Language is the indispensable tool used in formulating arguments. We all are familiar (or should be!) with the power of language when it is employed by fine writers of fiction—Shakespeare, Fielding, Austen, Conrad (to name just a few who wrote in the English language)—the list is very long. The principal point of literature classes is precisely to make this apparent. But good writing can be equally effective when used in the construction of argumentative essays and other argumentative passages. The trouble is that language also can be used effectively in the service of fallacious as well as cogent arguments, deceiving the unwary or unknowing into accepting arguments they should reject.

1. Cognitive and Emotive Meanings

If the purpose of a sentence is to inform or to state a fact, some of its words must refer to things, events, or properties of one kind or another. These words must thus have what is commonly called cognitive meaning. (The sentences they compose also are said to have cognitive meaning.)
But most words also have emotive meaning, which means that they have positive or negative overtones. The emotive charges of some words are obvious. Think of the terms wop, kike, nigger, and fag, or the so-called four-letter words that rarely appear in textbooks, even in this permissive age.

The words just mentioned have negative emotive charges. But lots of words have positive overtones. Examples are freedom, love, democracy, springtime, and peace. And plenty of others have either neutral or mixed emotive force. Pencil, run, and river tend to be neutral words. Socialism, politician, and whiskey get mixed reviews.

In fact, almost any word that is emotively positive for some people or in some contexts may be just the opposite for others. One person’s meat often is indeed another’s poison. Perhaps the paradigm case is the word God, which has one kind of overtone for true believers, another for agnostics, and still another for strident atheists. To the average person, the word student has positive connotations, but not to a landlord or landlady.

Terms that on first glance may appear to be emotively neutral often turn out to have at least modest emotive overtones. The terms bureaucrat, government official, and public servant, for instance, all refer to the same group of people and thus have approximately the same cognitive import, but their emotive meanings are quite different. Of the three, only government official comes close to being neutral in tone.

2. Emotive Meanings and Persuasive Uses of Language

The fact that expressions have emotive as well as cognitive meanings has not escaped the notice of con artists, advertisers, politicians, and others whose stock in trade is the manipulation of attitudes, desires, and beliefs. Over the years, they have learned how to use the emotive side of language to further their own ends, whether benevolent or self-serving.

One common way in which the emotive force of language can be used to con, as Talleyrand observed some time ago, is to mask the odious nature of an institution or practice by giving it a nice name rather than a more accurate, nasty one. Why call the Chinese dictatorship by an accurate name when it can be called the People’s Republic of China? When Saddam Hussein took control of Iraq, why should he have fiddled with the increasingly inaccurate name Republic of Iraq? The ruling clique in Myanmar (formerly Burma) surely has no reason to call its thugs who engage in mass murder and other kinds of nasty business anything other than the State Peace and Development Council. In a slightly different vein, why call diluted beer watered-down beer when you can call it lite? Why should a minority political group call itself The Moral Minority, when it can puff itself up into The Moral Majority? (Note, by the way, the implication that the individuals in this group are more moral than other people.) And doesn’t Department of Defense have a much sweeter ring to it than the original and more accurate name War Department? And how about the Clear Skies Initiative, Bushspeak for the set of pollution laws that dumb down the Clean Air Act?

I am firm, you are obstinate, he is pigheaded.
—Bertrand Russell’s example of words having similar cognitive meanings but much different emotive senses
The language of diplomacy is particularly prone to tricky manipulation, especially when it refers to provocative international issues. A good case in point was cited by William Safire in his column on language. In 2006, when things were heating up between Israel and the new Hamas government in Palestine, the prime minister, Ehud Olmert, wanted to move 90,000 Israelis from West Bank villages into secure areas behind the antiterrorist fence under construction, but instead of using the word *retreat*, he wanted a synonym that would not suggest weakness for withdrawing, or imply that the new border was permanent. The Hebrew word chosen was *hitkansut*, or coming together (in a safe place), which seemed an appropriate choice for the Israelis, but the problem came with translating the term for the international community. After several false starts, Olmert and his aides decided on *realignment*, which suggests shifting of the lines to describe their withdrawal plan. Safire notes, “By adjusting the line of separation without seeking to establish a formal border, Israel’s purpose is to minimize friction while retaining its historic claim on the land in dispute.” Thus, the carefully chosen translation was an attempt to gain international support for establishing a firm line of separation from Palestine for the present, while leaving open the possibility of reclaiming the disputed land in the future. This type of language manipulation goes on all the time in diplomatic circles, where word choice is often critical in policy explanations.

