

# Power Words



## 10 Word Choices that Shrink Your Power and How to Fix Them (Plus 3 Bonus Tips!)

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Why bother adding fancy new words to your vocabulary in order to impress others with your vast knowledge when you could instead make better use of some simple words you already know? Your choice of words can be used not only to increase your personal power, but also to make for more genuine communication among your family, friends, co-workers, and others. This concept is not new—many people have illustrated the positive vocabulary concept—but these are just a few of my favorite candidates for a quick fix:

**#1. I can't.** The cases in which we truly cannot do something are really pretty rare compared to the number of times we use this phrase. OK, maybe you can't lift up a car all by yourself because you're physically not strong enough. But if you say, "I can't go with you Saturday," you probably only mean, for whatever reason, you choose not to. People often rob themselves of personal power by refusing to recognize, and stand by, their choices. They make it seem as though they have no control over anything in their lives! Instead, you could say, "I won't be going with

you," or "That doesn't work for me," followed by a polite reason if one is called for.

Another way people use *can't* to give away their power is in the way they describe their abilities and attributes. I once was talking with a woman who said about herself, "I can't draw." She immediately caught herself and said, "That is, one way I've always limited myself was by thinking I couldn't draw." She told me about how she was learning to overcome her poor self-image. She later showed me the first drawing she'd attempted since she was a very young child: a beautiful, lively image of a hummingbird.

The late psychologist and author Dr. Wayne Dyer stated that when you say *I can't*, it probably doesn't mean you were born with deficient genes. Maybe it means you haven't made it a priority to learn, or you prefer not to, or you only do a little bit—but it rarely actually means you cannot!

**#2. I have to.** People who say *I can't* often follow it with *I have to*: "I can't go shopping today; I have to take my son to karate." When you're standing by your choices, your reply

might be, “I won’t be going shopping today (or, going shopping today doesn’t work for me); I agreed to take my son to karate.” You *could* go shopping but are *choosing* to honor your agreement with your kiddo. This is subtle, but it shifts the power from being helpless and stuck to being in control and of high integrity.

**#3. I’m afraid.** *I’m afraid* is often coupled with *I can’t* and *I have to*: “I can’t go with you Saturday; I’m afraid I have to work.” Although used as a figure of speech, it’s pretty clear what *afraid* literally means. Why inject fear into the conversation when there’s nothing to be afraid of? *I’m afraid* could be dropped altogether, or a different phrase could be substituted: “I won’t be going with you Saturday; I’m needed at work.” Notice, too, that *I have to* is replaced by *I’m needed*. So much nicer to be needed than ordered!

**#4. I’ll try.** Nice try, but *try* doesn’t cut it. You’re going to *try* to make it to that meeting? Well, are you going, or aren’t you? Can we count on you, or not? When people say *I’ll try*, usually what they really mean is, “I’m not going to, but I’m too weak to tell you directly, so I’ll lead you to believe that my answer is probably yes, and then when I don’t show, I’ve already got an excuse for letting you down because I only told you I’d try.” Most people who give an *I’ll try* answer actually have no intention of even trying, let alone doing.

Suppose you’re asked to come to a meeting on Thursday. Obviously, yes or no are more logical, direct answers. If you’re not sure you can attend, you could say, “I’m not sure right now. I may have a conflict with that time, but I’ll let you know as soon as I find out.” Then follow through and let them know. Don’t leave them hanging.

Have you ever been in a situation where you actually could make it but you honestly don’t want to? That used to scare me a lot, and it was a prime opportunity for the *I’ll try*

excuse. But I’ve learned that it’s not only OK but actually very empowering to say something like, “It sounds fun, but Thursday evening is the only chance I have to be alone, and I’m really feeling a need for some me-time.” That tells the person that you’re not only honest but that you also feel it’s important to take care of yourself. When you respond in that way, true friends will respect and appreciate you—and if they don’t, they might not be the kinds of people you’d want to spend time with anyway. If that seems too daring, you could soften it a bit (while still being truthful) with something like, “I need to look at my schedule to be sure everything fits (i.e., finding quality time for myself), but I’ll let you know by [plenty of advanced notice].”

The point is, you’re not doing yourself or others any good when you deal in deceit. Put the shoe on the other foot and think of it this way: Would you spend all day, and extra money, preparing a gourmet meal for someone who’s going to *try* to make it over for dinner? They’re not coming!

**#5. Anxious.** Have you ever heard someone say, “I’m so anxious to see you”? Whenever I hear that, somewhere in the recesses of my mind is a trigger for anxiety! Anxiety is a form of stress, and I get this comical image of a person being all nervous and consumed with worry over the mere prospect of meeting with me! I’d be much more comfortable knowing that the person is *eager* to meet me, not anxious! I’d much rather tell others I’m *looking forward* to meeting them. It has been said that words swim around in our subconscious mind and contribute, however minutely, to our state of mind, our attitudes, and our actions. I’m more relaxed when I eliminate the word *anxious* from my vocabulary unless it’s really necessary.

