

Power Verbs for Presenters

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Power Verbs for Presenters

**HUNDREDS OF VERBS
AND PHRASES TO PUMP UP
YOUR SPEECHES AND
PRESENTATIONS**

**MICHAEL LAWRENCE FAULKNER
WITH MICHELLE FAULKNER-LUNSFORD**

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Dedicated to my wife, Jo-Ann

*She has been patient, inspirational, understanding,
thoughtful, and loving beyond all expectations.*

She is the ultimate power verb.

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1

Why and How Power Verbs Can Pump Up Your Speeches and Presentations

Although no sources can trace it to him, an oft-used quotation is frequently attributed to Plutarch: “When Cicero spoke, people said, ‘How well Cicero speaks!’ But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, ‘Let us march against Philip.’” The point is, the purpose of public speaking is usually—but not always—to persuade. As Rudyard Kipling said, “Words are the most powerful drug used by mankind.” So whenever we speak, we are using a powerful device. Thomas Fuller might have said it best: “When the heart is afire, some sparks will fly out of the mouth.” This book gives you some sparks.

This is not a style book. Nor is it a book on public speaking, *per se*. If that is what you are looking for, you can put this book down—but not too fast. You might want to read a little further; it might be just what you are looking for.

In this book, you will not learn specific skills of public speaking, oration, or rhetoric—or even how to deliver a good presentation. You will not learn in depth the skills of visualizing; managing stage fright; channeling your message; adapting to your audience; maintaining eye contact; using tone, cadence, and pitch; breathing properly; using hand gestures; selecting a topic; or handling questions. This book will make you a more powerful communicator because it helps you choose powerful verbs—the spark of sentences that people will remember. Power verbs are the flame that make your phrases and sentences ignite people’s passions. Power verbs are the kindling that illuminates purpose and makes people want to take action ... to march on Philip.

Why verbs, you might be asking? Not just verbs, but power verbs. First, more books have been written on language skills and verbs than you can imagine, and the world does not need another one of those books. Second, it would not be much fun to write or read another boring language skills book. If those books were so interesting, wouldn’t there be a movie about one of them by

now? Finally, this isn't a book about the old standby verbs. Everyone knows the 16 basic English language verbs: *be, do, have, come, go, see, seem, give, take, keep, make, put, send, say, let, get.*

Power verbs are emotionally edgy and powerfully positioned, with punch and pizzazz. Hundreds of books, guides, blogs, and more can help people learn how to put a speech together. Numerous guidebooks walk through writing and delivering a speech. However, in my 35 years of experience in giving hundreds of speeches and presentations, I've learned one fundamental truth: The power of the words selected and way they are delivered—the rhythm—make the greatest difference in the success of the presentation.

So why not write one book with every piece of advice, technique, and approach available? Simple: a fundamental principle called Pareto's Law, or the 80/20 principle. Simply stated, this widely accepted principle posits that the vast majority (the 80 percent) of all explanations for things such as solutions to problems and answers to questions are usually found in the smallest number of options (the 20 percent). So 80 percent of a great presentation or speech is in the 20 percent category for the proper words chosen and the rhythm in which they are delivered. As Dr. Frank Luntz says, "It's not what you say—it's what people hear" (Luntz, 2007, p. xi). Your audience translates your message through a prism of their own biases, interests, knowledge, awareness, feelings, attention span, and many other interpretative filters. Once you have spoken words, they no longer are yours. Other people will translate them, evaluate them, and measure them. Choose your words carefully—make them appropriate for the situation, and be aware of the power of words.

Poorly chosen words or speech used for hubris or evil can impact self-esteem, destroy morale, kill enthusiasm, inflame bias, incite hatred, lower expectations, and hold people back. Experts are learning more about the connection between words and people's human spirit and health. We've known for some time that insults and verbal harassment can make us physically and mentally ill. Inappropriate words can make work and home toxic, abusive environments. Empirical studies show that people who live or work in toxic environments suffer more colds, flu, heart attacks, depression—more of almost all chronic physical and emotional disorders than people who report living or working in happy, enjoyable, caring environments.