In recent years, manipulative uses of language have been given a spate of emotively negative names, each with a slightly different connotation, including *doublespeak* (deliberately ambiguous or evasive language), *bureaucratese* (governmental doublespeak), *newspeak* (media doublespeak), *academese* (the academic variety), *legalese* (lawyer talk), *gobbledygook*, *bafflegab*, and *jargon*.

Take *militaryese*. The military at all times and places has devised expressions intended as much as possible to hide the fact that war is, to put it mildly, unvarnished hell. For example, the term *waterboarding* sounds more like a harmless water sport than what it really is, a brutal method of torture. Here are some more examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfort women</td>
<td>Women of conquered countries forced to work as prostitutes “servicing” soldiers (term used by the Japanese during World War II)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preemptive action</td>
<td>Our side attacking first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle fatigue</td>
<td>Insanity suffered as a result of the unbearable horrors and strains of battle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incursion</td>
<td>Invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collateral damage</td>
<td>People who are inadvertently killed or property that is inadvertently destroyed in warfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic cleansing</td>
<td>Driving out unwanted citizens of a country, burning their houses, and killing some along the way (as in Kosovo, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced interrogation technique</td>
<td>Torture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friendly fire
Shelling friendly villages or troops by mistake

Servicing a target or visiting a site
Bombing a place flat (used during the Gulf War)

Information extraction
Torturing people into giving confessions

Pacification center
Concentration camp (itself originally doublespeak)

Termination
Killing (also used by the CIA, where termination with prejudice means assassination)

Selective ordinance
Napalm (used to kill by incineration)

The Final Solution
Plan of the Nazis to murder all European Jews

During World War II—one of the most awful of all wars—the expression *dehousing industrial workers* was used by the British and Americans to mean killing civilians, including women and children via saturation air raids. The indescribably horrible massive air raids on Germany and Japan that created incredible firestorms were said to result in self-energized dislocation, not widespread death by either incineration or asphyxiation. The term war itself has been euphemized into conflict or operation. Bush the elder waged “Operation Desert Shield”; Bush the younger, “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” In the latter conflict the term war was used to describe the War on Terrorism or the War for Peace (!), but not the Iraq War, until we were several years into the conflict. During that war, both sides manipulated terminology to suit their own bias. In the United States the networks used the term coalition forces for what the Arab media called occupation forces. And when CNN reported that 16 “insurgents” were killed in an Iraqi uprising (May 7, 2004), the Arab media described them as “resistance fighters.” George Orwell got it right when he said “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” Few people would realize that the harmless terms cited above were devised to sugarcoat the truth, or create a bias, or mask sinister, even hideous practices—unless it were pointed out to them.

The military isn’t the only master of doublespeak. The law has its own version—legalese, a hybrid of French, English, and Latin that baffles the average person. In plain English a *writ* is a claim form, and a *plaintiff* is someone who makes a complaint against another party. Meetings with the judge in camera are just private meetings behind closed doors. Why all this turgid terminology? The principal reason is to ensure certainty, to protect clients by using phrases defined by statutes or case law. Using different expressions may raise doubts as to precisely what is meant. But why can’t plain English accomplish the same thing? Another justification is that it’s cheaper and less trouble to use archaic language than to rewrite everything. Maybe, but then again, lawyers might have to charge lower fees if legal documents were clear.

