



LANGUAGE OF PERSUASION

The Language of Persuasion

Many media messages that we interact with every day are trying to persuade audiences to think, feel, believe, and/or do something. The media messages most reliant on persuasion are found in advertising, public relations, and advocacy. Commercial advertising tries to persuade us to buy a product or service. Public relations (PR) sells us a positive image of a corporation, government, or organization. Politicians and advocacy groups (groups that support a particular belief, point of view, policy, or action) try to persuade us to vote for or support them, using ads, speeches, websites, social media, and other means. These media messages and messengers use a variety of techniques to grab our attention, to establish credibility and trust, to stimulate desire for the product or policy, and to motivate us to act (buy, vote, give money, etc.)

Most of us have persuaded someone to do something, too—asked a child to clean their room, begged a parent to let us stay out late, or convinced a foundation to financially support a program in our non-profit organization. There is nothing inherently bad or wrong about persuasion. Sometimes we may not know that this art of persuasion is made up of identified techniques, or even realize we are using these tried and tested tools. Once we can understand and recognize these techniques we can better deconstruct them. Just as importantly, we can also become more adept at using these tools in our own lives and in our own media creations, too.

These techniques are called the "language of persuasion" and learning to identify and utilize these techniques is an important media literacy skill. Media Literacy Project defines persuasion as getting people to do something in their best interest, and manipulation as getting someone to do something that goes against their best interest. We understand that persuasion techniques are used to persuade as well as to manipulate. With media examples everywhere and this resource you can decide whether a message is simply persuading or manipulating. Once you know how media messages try to persuade you to believe or do something, you'll be better able to make your own decisions, and better able to make your own media.

Note to educators:

We've divided our list of persuasion techniques into three levels: Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced. Basic techniques are easily identified in many media examples, and they are a good starting point for all learners. Identifying many intermediate techniques may require more critical distance, and they should usually be investigated after learners have mastered the basics. More abstraction and judgment may be required to identify the advanced techniques, and some learners may find them difficult to understand. However, even media literacy beginners may be able to spot some of the intermediate or advanced techniques, so feel free to examine any of the persuasion techniques with your group.

Advertising is the easiest starting point to begin teaching these techniques. Most ads are relatively simple in structure, easily available, and their techniques can be very obvious at times. Media literacy beginners are encouraged to learn the language of persuasion by examining ads. Keep in mind that many media messages, such as television commercials, use several techniques simultaneously. Others selectively employ one or two.

Political rhetoric, whether used by politicians, government officials, lobbyists, or activists, is more difficult to analyze, not only because it involves more emotional issues, but also because it is more likely to be seen in bits and fragments, often filtered or edited by others. Depending on the level of your learners, you may want to introduce basic concepts using ads before getting into news, blogs, and campaign speeches.

Basic Persuasion Techniques

1. Association. This persuasion technique tries to link a product, service, or idea with something already liked or desired by the target audience, such as fun, pleasure, beauty, security, intimacy, success, wealth, etc. The media message doesn't make explicit claims that you'll get these things, rather the association is implied. Association can be a very powerful technique. A good ad can create a strong emotional response and then associate that feeling with a brand (happiness = Coke, patriotic pride = America). This process is known as emotional transfer. Several of the persuasion techniques below, like Beautiful people, Warm & fuzzy, Symbols, and Nostalgia, are specific types of Association.

2. Bandwagon. Many ads show lots of people using the product, implying that "everyone is doing it" (or at least all the cool, beautiful, successful, or rich people are doing it). No one likes to be left out or left behind, and these ads urge us to jump on the bandwagon. Ads might say, "All moms trust this vacuum cleaner," or "Everyone is using the latest iPhone." News reports might say, "People can't stop talking about the most recent social media network."

3. Beautiful people. This technique uses models and actors who are considered attractive according to media industry standards in order to draw our attention. Sometimes the beautiful people are also celebrities. This technique is extremely common in ads, which may imply that we'll look like the models if we use the product. We also see this technique employed in newscasts where journalists are expected to look like models. This technique is so common that politicians and public officials are often criticized for not fitting this "beauty" look, especially if they are women.

4. Bribery. This technique tries to persuade us to buy a product by promising to give us something else, like a discount, a rebate, a coupon, or a free gift. Sales, special offers, contests, and sweepstakes are all forms of bribery. Unfortunately, we don't really get something for free—part of the sales price covers the cost of the bribe. Sometimes politicians make promises during election season to get votes, which is another form of bribery.

