Starting slow is key. If the plot moves too fast right off the bat, the audience may get left in the dust. Early on, speed is detrimental. But once similarity has helped lay the groundwork, setting the stage and building expectations, the story must advance. Once everyone is on board, the best stories pick up steam, building excitement, and engagement, along the way.

This translates to everything from telling a story to communicating more generally. If the goal is to entertain, speed is good. If the goal is to inform, however, a different trajectory may be better. When presenting complex ideas, slow may be the way to go.

The six types of magic words discussed in this book can help us across all areas of our lives. Words and phrases can be used to influence others and reveal things about the people and society that created them. The right words used at the right time can have immense power. They can help us persuade colleagues and customers, engage audiences and acquaintances, and connect with partners and peers.

But while the impact of these words may seem magical, we don't have to be a magician to use them. Indeed, rather than being a spell, these words work by leveraging the science of human behavior. By understanding how magic words work, anyone can harness their power.



Jonah Berger is an associate professor of marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. His research has been published in top-tier academic journals and popular accounts of his work have appeared in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Science, Harvard Business Review, and more. His research has also been featured in the New York Times Magazine's "Year in Ideas." Berger has been recognized with a number of awards for both scholarship and teaching. He is also the author of *Contagious and Invisible Influence*.

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