Of course, bureaucratese, governmentese, and politicalese (we all can play at this game) don’t exactly suffer from a paucity of examples. Political attack groups seem particularly prone to giving themselves euphemistic names. In the run-up to the 2008 presidential primaries, a group called Common Sense Issues launched a smear campaign against John McCain. It made millions of phone calls to South Carolina voters claiming he “has voted to use unborn babies in medical research,” and to Iowa voters accusing him of creating “The most restrictive assault on free speech [the McCain-Feingold bill]
ever passed in America” because his bill tightened the rules on campaign contributions.\(^2\) Given the irrational distortion of these attacks, the term *common sense* in the group’s name can only be a euphemism for *nonsense.* John Kerry suffered similar attacks in the 2004 presidential campaign by a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (a euphemism if there ever was one) that launched a barrage of slanderous ads smearing his military record.

These examples illustrate the use of *euphemistic language*—locutions from which as much negative emotive content as possible has been removed—and the replacement of accurate names with more high-flown locutions. The point generally is to conceal or to mislead, which could be one reason that this kind of talk has become so popular with government officials, lawyers, military officers, doctors, and (alas!) a large number of academics. (Is this one reason why so many other[!] textbooks are so dull?)

In recent years, however, it’s possible that doublespeak in the business world has managed to surpass even that of militaryese in its deviousness. Well, maybe not. But consider these examples of euphemisms used when someone is fired:

*bumped, decriued, dehired, deselected, destaffed, discontinued, disemployed, dislocated, downsized, excessed, involuntarily separated, nonretained, nonrenewed, severed, surplussed, transitioned, vocationally relocated*\(^3\)

Firing large numbers of workers is *corporate rightsizing,* by the way, and the place where you get *downsized* is sometimes called the *outplacement office.*

This euphemistic trend in the business world is often satirized in the media. For instance, in a *Doonesbury* cartoon (November 20, 1999) satirizing the owners of startup companies that earn no money but make millions from IPOs (initial public offerings of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>climate change</td>
<td>global warming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trial lawyer</td>
<td>personal injury lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faith-based</td>
<td>religious</td>
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<tr>
<td>school choice</td>
<td>school vouchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tax relief</td>
<td>tax cuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>illegal</td>
<td>undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fetus</td>
<td>uterine contents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>military difficulties</td>
<td>quagmire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Everyone knows that politics is fertile ground for doublespeak. All political parties use it when it suits their purposes. Here are a few examples noted in John Leo’s article “Double Trouble Speak” (*U.S. News & World Report*, July 4, 2005).


\(^3\)New York Times Service (March 8, 1996); mentioned in the July 1996 issue of the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak.*
A play on words that distorts paying off the national debt to mean paying down the debt that the G. W. Bush character owes to his campaign contributors.

stock), one character says, “We’ll probably walk away with a fortune. It’s only the small investors who get burned. It’s called socializing the risk while privatizing the profit.”

Interestingly, class differences have always been mirrored euphemistically. Average people rent apartments; the rich lease them. The nonrich talk of social climbers; social climbers like to think of themselves as upwardly mobile or (more recently) changing course, and not as pushy but rather as emphatic. The wealthy don’t earn a salary, they receive compensation or have an income.

In the field of education euphemisms abound (and why should we be different?). One college gives placement tests in Student Success Workshops, presumably to soften the blow to the many students who place in remedial (uh, developmental) classes. Teachers no longer teach but facilitate in comfort zones where collaborative learning occurs.