5. Celebrities. Celebrities are used to grab our attention so that we will associate the product or idea with the attributes of that particular celebrity. By appearing in an ad, celebrities implicitly endorse a product and sometimes the endorsement is explicit when they directly state they use the product. In this way, their participation is also a Testimonial. Many people know that companies pay celebrities a lot of money to appear in their ads yet this type of testimonial is effective.

6. Everyday people. This technique is often a type of Testimonial. The use of Everyday people works because we may believe or identify with an "ordinary" person more than a highly-paid celebrity. This technique is often used to sell everything from basic consumer products like laundry detergent or frozen dinners to a political candidate and their values. Most of the Everyday people in ads are actually paid actors who have been carefully selected because they look like one's idea of "ordinary" working class or middle class people.

7. Experts. We rely on experts to advise us about things that we don't know ourselves. Scientists, doctors, professors, writers, and other professionals often appear in ads and advocacy messages, lending their credibility to the product, service, or idea being sold. They might also be interviewed in a news story, or quoted by a politician in a speech. Sometimes, Everyday people can also be Experts, as when a mother endorses a brand of baby powder or a construction worker endorses a treatment for sore muscles. In this way, Experts can also be a type of Testimonial.

8. Explicit claims. Something is "explicit" if it is directly, fully, and/or clearly expressed or demonstrated. For example, some ads state the price of a product, the main ingredients, where it was made, or the number of items in the package. Explicit claims are also specific, measurable promises about quality, effectiveness, or reliability, like "Works in only five minutes!" or, "When I was Senator I reduced spending by 10%." Explicit claims can be proven true or false through close examination or testing, and if they're false, the advertiser may get in trouble.

9. Fear. Fear is the opposite of the Association technique. It uses something disliked or feared by the intended audience (like bad breath, failure, isolation, loss of security, or safety) to promote a "solution." Ads use fear to sell us products that claim to prevent or fix the problem. Politicians and advocacy groups use our fears to get elected or to gain support for a cause.

10. Flattery. Persuaders love to flatter us. Politicians and advertisers sometimes speak directly to us: "You know a good deal when you see one." "You expect quality." "You work hard for a living." "You deserve it." Sometimes ads flatter us by showing people doing unintelligent things, so that we'll feel smarter or superior. Flattery works because we like to be praised and we tend to believe people we like. (We're sure that someone as brilliant as you will easily understand this technique!)

11. Humor. Humor grabs our attention and is a powerful persuasion technique. When we laugh, we feel good and we often remember this feeling. Advertisers make us laugh and then show us their product or logo because they're trying to connect that good feeling to their product. They hope that when we see their product in a store, we'll subtly re-experience that good feeling and select their product over another brand..

12. Intensity. The language of ads and other media are full of intensifiers—words, images, or music that make something seem more powerful or intense. Examples include superlatives (greatest, best, most, fastest, lowest prices), comparatives (more, better than, improved, increased, fewer calories), exaggeration (amazing, incredible, forever), and many other ways to hype the product. Music that accompanies news programs and commercials is often used to increase intensity.

13. Maybe. Unproven, exaggerated, or outrageous claims are commonly preceded by words such as may, might, can, could, some, many, often, virtually, as many as, or up to. ("This product could change your life." "If you vote for me you might pay less taxes.") Watch for these words if an offer seems too good to be true.

14. New. We love new things and new ideas, because we tend to believe they're better than old things and old ideas. That's because the dominant culture in the United States (and many other countries) places great faith and value in being young, in technology, and in progress. New products and new ideas are not a guarantee of something better, and like any product or idea, they can lead to new and more difficult problems.

15. Repetition. Media makers use repetition in two ways. Within a message, words, sounds, or images may be repeated to reinforce the main point. Advertisers, news broadcasters, filmmakers, poets, and others use this technique often. The other use of repetition is repeating the message itself. A banner ad on your favorite website, a political slogan, a commercial, a billboard, or a logo may be displayed or repeated again and again, sometimes over a long period of time.

16. Rhetorical questions. These are questions designed to get us to agree with the speaker. They are set up so that the "correct" answer is obvious. Examples include questions such as, "Do you want to get out of debt?" "Do you want quick relief from headache pain?" and "Should we leave our nation vulnerable to terrorist attacks?" Rhetorical questions are used to build trust and alignment before the person tries to get us to buy a product or idea.