Hiding almost in plain sight for years, and now clearly recognized, is the connection between physical violence and words. Rarely does physical violence occur without some sort of verbal preamble. The old parental advice that sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you is simply bad advice. On the other hand, well-chosen words or speech for the benefit of good can motivate, inspiring others to greater feats and deeds. They can offer hope, create vision, impact others' beliefs and behavior, and alter the results of strategies, objectives, and, overall, people's lives.

Nationally syndicated columnist Peggy Noonan knows a thing or two about words and how they impact us. She recently wrote about the advice Clare Booth Luce once gave the newly inaugurated U.S. President John F. Kennedy. Luce was truly a remarkable woman. Her career spanned seven decades and nearly as many professional interests—journalism, politics, the theater, diplomacy, and intelligence.

According to Noonan, Luce had a conversation in the White House with her old friend John F. Kennedy in 1962. She told him, “A great man is one sentence.” That is, his leadership can be so well summed up in a single sentence that you don’t need to hear his name to know who’s being talked about. Think of “He preserved the union and freed the slaves” and “He lifted us out of a great depression and helped win a world war.” You don’t need to be told that the answers are Lincoln and FDR.

Luce wondered what Kennedy’s sentence would be. Her advice to him was to concentrate, to know the great themes and demands of his time, and focus on them. It was good advice. History has imperatives, and sometimes they are clear. Sometimes they are met, and sometimes not. When they’re clear and met, you get quite a sentence (Noonan, *Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2009).

Fast-forwarding to more contemporary times, the historic 2012 presidential debates might have had more significance than previous debates because of the words the candidates chose—their rhythm and nonverbal physical cues. A big part of successfully communicating depends on how well we negotiate the paradox of how the vast majority of human communication is conducted. We know from empirical research that more than 97 percent of human communication involves nonverbal cues (body language).

To give a successful presentation, speech, or presidential debate performance, we must compose a sophisticated but seamless message that unites our words in the proper rhythm and uses the corresponding nonverbal cues. If our words don’t match our nonverbal cues, or vice versa, the audience will be confused and the message will be diminished—or, worse, ignored.

In the world of movies, theater, art, and entertainment, words have a dramatic impact. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* edition, a special report entitled “What’s In a Name?” explored the original titles for a number of box office successes. For example, the Humphrey Bogart classic *Casablanca* had an original title of *Everybody Comes to Ricks*. The Julia Roberts/Richard Gere blockbuster *Pretty Woman* had an original title of *\$3,000*. The successful *G.I. Jane* was slated to be released as *In Defense of Honor*. And the world might not have ever remembered Diane Keaton and Woody Allen in *Anhedonia*, but we do remember *Annie Hall* (*Wall Street Journal*, 19 October 2012, p. D1).

Words have the power to affect both the physical and emotional health of people to whom we speak, for better and for worse. Words used to influence are inspiring, uplifting, and challenging; they encourage, motivate, and

persuade. They can be visionary; they can change people's lives for the better. Words used with power, coercion, force, and deception have a short-term impact, if they have any at all.

Verbal communication is a powerful human instrument, and we must learn to use it properly. We need to learn to think not only about *speaking* in new ways, but also about language, human nature, psychology, and sociology.

LET'S TAKE A MOMENT AND THINK ABOUT LANGUAGE

One of the peculiar characteristics of our culture involves how we communicate. Communication is perhaps the most important human function in which we engage, but we don't do it very well and aren't trained well to do so. We know that about 97 percent of human communication is through nonverbal cues or by use of mostly facial expressions and hand gestures. Because we don't trust our instincts driven by our amygdala (which some refer to as our animal brain) as much as we should, we have trouble absorbing the nonverbal human communications adequately.

Think about all our acculturation that teaches us to deny our amygdala-driven instincts: "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," "Don't judge a book by its cover," "Don't jump to conclusions," "Look before you leap," "Act in haste, repent at your leisure," "We should have a committee meeting to talk it over first," and so on. In spite of how much communication nonverbal cues transfer, our schools provide very little training to improve human nonverbal perception.