The deliberate use of euphemistic language has been going on at least since the beginning of recorded history, but it seems to have increased dramatically in recent years, perhaps because of the professionalization of most trades. Titled professionals want to sound objective and authoritative, not opinionated or biased. Also, controversial topics can be toned down when dressed in euphemistic language. For instance, to lessen its negative connotation, the term abortion comes in many guises nowadays: effecting fetal demise, planned cessation of gestation, interrupted pregnancy, termination, and selective reduction.
It’s true that euphemisms can and often do serve useful, nonmanipulative functions. Circumlocutions used to replace offensive four-letter words are good examples. Using expressions like put to sleep, passed gas, and for the mature figure often is just a matter of politeness. Why shock or offend when we don't have to? Nevertheless, all too often euphemisms are used to further Machiavellian purposes. Indeed, the nastier something is, the greater the need to clothe it in neutral garb.

Doublespeak has become so common that we hardly notice it. Euphemisms slide past us without registering and soften our grasp of reality. When politicians “misspeak” rather than lie, we are less likely to hold them accountable. When the military “deploys troops” rather than invades a country, we are less alarmed. When mayors refer to neighborhoods with “substandard housing” rather than slums or ghettos, we are less likely to think of people living in poverty. Doublespeak hoodwinks us into thinking wrong is right, dangerous situations are benign, poverty is nonexistent, and we are lulled into a deceptive calm. A misleading phrase here and there may not seem like much, but the cumulative effect is to erode our understanding of what is actually going on in the world. When doublespeak is a buffer between us and reality, we are more likely to be manipulated into mindless acceptance of half truths, distortions, and lies.

Of course, sometimes attempts to whitewash bad news are so obvious that the American public simply rolls its collective eyes. When a recession loomed in 2008, President Bush avoided the R word and talked, instead, about “economic challenges” and “uncertainties,” as in “... we have a dynamic economy, but there are some uncertainties.” It didn't take an economist to recognize the code language for recession. Given the sinking economy and the drain on their pocketbooks, most people fully understood what was going on, and no amount of hedging could convince them otherwise. Unfortunately, many people have trouble seeing through doublespeak until they are personally affected, and sometimes that is too late.

Doublespeak is especially deadly when it comes in whole sentences or runs on for whole paragraphs. Academese illustrates this nicely. Here, for example, is a tiny snippet from Zellig Harris’s well-known text Structural Linguistics that makes a simple idea seem more profound:

Another consideration is the availability of simultaneity, in addition to successivity as a relation among linguistic elements.

This seems to mean (there is a certain amount of vagueness here) that we can do two things at once, like gesture while we talk. (You didn't know that, did you?)

Now that appetites have been whetted, how about a sampling of truly impenetrable prose?

Indeed dialectical critical realism may be seen under the aspect of Foucauldian strategic reversal—of the unholy trinity of Parmenidean /Platonic/Aristotelian provenance; of the Cartesian-LOCKean-Humean-Kantian paradigm, of foundationalism . . . new and old alike; of the primordial failing of western philosophy, ontological monovalence, and its close ally, the epistemic fallacy with its ontic dual. (New York Times, February 27, 1999, report of a Modern Language Association [MLA] speech)

Examples are taken from Doublespeak Defined, by William Lutz, a perceptive compilation and commentary of misleading language.
The popularity of the writings of George Orwell is an important reason that doublespeak has received more than a usual amount of attention in recent years. In this excerpt from his 1948 classic “Politics and the English Language,” he explains one reason why politicians favor this less-than-straightforward kind of rhetoric:

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. . . . Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: This is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: This is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. . . .

The inflated style is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. [These italics added.]

This little gem earned the author, Roy Bhaskar, first prize for bad writing by “serious” scholars, awarded by the New Zealand–based Journal of Philosophy and Literature.

Both these examples of academese are badly written in one way or another (actually several). They use inflated or obscure language and, of special note, are full of jargon. There are several senses of this term, one being nonsensical, incoherent, or meaningless talk; another the specialized language used by professionals when talking (or writing) to each other. The trouble is that jargon intended in the professional sense can and often does turn out to be jargon in the meaningless or incoherent sense, making vacuous or otherwise simple and easily understood remarks appear to be profound. The MLA item quoted here may well illustrate the incoherent variety (who can be sure?); the Harris remark exemplifies the obvious made to seem important.