17. Scientific evidence. Scientific evidence often accompanies the Expert technique. It uses data and scientific imagery (charts, graphs, statistics, lab coats, etc.) to prove something. It often works because many people trust science and scientists. It is important to look closely at the "evidence," because it can be misleading. Questions to ask about the evidence may include: Who conducted the study? How many people were surveyed? Who participated in the survey? Is the person in a lab coat an actor?

18. Testimonials. Media messages often show people testifying about the value or quality of a product, or endorsing an idea. They can be Experts, Celebrities, or Everyday people. We often believe the person giving the testimony because they are sharing their personal opinion. One example could be a music or Internet celebrity who really wants us to know which skincare products she likes. She has used them and wants to share her experience. Another example is a community member telling us why he is voting for someone. This person is someone from our town (supposedly) instead of the politician running for office herself. This technique works best when it seems like the person testifying is doing so because they genuinely like the product or agree with the idea.

19. Timing. Sometimes a media message is persuasive simply based on when it is delivered. This can be as simple as placing ads for flowers and candy just before Valentine's Day, creating a news segment based on a recent trend in diet or fashion, or delivering a political speech right after a major news event. Sophisticated ad campaigns commonly roll out carefully-timed messages to grab our attention and generate a response.

20. Warm & fuzzy. This technique uses sentimental images (especially of happy people, beautiful landscapes, children, and animals) to stimulate feelings of happiness or comfort. Warm & fuzzy messages may also include the use of soothing music, pleasant voices, and suggestive words like "cozy" or "comforting." The Warm & fuzzy technique is a form of Association.

Intermediate Persuasion Techniques

21. Analogy. Analogy compares one situation with another. A good analogy, where the situations are reasonably similar, can aid decision-making. People fighting for Internet access might compare broadband to electricity. This comparison states that the Internet is a basic utility, like electricity or water, and is necessary in a 21st Century world that relies on this technology for education, health information, staying connected with loved ones, entertainment, and other purposes.

22. The Big Lie. According to Adolf Hitler, one of the 20th century's most dangerous propagandists, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a big one. The Big Lie is more than exaggeration or hype; it is telling a complete falsehood with such confidence that people believe it. We can recognize Big Lies in news reports, on social media, and other places by either possessing prior knowledge that it is not true or upon conducting a bit of research and asking questions about the message. Examples of Big Lies include: "Poor people are not as smart or hard working as people with money" or "Insert Major Soda Company Name cares about your health and the environment."

23. Charisma. Sometimes, media messengers can be effective simply by appearing firm, bold, strong, and confident. This is particularly true in political and advocacy messages. People often follow charismatic leaders even when they disagree with their positions on issues that affect them.

24. Euphemism. Euphemism tries to pacify audiences in order to make an unpleasant reality more palatable. Vague or abstract terms are used instead of clearer, more graphic words. Thus, we hear about corporate "downsizing" instead of "layoffs," or "intensive interrogation techniques" instead of "torture."

25. Glittering generalities. Glittering generalities are words such as civilization, democracy, freedom, patriotism, motherhood, fatherhood, science, health, beauty, and love. A truck ad, a politician, or a news commentator may repeat the word "freedom" for example without explaining what they mean by using that term. Media messages use these words in the hope that we will approve and accept the statements made without examining the evidence or asking what they really mean.

26. Group dynamics. We are greatly influenced by what other people think and do. Group dynamics is a system of behaviors and psychological processes occurring within a social group or between social groups. We can get carried away by the forceful atmosphere of live audiences, rallies, or other gatherings. For example, fans in a football stadium might decide to rush the field, users of Mac products often wait in line for hours or days to buy their latest gadget, or hundreds of thousands of people might give a standing ovation when they are moved by a speech at a political rally.

27. Majority belief. This technique is similar to the Bandwagon technique. It works on the assumption that if most people believe something, it must be true. That's why polls and survey results in news reports and articles are so often used to back up an argument. It is important to remember that responses vary widely depending on *how* one asks the question and who is asked the question. Politicians use the same technique when they say, "The American people want..." How do they know what all Americans want?

28. Name-calling. This technique links a person or idea to a negative symbol (liar, creep, gossip, criminal, illegal, etc.). Name-calling is used to make us reject the person or the idea based on our reaction to the negative name ("My opponent is a liar."), instead of looking at the available evidence. A subtler version of this technique is to use adjectives with negative connotations (extreme, passive, lazy, pushy, conservative, liberal, etc.) Ask yourself: If the name-calling was removed, does the idea still have merit?

