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## Advertising's Magic Language—A Primer for the Reading Blahs

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# Advertising's Magic Language—A Primer for the Reading Blahs

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## **Abstract**

Over the years, students have been bogged down and bored by reading comprehension exercises. Bracing themselves for the mad pencil-pointing scarring of (A), (B), (C), (D), and on occasions (E), it sometimes seemed that the skill being taught was the ability to eliminate the worst of a choice of answers. Exercise passages in texts, workbooks, manuals, also generally have concerned themselves with dated and dusty materials. Norse verse poets of the 12th century vied and still vie with lengthy tracts extolling the virtues of the onion as a very useful vegetable. It is not a distortion to affirm that the interest level for these reading comprehension materials has never been very high.

# ADVERTISING'S MAGIC LANGUAGE— A PRIMER FOR THE READING BLAHS

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Over the years, students have been bogged down and bored by reading comprehension exercises. Bracing themselves for the mad pencil-pointing scarring of (A), (B), (C), (D), and on occasions (E), it sometimes seemed that the skill being taught was the ability to eliminate the worst of a choice of answers. Exercise passages in texts, workbooks, manuals, also generally have concerned themselves with dated and dusty materials. Norse verse poets of the 12th century vied and still vie with lengthy tracts extolling the virtues of the onion as a very useful vegetable. It is not a distortion to affirm that the interest level for these reading comprehension materials has never been very high.

Yet it is not the intention of this writer to attack a method that has been tried and true for many educators and learners. It is however this writer's motive to suggest an alternative approach—one that teaches reading sensitivity as well as efficiency, one that teaches vocabulary in connotation as well as vocabulary in context, one that enables the reader to read for awareness as well as comprehension.

The text book is one that does not have to be purchased in a book store and does not have to become dated. That is part of the charm of the method. The text book is the daily newspaper, the magazine, the world of signs, billboards, flyers, newsletters that assault our senses clamoring for attention.

It is a fact that more than half the space in all magazines is filled up with advertisements. Newspapers devote 60% of their pages to advertising. It has been estimated that people spend more of their time involved with newspaper and magazine ads than with the editorial content of these publications.

Educators can counter-attack the slick product of American ingenuity and verbal message—advertising—to make for better consumers, citizens, and readers. The magic language of advertising in all its forms can be and should be picked apart and used as a primer for more efficient reading.

On a very basic level, the efficient reader can be taught to sweep through a list of the invented ailments and technological cure-alls that litter the magic world of advertising. Some of these include: NO FRILLS, TIRED BLOOD, THE BLAHS, UNSPOILED ISLAND, UNCOLA, DUAL FILTERS, RD-119, ACTIVATED CHARCOAL, CHLOROPHYLL, QUADRAPHONIC SOUND. . . . The language of advertising and insights into reading result from analyses of the content of these nostrums and sales pitches. Does the content really exist? If it does

exist, what is it? How do these terms smokescreen the reading comprehension experience?

In context, the polysyllabic technical word works wonders on the careless reader: "NO PLAIN ANTACID CAN DO WHAT DIGEL CAN DO. IT CONTAINS SIMETHICONE, MEDICALLY PROVEN EFFECTIVE." Digel is not what the language claims has been proven medically effective. But the implication in a careless reading seems to be making such a claim.

Another useful method to demagicify the language of advertising is to learn to read intelligently for what is not said, for what is left out. Sometimes this verbal magic is accomplished with a strategically placed adjective or adverb. And in other cases, pure omission is the reading trick employed. Like the old time sing-a-longs, one must keep an eye on the bouncing ball to follow the words or the melody will sweep you off your reading feet. A few examples will demonstrate this:

THERE ARE MORE THAN A THOUSAND WAYS TO BLEND WHISKIES IN SCOTLAND, BUT FEW ARE AUTHENTIC ENOUGH FOR DEWAR'S.

The magic word is "few." How much is few? Are the few ways unique only to this brand of whiskey? Or do all the blenders of whiskey find these uncounted few ways the best method for their product? If this is the case, what makes the advertised brand the best aside from the fact that it is the advertised brand?

#### COULD BE A SYMPTOM OF PSORIASIS?

A question is posed and then the rest of the copy plunges into a lengthy discussion as to why the product should be consumed. If the reader intelligently comprehends the first word "could," the whole written seduction can be repelled. Once "could" is accepted, the combination of the medical problem, the resultant cure—reverence for the printed word—batter away at the reader to trigger careless and emotional reading. A healthy skepticism at the start of a reading experience easily defuses these magic timebombs.

Another variation on the theme is the statement: "EX-LAX CONTAINS PHENOPITHALEIN, MEDICALLY PROVEN EFFECTIVE." The magic touch of advertising blurs reading comprehension here. Again is the effectiveness claimed for phenopithalein, for Ex-Lax, or both? Don't other laxatives contain the same ingredient? If they do, why Ex-Lax?