Note the connection here, by the way, with what we said in Chapter 3 in the discussion of appeals to authorities about not being intimidated by professional lingo. Telling patients that they have a malignant melanoma, for example, may leave them ignorant of the fact that they have a form of skin cancer, which, if untreated, quickly leads to death.

We need to remember, though, that technical terms used by professional people generally do have an important function — namely, to ensure precision when it counts. Lawyers want contracts to be airtight. Doctors need to be sure they understand each other when they talk about patient illnesses. It may be adequate for a layperson to talk, say, about rapid or irregular heartbeats, but cardiologists need a more precise way of distinguishing the various kinds — distinguishing, for example, supra ventricular tachycardia from atrial fibrillation or from the immediately life-threatening ventricular fibrillation. Use of these technical expressions quickly conveys rather precise and absolutely vital information from one doctor to another. Technical jargon used by people in the same field is an essential form of communication, but when it deteriorates into incoherent or meaningless verbiage, it is puzzling at best and incomprehensible at worst.
Another common feature of jargon, by the way, is **padding**—adding significant-sounding sentences here and there that in fact say little or nothing. Here is an example typical of a common variety in psychological writings: “Although the effects of mental attitudes on bodily disease should not be exaggerated, neither should they be minimized.” True. And here is an example of another type: “As soon as there are behaviors you can't generate, then there are responses you can't elicit.” Yes. And another: “In order to achieve products, outputs, and outcomes through processes, inputs are required.” Absolutely.

3. Other Common Rhetorical Devices

Let’s now look at a few of the many other rhetorical devices that are frequently used to manipulate the unwary or less knowledgeable. (This does not mean that these devices cannot be used in the services of truth and justice!)

**Tone**

Good writers or speakers try to choose the **tone** best suited to their audience, as students are taught to do in writing classes. Tone expresses attitudes or feelings—of compassion, anger, levity, humility, congeniality, and so on—and can be quite powerful when
employed properly in argumentative passages. Using the proper tone, even though doing so clearly plays to emotions, isn't like arguing fallaciously or from premises known to be false, but rather is just a matter of common sense; arguments aren't won by unnecessarily ruffling the other guy's feathers.

But tone can be employed for nefarious purposes, not just virtuous ones. Lawyers addressing juries are masters of the art, as are politicians addressing constituents. Success in politics requires knowing how to use the tone of “Mom and apple pie" rhetoric when addressing, say, families of soldiers returning from overseas duty and humor when dealing with matters of a lighter nature. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from the veto by Adlai Stevenson, then governor of Illinois, of a bill to protect birds by restraining the roaming of cats:

It is in the nature of cats to do a certain amount of unescorted roaming. . . . That cats destroy some birds, I well know, but I believe this legislation would further but little the worthy cause to which its proponents give such unselfish effort. The problem of the cat versus the bird is as old as time. If we attempt to resolve it by legislation who knows but what we may be called upon to take sides as well in the age-old problem of dog versus cat, bird versus bird, or even bird versus worm. In my opinion, the state of Illinois . . . already has enough to do without trying to control feline delinquency.

Just the right touch to put the quash on a bill that members of the legislature cared little about anyway. By using elevated language to explain his decision on a rather minor matter, and by carrying the consequences of the vetoed bill's logic to ridiculous lengths, Stevenson managed to undermine the opposition with gentle humor and without offending anyone. (Stevenson, by the way, was rightly famous for his ironic humor; witness his remark when accused of being an “egghead” : “Eggheads of the world unite; all we have to lose are our yolks.”)