29. Nostalgia. Upon the use of certain images, sounds, or smells, Nostalgia can be very powerful as it triggers emotions and positive memories. Many media makers invoke Nostalgia and refer to a time when life and quality were supposedly better ("like Mom used to make"). Politicians sometimes promise to bring back the "good old days" or restore "tradition" and "values." But whose traditions are being restored? Who did they benefit, and who did they harm? This technique works because sometimes people tend to forget the bad parts of the past, and remember the good.

30. Sex object. This technique uses objectification to sell a product. Objectification happens when a person is reduced to and made to seem like an object, often with their face removed from the image, rather than a whole human being with an identity. One common example of this technique is when a woman's body is made to resemble or mimic a bottle of beer or some type of food, sending the message that her body is desirable and consumable for the audience. We often see men's bodies objectified in ads for cologne or protein shakes, reducing them to muscular body parts.

31. Simple solution. Life and people are complicated. Problems often have many causes, and are not easy to solve. Media messages sometimes offer Simple solutions to all sorts of problems. Politicians claim one policy change (lower taxes, a new law, spending cuts, or a government program) will solve big social problems. Advertisers may suggest that a deodorant, a car, or a brand of beer will make you smart, rich, or successful.

32. Slippery slope. This technique warns against a negative outcome. It argues against an idea by claiming it's just the first step down a "slippery slope" toward something the target audience opposes. The Slippery slope technique is commonly used in political debate, because it's easy to claim that a small step will lead to a result most people won't like, even though small steps can lead in many directions. An example is, "If we let young people use the Internet they will not know how to think for themselves and then the next thing we know we'll have to use robots in the work place. Robots in the work place are bad."

33. Symbols. Symbols are words or images that bring to mind some larger concept, usually one associated with strong emotions, such as home, family, nation, religion, gender, or lifestyle. Media makers use the power and intensity of symbols to make their case. (US flag = America, Swastika = fascism) Symbols can have different meanings for different people. For example, Hummer SUVs are status symbols for some people, while to others they are symbols of environmental irresponsibility.

Advanced Persuasion Techniques

34. Ad hominem. Latin for "against the man," the Ad hominem technique responds to an argument by attacking the opponent instead of addressing the argument itself. It's also called "attacking the messenger." It works on the belief that if there's something wrong or objectionable about the messenger, the message must also be wrong. "She was a known partier so her allegations must be false."

35. Card stacking. Card stacking goes beyond just telling part of a story and deliberately provides a false context and leaves out key information to give a misleading impression. This technique "stacks the deck," selecting only favorable evidence to lead the audience to the desired conclusion. News commentators do this often so that we side with their argument, and advertisers do this when they present all the great things about the product without revealing that it may not be effective, could cause health problems, or is really expensive. Censorship is a form of card stacking.

36. Cause vs. Correlation. Media messages can trick us by intentionally confusing correlation (two things being connected or related in some way) with cause (one thing causes another thing to happen). For example: "Babies drink milk. Babies cry. Therefore, drinking milk makes babies cry."

37. Denial. This technique is used to escape responsibility for something that is unpopular or controversial. It can be either direct or indirect. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." "I did not inhale." "I am not a crook."

38. Diversion. This technique diverts our attention from a problem or issue by raising a separate issue or sharing only positive information. Diversion is often used to hide the part of the story not being told. For example, rather than focusing on a recent oil spill, an oil company may share a commercial showing us that they are investing in renewable energy and helping the environment.

39. Extrapolation. Media messages and messengers sometimes draw huge conclusions on the basis of a few small facts. Extrapolation works by ignoring complexity. An example could be a news story on someone in a hospital in your town that has been reported to be carrying a deadly virus, and the new story states that now everyone in your state is at risk.

40. Scapegoating. Scapegoating blames a problem on one person or one group. Some people, for example, claim that undocumented immigrants are the main cause of unemployment in the United States, even though unemployment is a complex problem with many causes and our economy and local communities rely on the work of those who are undocumented. Scapegoating is a particularly dangerous form of the Simple solution technique.

41. Straw man. This technique builds up an illogical or deliberately damaged idea and presents it as something that one's opponent supports or represents. Knocking down the "straw man" is easier than confronting the opponent directly. Infomercials often use Straw man. One example would be an infomercial that opens by telling us that blankets don't work and we need footed pajamas instead. An example of Straw man in a political debate is when a candidate says, "My opponent regularly releases dangerous criminals and sends them back to the streets. No one wants to vote for someone that puts families in danger."