**#6. Stress.** This is in the same category as *anxious*—it inserts a subconscious ding that doesn’t need to be there. So many times we hear something like Professor Brown *stresses* the importance of class discussion (as if

college isn't stressful enough), or that the mayor *stressed* the importance of coming to the city council meeting. Bummer that Prof. Brown and the mayor are stressed (or perhaps subconsciously inflict stress on others), but I'd feel less stressed if they were to *emphasize* the importance instead.

**#7. To be honest.** Let me get this straight: You're *dishonest* most of the time, so on this one occasion you feel compelled to notify me that you're being honest? I appreciate that! A variation of this is habitually saying *to tell you the truth*, or worse, *I'm not gonna lie*. (Gosh, thanks for the heads-up!) I would hope you have enough integrity to be truthful as a regular habit, eliminating the need to point it out each time. I prefer to hear a statement, pure and simple, without it being introduced with an unnecessary statement about its validity.

**#8. I'm sorry.** This one is fairly minor but just something to consider for possible elimination or modification. Saying you're sorry is a nice way to offer condolences to someone who is suffering. It's also an admission of guilt and an attempt to make amends. So, why say you're sorry when there's nothing to apologize or offer condolences for? If you feel you should say something to soften the blow, without inferring sorrow or guilt, a good substitution for saying, "I'm sorry I won't be there" is, "Unfortunately I won't be there."

**#9. I'm confused.** *Confused* describes a state of having completely disorganized thoughts (such as with dementia, injury, or severe mental illness), or things being incorrectly mixed up (such as items in two separate stacks becoming confused). Saying, "I'm confused. Is the meeting at 1:00 or 2:00?" probably means you're not sure, you're uncertain, or perhaps you forgot. *I'm not sure...*, *Please remind me...*, and *Which is it...?* are phrases that would not put your mental state in question!

**#10. It's incurable.** This one may not come up very often, but think back through history to the many diseases once thought to have no cure—until one was found. Instead of *incurable* (there's no hope), I prefer to say, "A cure hasn't been found yet." (They'll figure it out eventually.)

### 3 Bonus Tips

Apart from specific vocabulary words, here are three additional pointers for more empowered communication:

**#1. Make your words count.** To the best of your ability for the circumstance you're in, give a forthright answer. When you say, "I'll check into it," do you really plan to explore the issue further and get back to the other party with your findings, or is it just a stall tactic? Similarly, how about "We'll see"? Do you really mean there are several factors at play, the results of which we'll all have to wait for, or do you mean you don't want to bother with it? Would you rather hear, "I'm working on it," or would you prefer, "I've still got [such-and-such] to do, so if all goes well, I should be done by the 15<sup>th</sup>"? What I've learned from working on projects requiring the coordination of different departments or subcontractors is that the more someone says, "I'm working on it," the more the waiting party keeps calling back—and with each exchange, the annoyance level increases. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

**#2. Audible pauses.** Almost everyone utters them, but their frequency can get in the way of your message. Audible pauses are those meaningless vocalizations that pepper everyday speech. They can be mere sounds (*um; uh*), or words (*well; like; see?; OK?*), or even phrases (*Know what I mean? See what I'm saying? You know? Ya feel me?*). They're harmless in that the meanings themselves are not specifically disempowering. But when used frequently or without meaning, audible pauses give the impression of not having your

thoughts very well together. Many people are not aware of the frequency of their audible pauses. If you think you might be doing this too much, record yourself sometime or have a friend give you a signal each time. It's merely a habit, and awareness is often the best way to address it.

**#3. Statements as questions.** Finally, this has nothing to do with choice of words, but it does have to do with conveying strength or weakness. I'm referring to one of my pet peeves: *uptalking*. Uptalking is the speech pattern of raising the vocal tone at the end of a phrase or sentence, making it sound like a question. It makes the speaker sound weak or uncertain.

If I'm paying for professional advice, for example, I expect that person to be self-assured and to give an authoritative statement or opinion. I want to hear, "I think yellow is your best bet here." (This implies: "I'm the expert. I know what I'm talking about. This is the way we should go.") I don't want to hear, "I think yellow is best?" ("I'm not really too sure, and I'm desperately afraid

you might not agree with me, so I'll tentatively put it out there, but I really don't expect you to accept it.") That's probably not what the person wants to convey.

Asking and collaborating is often an excellent way to get things done. However, habitually using the asking tone of voice for non-questions is the equivalent of standing slump-shouldered instead of erect; it just doesn't come across as empowering. Let me put it this way? Stating all your sentences? Or even phrases? In the form of a question? Sounds like you don't know what you're doing? And besides? It's annoying? So don't do it?



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