Contrast the tone of the Stevenson veto with the following excerpt from the best-known speech by Winston Churchill, a master at the trade. It is taken from the end of an address to the British Parliament in the summer of 1940, during the darkest days of World War II, when the British expected to be invaded by German armies flush with
Monroe C. Beardsley was one of the first to write a textbook dealing strictly with
critical reasoning (as opposed to formal logic). In this excerpt from his book
Thinking Straight, he explains an example of suggestion:

On November 30, 1968, the New York Times reported on the construction site for
a new jetport in the Everglades, 40 miles from Miami:

Populated now by deer, alligators, wild turkeys, and a tribe of Indians who
annually perform a rite known as the Green Corn Dance, the tract could
someday accommodate a super jetport twice the size of Kennedy Interna-
tional in New York and still have a one-mile buffer on every side to minimize
intrusion in the lives of any eventual residents.

A more horrible example of suggestion could hardly be found. First, note that by
putting the Indians in a list with deer, alligators, and wild turkeys, the writer sug-
gests that they belong in the same category as these subhuman species. This
impression is reinforced by the allusion to the “Green Corn Dance,” which (since it
is irrelevant to the rest of the story) can only suggest that this kind of silly super-
stitious activity sums up their lives. And the impression is driven home sharply at
the end when we get to the need to “minimize intrusions on the lives of any even-
tual residents”—the Indians, of course, can hardly be counted as real residents.

proves is that . . .” or “Since we willingly admit that . . .,” implying that the testimony is of little importance when in fact it is quite damaging. Or an advertisement may say, “Try our best-quality knife, only $9.95,” implying that the price is very low when in fact it may be just the ordinary price. Punctuation also can be used to make a point. In this headline from the New York Times (June 22, 1999)—“In Principle, A Case For More ‘Sweatshops’”—the quotation marks around the term sweatshops create doubt that such things as sweatshops exist in the United States. (Alas! They do.)

Slanting creeps into objective news reports, as in this example from a Washington Post article (October 4, 2007) describing comments by Dennis Kucinich to a mainly Latino audience in the run-up to the Democratic primary. “Kucinich (Ohio), the opening act, went with the naked, Latino pander” when he greeted the crowd with “Buenos dias” and concluded with “Si se puede.” Since the word pander means to appeal to the baser instincts, pandering to Latinos implies that Kucinich was disparaging them by thinking he could win them over with base appeals to their emotions, though how “good day” and “if we can” qualify as pandering is a mystery. It is worth noting that the media tend to describe politicians as “pandering” to ethnic groups but rarely to corporations. Another example: In a San Francisco Chronicle article (October 29, 2003) about a White House press conference on the rebuilding of Iraq, the comment “Much of Bush’s black-and-white view of the war persists” implies that the president habitually ignored not only the complexity of postwar problems in Iraq but of all other issues he faced as well.

Slanting also can be accomplished by a careful selection of facts. (So slanting often invites the fallacy of suppressed evidence, discussed in Chapter 3.) For example, the authors of most U.S. history texts used in public schools select facts so as to sanitize American history as much as they can (given the general stricture against wandering too far from the straight and narrow). The point of public school history texts, after all, is not to produce disaffected citizens. Slanting, also, subtly promotes textbook biases. Now that multiculturalism has nudged out Eurocentrism, history books tend to romanticize Native Americans, for instance, and criticize the actions of white settlers. The word massacre is invariably used to describe whites attacking Native Americans but not when the situation is reversed and settlers are the victims of atrocities committed by Native Americans. (More said on these topics in Chapter 12.)

It’s no secret that political parties slant information to favor their political bias. Under the second President Bush, for example, health information on government websites was subtly changed to reflect the administration’s ideology. On the National Cancer Institute website, the statement that there was “no association between abortion and breast cancer” was changed to “the evidence is inconclusive.” And the website for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention used to explain that condoms could protect people effectively from HIV infection, but the revision claimed that “more research is needed.”