For the 3 percent of human communication that is conveyed by language, we generally don't listen as effectively as we should. Furthermore, our educational system often fails students and society by giving them minimal instruction in communication skills (writing, speaking, and listening skills). Considering that we express almost every desire, need, emotion, feeling, want, expectation, demand, and frustration to other humans via communication, it is surprising and disappointing that lower forms of life do a better job of communicating.

WHAT IS THE SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE?

We learn language completely from audio cues—by listening. We do this because human brains are hard-wired, or genetically prewired, to learn language by listening as infants. Interestingly, we are not even consciously aware that we are cognitively learning. Before we had the ability to speak words, others could understand us. Our species survived and advanced by making other members understand with nonverbal cues. For more than a million years, children communicated to their mothers that they were hungry. Men communicated to women, and women to men, that they were interested in each other as partners. Hunters collaborated on big animal kills long before a word was

spoken. Man even showed others how to start and keep a fire going long before there were words for such things. Anthropologists believe that the spoken word appeared on the scene between 350,000 B.C. and 160,000 B.C.—that’s a long time spent using grunts, pointing, and relying on body language.

The special significance of language as a great idea lies in the fact that it is related to all other great ideas, insofar as ideas and thoughts are expressed to other persons mostly in language.

In his dialogues, Plato used Socrates as a character and continually called attention to the slippery nature of words and how sometimes words conceal thoughts as well as express them. In more modern times, philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke wrote about the abuse of words and how to use language. Today we view language a bit as an enemy—a barrier to communication and a tyranny of words. Debate even centers on whether communications and speech are the same thing.

A time will likely come when you have to give a presentation or speech. If you do not capture the attention of the audience with your communication skills, you will hear the crickets chirping because no one is listening to you. Then you will become another example of what not to say in a presentation. Maybe you are one of the lucky individuals who will not have to endure an interview or give a presentation. Nonetheless, you will have to communicate at some point. With the addition of texting, instant messaging, email, and social networking, we have few reasons to physically write a complete message and send it to a recipient anymore. However, if you choose to send a message, remember that it is a permanent reflection of you. This is how this book can help you.

History has seen many examples of memorable quotes that demonstrate that *how* someone says something is just as important as *what* he or she says. For example, when Lyndon B. Johnson was stumping for political office, he was asked the difference between himself and his opposing candidate. He famously replied, “He matriculated and I never matriculated.” Some of the most famous speeches Abraham Lincoln made are memorable not just for their message, but also for the fact that Lincoln condensed an enormous amount of information into them. His second inaugural speech was a mere 700 words, and the *Gettysburg Address* was just under three minutes. Beyond his words, his cadence gave those speeches more power.

Power verbs express an action that is to be taken or that has been taken. Used correctly, a powerful verb has the power to impact your life, whether you are going into battle, running for president, or simply interviewing for a job.

Researchers have observed that, when students are given standardized tests and told that the tests are “intelligence exams,” the average scores are 10 percent to 20 percent lower than when the same exam is given to similar students who are told that it is “just an exam.”

We know that words create ideas, impressions, images, concepts, and fac-similes. Therefore, the words that we hear and read influence how we think and, consequently, how we behave. Thus, there is a correlation between the words we select and use and the results that occur.

The words we use, and the impact they have, can even be impacted by our background and other influences. Consider the words *buy* and *invest*. If you are selling life insurance, you want the customer to buy now, but in your mind, the purchase is a long-term investment. The premiums will be invested, the face value of the policy will grow, there will eventually be loan value, and the investment will appreciate beyond the purchase price. However, the customer thinks in terms of a purchase decision and how much it costs. The issue comes full circle if the customer does buy and wants the insurance company to make good investments with the premium.

Nan Russell, writing for Career Know-How, introduces this word choice: problem or challenge? Would you rather have your boss see your mistake as a problem or a challenge? Is it just semantics? Problems are fixed; challenges are met. Different words evoke a set of different emotions and different feelings. People usually have a much more positive feeling about “meeting a challenge” than “fixing a problem.”