The reading comprehension sand-storm at its best—the blurring by omission and commission—is personified in this line: "DOMINO SUGAR · 100% PURE · ONE OF THE PUREST FOODS KNOWN." Affixing Domino to sugar is commission. It makes Domino Sugar generic as Bayer Aspirin has been made to appear generic. The reading comprehension omission sleight of hand is executed via the claim that the product is 100% pure. Is this true of all sugar or only Domino Sugar? Finally, the careful reader would probably question the word "known" at the end of the statement. "Known" by whom?

Perhaps the most famous of all the sugarless gum ads proclaims: "FOUR

OUT OF FIVE DENTISTS SURVEYED RECOMMENDED SUGARLESS GUM FOR THEIR PATIENTS WHO CHEW GUM.” This has been repeated so often that most of us can repeat it by heart. Repetition has virtually bored the advertising message into our acceptance, but what the ad leaves out is more important than what it puts in.

Nowhere is it clear as to who conducted the survey. Perhaps Trident conducted the survey? Moreover, the dentists are not advocating the creation of a nation of gum-chewers, but simply opting for sugarless gum only if the patient chews gum. The patient in question is their patient, a gum chewing patient. This then is also not a recommendation for the American public at large. The real hook in the language is the weaving in the brand Trident. After the reading defenses have been battered away at, the next line zooms into the merits of Trident. There is no claim that the dentists promoted for Trident. But since it's around and the ad is selling it, why not Trident just as well as Brand X?

Two and two always add up to four except in the magic world of advertising, where there's no guarantee. Some special words for the efficient reader to look out for are JUST and ONLY and NOW. With these at work within the reading task, two and two can always just equal only five now.

Concern for detail, concern for language, concern for conclusions — all of these are skills that come through comprehending the fancy footwork of the adman or adwoman. A famous advertisement that sold a lot of beer read:

“IN NEW YORK CITY WHERE THERE ARE MORE GREEKS THAN IN SPARTA, MORE PEOPLE DRINK RHEINGOLD THAN ANY OTHER BRAND. HOW COME SO MANY GREEKS PREFER RHEINGOLD? WE DON'T KNOW. BUT WE MUST BE DOING SOMETHING RIGHT.”

Broken down to a syllogism:  
 There are lots of Greeks in New York City.  
 Lots of New Yorkers prefer Rheingold.  
 Lots of Greeks prefer Rheingold

we have a magical ad, but not a difficult reading comprehension exercise. The reading lessons that emerge would enable the efficient reader to ask who is the source for these claims? Why are they trying to link together more Greeks in New York than Sparta with the unrelated comment that lots of the Greeks in New York drink Rheingold beer? The gap is big enough to drive a Rheingold truck through.

The world of reading in advertising has created a world within a world of shaded meaning and subtle emotionalism, of good feeling and belonging. MILLERTIME, DODGE BOYS, MARLBORO MAN and MARLBORO COUNTRY, SCHAEFER PEOPLE, THE PEPSI GENERATION do exist for the careless reader, the one taken in by emotionalism and conformity and escapism. The efficient reader can analyze the copy of the DODGE BOYS in an attempt to analyze what is said that entices and promises the consumer, what distorts and distracts reading

comprehension into a written fog of connotative words screaming "Buy me, buy me!"

Doubtless the asterisk is the most obvious of the reading tricks existing in the magic world of advertising. A glittering generality is headlighted in large type and in the small body type all the exceptions to the rules are illegibly abbreviated. This is a good exercise in finding details and skimming. The reading sleuth can unravel the whole fabric of the fine point, concealing off-season, not equipped with extras, delivery charges extra, manufacturer's suggested retail price, one day only, batteries not included.

Those people who invented THE BLAHS and MARLBORO COUNTRY also have a way with words that seems innocent enough. Changed weekly or seasonally, the reader is often at a loss in deciphering the new from the newer, brand new, newest and now new. A variation on the theme is large size, family size, giant size, jumbo size and economy size, not to mention new and improved.

This article has only suggested a few of the varied approaches to make for a better reader and better consumer by probing the slick, sensuous, subtle world of advertising. Like frogmen diving into the world of print advertising, aggressive readers can discover much about the reading process and the ways of better consumerism.

In the famous story heard in the halls of academe, a student completed a month of schooling. His father, concerned about the learning of his offspring, decided to question the child on his acquired knowledge.

"Son," the father said, "may I ask you a question?"

"Sure," replied the youth.

"How do you spell cat?"

Thinking for a moment, the youth smiled, "What are the three choices?"

Perhaps through teaching reading efficiency and comprehension via the world of advertising, such a story will one day go out of style.