Slanting sometimes goes under the name suggestion or, in some cases, the more pejorative name innuendo. The latter term might well be applied to the politician who responded to a statement by Dan Quayle, Vice President under the first President Bush: “Well, I admit he wasn’t lying this time.” The nice thing about slanting, so far as practitioners of the art are concerned, is that you can always deny that you implied or suggested what you in fact have implied or suggested.
**Weasel Words**

Weasel words (or phrases) are locutions that appear to make little or no change in the content of a statement while in fact sucking out all or most of its content. Typical is the use of the terms *may* or *may be*, as in this example from a student paper: “Economic success *may be* the explanation of male dominance over females” (italics added). Using the expression *may be* instead of the straightforward verb *is* protected the student from error by reducing the content of her statement close to zero. What she said is consistent with the economic success of males *not* being the reason for male dominance. By the way, note the assumption that males do dominate females in the last analysis, a contention some males (and females!) would deny. The term *arguably* is another weasel word frequently employed to spruce up weak arguments. The student quoted here might just as well have protected herself by stating that “Economic success *arguably* is the explanation for male dominance over females.”

Weasel words are the stock and trade of most politicians when discussing controversial issues—and they can be subtle. For example, when the second President Bush justified his plan for a troop “surge” in Iraq in 2007, he claimed that military commanders who reviewed the strategy reported that this plan *can* work. However, some critical thinkers agreed that maybe the plan *can* work, but that doesn’t mean it *will* work.

**Fine-Print Disclaimers**

Another common trick is to take back unobtrusively in the (usually) unread fine print what is claimed in the most easily read part of a document. Schlock insurance policies are notorious for their use of this device. They tout wonderful coverage in large type while taking it away in the fine print. When private property is damaged by earthquakes, tornados, or hurricanes, for instance, people usually think they are sufficiently insured against damage from natural disasters, but they often discover to their chagrin that upfront promises of replacement cash are severely limited in the fine print of their insurance policies.

Advertisers regularly use very small asterisks to direct readers to the bottom of ads, where they find out, say, that to get the “low-low” airline fare, tickets must be purchased 21 days in advance and cover a stay over at least one Saturday and also learn that “other restrictions may apply” (note the weasel word *may*, hiding the fact that they do).

Fine-print disclaimers have become so odious that advertisers have begun to play on the fact with a bit of humor, announcing (as some Lexus auto commercials did) that their lawyers have gone into paroxysms of joy while writing the fine print that is then scrolled across the TV screen (very quickly, so it can’t be read—but that’s part of the humor).

A variation of the fine-print disclaimer is the sneaky stipulation buried in contracts. A blatant example of this fine-print finagling occurred in the case of a fellow named Jim Turner, who rented a car in Connecticut, but discovered when he returned it to the car rental company that he had been charged $450 because of a stipulation in the contract that “fined” the driver $150 every time the speed exceeded 79 miles per hour.

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3Weasels often suck out the content of eggs without breaking their shells. The expression, by the way, was first used by Theodore Roosevelt.
His car had been tracked by satellite over seven states! Alas, poor Mr. Turner didn’t read the fine print in the contract when the agent asked him to sign his initials by the X.

Another variation on the fine-print disclaimer gambit is the reinterpretation ploy. Having said what turns out to be unpopular, or perhaps offensive, the best strategy for a politician often is just to reinterpret the ill-advised remark. On one of the tapes released by Gennifer Flowers, Bill Clinton is heard making a remark that clearly implies he thought Mario Cuomo (then governor of New York) acted like a mafioso. When the tapes became public, an embarrassed Clinton apologized, which is the right thing to do when caught with . . . uh . . . one’s pants down, but also stated that “I meant simply to imply that Governor Cuomo is a tough, worthy competitor,” which was a clever, but somewhat shady, reinterpretation of his remarks.

**Obfuscation**

Dictionaries tell us that to *obfuscate* is “to be so confused or opaque as to be difficult to perceive or understand” or “to render indistinct or dim.” George W. Bush wins a prize for opacity in his response to the question “Do you support affirmative action?”