Power verbs can have medicinal benefits if used correctly, but consider this warning about words used inappropriately: They can actually cause individuals to become ill. In a published study on pain, researchers used functional magnetic resonance tomography (fMRI) to examine how 16 healthy people processed words associated with experiencing pain. The brain scans revealed which parts of the brain were activated in response to hearing the words. In the first experiment, researchers asked the participants to imagine situations that corresponded to words associated with pain (such as *excruciating*, *paralyzing*, and *grueling*), as well as situations that corresponded to negative but non-pain-associated words (such as *dirty* and *disgusting*) and both neutral and positive words. In the second experiment, the participants read the same words but were distracted by a brainteaser. In both cases, the results showed a clear response in the brain’s pain-processing centers to the words associated with pain, but no such activity pattern arose in response to the other words. Researchers say that preserving painful experiences as memories in the brain might have been an evolutionary response to allow humans to avoid painful situations that might be dangerous (www.webmd.com/pain-management/news/20100402/words-really-do-hurt).

WEAVE IN BEAUTIFUL WORDS

What words make you feel warm and happy? Sure; it’s different for all of us, but some words have universal appeal (at least, in English). The British

Council, which oversees education of the English language, conducts an annual study of the “Most Beautiful Words in the English Language.” Forty-thousand people participated in the study. The top ten words were as follows:

1. Mother
2. Passion
3. Smile
4. Love
5. Eternity
6. Fantastic
7. Destiny
8. Freedom
9. Liberty
10. Tranquility

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR YOU

For additional support, I have included eight words that Dr. Frank Luntz has compiled from his research. These are words that have become powerful in the past ten years. The following list displays the words and briefly describes why they are powerful additions to your word arsenal.

1. **Consequences:** n. The phenomenon that follows, caused by a previous phenomenon.
2. **Impact:** n. A forceful consequence that causes listeners to assume that they will see and feel a measurable difference. Speaking about potential solutions or best effort is no longer good enough; people want results.
3. **Impact:** v. To have an effect upon, to cause listeners to assume that they will see and feel a measurable difference. Speaking about potential solutions or best effort is no longer good enough; people want results.
4. **Diplomacy:** n. A subtle, skillful, peaceful, nondramatic solution to problems. People are tired of drama, anxiety, and tension; they want leadership in diplomacy.
5. **Dialogue:** n. The discussion of diplomatic issues.
6. **Reliability:** n. The quality of being dependable in a way that was expected or better.
7. **Mission:** An authentic and genuine purpose.
8. **Commitment:** Dedication to what one promised.

In our American culture, a growing trend involves converting words that are nouns into verbs. *Verbed* has made its way into the mainstream and is used in everyday language. Some instances of this relate more to social media. The social networking site Facebook has also seen its name itself become a verb used to describe the action of communication. *Facebooking* someone now means sending a message or posting to someone's Wall. (Although my family believes that I am addicted to the social media site, they can be assured that, at all family functions, I will be the one taking all the photos and will later Facebook the photos. They will have clear copies, taken from a different perspective, for themselves for eternity.) Likewise, in the days before Facebook, to say you would "tag" someone meant something entirely different.

Another example of converting a noun to a verb is the search engine Google. Don't know the answer to something? Then *Google* it. The same can be said for texts. The action of sending a text has become shortened to the verb *texting*.

Especially for the millennial generation (born after 1970), people don't talk much on the phone anymore—they text each other. Although texting is fine for quick impersonal communications, it should never substitute for professional communication. This phenomenon of turning nouns into verbs means that the English language is constantly evolving and changing. Style manuals are outdated before they even hit the shelves, which is why this book is not a style manual: It does not attempt to identify these urbane, hip, or chic fad words. Instead, it includes a number of nouns that are now commonly accepted action verbs in today's business culture. Consider these examples:

silo	siloed
email	emailed
SPAM	spammed
message	messaged

The impact of action/power verbs and how they are woven into our collective conscience is evident in the names advertisers use for their products. For everyday items, we associate certain products with action verbs, as in these examples: Accord car model, Act mouthwash, Agree shampoo, Allure ski product, Ban deodorant, Budget Rent A Car, Converse tennis shoes, Dodge cars, Eclipse exercise machine, Endeavor spaceship, Edge shaving cream, Equal sugar substitute, Escalade Cadillac, Excel software, *Glamour* magazine, Gleem toothpaste, Google (company), Intuit software, Kindle e-reader, Marvel comics, Pilot pens, Pledge cleaner, Pioneer sound systems, Puff tissues, Quip (precursor to the fax machine), Raid bug killer, Shuffle iPod product, SPAM, Target store, and Vanish home cleaning product. These are just a few examples.

Over time, the inconsistency of English grammar has made it increasingly difficult for non-native speakers to learn English—even those who speak English as a first language often find it difficult to speak correctly. Some rules and styles are antiquated and not enforced. As a result, we have become lazy and are losing the war on poor grammar. English is a minefield of rules, and although I can assure you that this is not a style manual, it goes without saying that if you were to follow all the rules, you would spend a lifetime studying them. You'd also end up speaking a language that no normal person would understand. (And you'd be a complete bore.)

George Orwell wrote an essay in 1946 entitled “The Politics of the English Language,” in which he criticized the ugly and inaccurate use of the English language, particularly the bland use of passive verbs:

The passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*). The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the *-ize* and *de-* formations, and the banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-* formation. Simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as *with respect to*, *having regard to*, *the fact that*, *by dint of*, *in view of*, *in the interests of*, *on the hypothesis that*; and the ends of sentences are saved by anticlimax by such resounding commonplaces as *greatly to be desired*, *cannot be left out of account*, *a development to be expected in the near future*, *deserving of serious consideration*, *brought to a satisfactory conclusion*, and so on and so forth. (Orwell, 1946)

As mentioned previously, the English language comes with many rules, and as with any rule, there are also exceptions, counterexceptions, special rules, do's and don'ts, and other confusing situations. More than 60 different rules and variations of rules exist for verbs alone. After you have learned the rules, you still have to follow exceptions. For example, consider the word *lightning* used as a verb. We say that it is “thundering and lightning all night”; it is the only exception to the rule that *-ing* can be added to the base verb to produce the *-ing* form. We do not say or write “It thundered and lightninging all night,” nor do we say or write “It “thundered and lightning all night.” As another exception to the rules, we say that we “relayed a message” but “relaid a carpet” (Crystal, 1995, p. 205).

For all my former English teachers and the dedicated writers of the grammar books on linguistic style and theory who will wonder why this book says nothing about active and passive voice, conjugation, and transitive or

intransitive usage, that is your job. This guide is merely a road map to help individuals move toward success in everyday communications.

I am not excusing people from their responsibility and duty to learn the language correctly. However, there is a time and place for everything. Noam Chomsky, perhaps the most influential figure in the theoretical linguistics of the English language, recently conceived the goal of linguistics (all the rules, principles, and regulations) to be a description of the mental grammar of native speakers.

Chomsky perceives linguistics to be the system of all these rules, to characterize the mental structure that underlies our ability to speak and understand the language. Furthermore, Chomsky hypothesizes that humans have an innate language ability that enables children to quickly acquire a mental glimmer when they are exposed to a particular language. It's pretty amazing to think that a child learns an entire language by listening and observing some nonverbal cues. By the age of 5, a person has about 70 percent of lifetime vocabulary and linguistic rules learned by listening and observation.

Chomsky (and this is the last reference to a theorist or an intellectual, I promise) draws a distinction between competence in a language and performance in a language. Competence is the underlying knowledge of the theory and applications, whereas performance is the actual use of that knowledge. This book doesn't assume anything. It provides a performance tool for one part of the language: power verbs.

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*Words in **bold** are power verbs.

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