> What I am against is quotas. I am against hard quotas, quotas they basically delineate based upon whatever. However they delineate, quotas, I think, vulcanize society. So I don’t know how that fits into what everybody else is saying, their relative positions, but that’s my position.

Since *vulcanization* is the process of treating rubbery material with chemicals, one wonders what mischief those quirky quotas will do to society—not to mention what Bush’s position is on the issue.

Let’s stretch the definition of *obfuscation* a bit here to cover cases in which an issue or question has been *evaded* by wandering from the point or by snowing one’s audience with an immense amount of detail in the hope that they either won’t notice or at least won’t press the point. For example, in the run-up to the 2008 election, ABC news anchor Charlie Gibson questioned Governor Sarah Palin about whether she had the national security credentials to serve as vice president, perhaps president of the country. He noted that she did command the Alaskan National Guard and that Alaska was close to Russia and then asked, “Are these sufficient credentials?” Palin replied:

> . . . it [running the country] is about reform of government and about putting government back on the side of the people, and that has much to do with foreign policy and national security issues. Let me speak specifically about a credential that I do bring to the table, Charlie, and that’s with the energy independence that I’ve been working on for these years as the governor of this state . . .

And off she went on her energy policy. Well, government reform is important, and so is putting government back on the side of the people, but Palin’s response told us nothing about her national security credentials. And so she evaded the issue, then wandered from the point when she slid into her energy policy. One can hardly single her out, though, for what has become standard political obfuscation. Nowadays that’s just common practice (as in two wrongs).

By the way, it needs to be said that not all wandering from the point constitutes obfuscation. We have to say this here because the many asides in this textbook...
(“Interestingly, . . .” and “By the way, . . .,” for example) definitely are not intended as obfuscations but merely as remarks about related or secondary matters that it is hoped the reader will find either interesting or informative.

4. Language Manipulators

People manipulate language for all sorts of reasons: to flatter, to impress, to persuade, to obfuscate, and to distort the truth—to name a few. Sometimes language manipulation is benign, but when it is done to benefit those in power, it can undermine the rights of others. Often the point of redefining language is to circumvent legal stipulations or to justify inequities—as noted below.

When the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib hit the news, officials in the Bush administration claimed it was the work of a few bad apples, but skeptics dug deeper and came up with the Justice Department’s interpretation of existing laws banning torture abroad (posted on the Washington Post website, June 14, 2004). In Section 2340 of the U.S. Criminal Code, torture is defined as any act “specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering . . . upon another person within his custody or physical control.” The Justice Department’s legalistic explanation (written in June 2002) was that “mere” pain wasn’t enough. “Physical pain amounting to torture must be equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.” This interpretation seems to make torture legal, unless it is extreme.

As for the fate of interrogators “who might arguably cross the line drawn in Section 2340” and be charged with torture—not to worry: They could claim they acted out of “necessity” or “self-defense,” pleas that “would potentially alleviate criminal liability.” In other words, they could get off the hook.

Those Who Control the Definitions . . .

Calling something by just the right name is crucial when you want to bend the law in your favor, influence public opinion, or justify funny business of one kind or another. For example, employers who want to pay employees less than the legal minimum wage or escape contractual obligations to provide health and other benefits to employees need only categorize them as subcontractors and arrange paperwork accordingly. Minimum wage laws in the United States apply to employees but not to subcontractors; union-brokered agreements concerning employee health insurance don’t cover subcontractors. Attempts at this kind of chicanery via definition occasionally have been overturned by the courts, but often they are successful. However, since the number of independent contractors has mushroomed over the past decade, lawsuits and union protests demanding job reclassification are expected to increase.

7While billionaire Bill Gates was becoming the richest person in the world, his Microsoft Corporation was using the subcontractor ploy to stiff over a thousand of his employees out of several perks other employees were entitled to. At one time or another, Microsoft has been embroiled in court battles over classification since 1990.
The food industry is plagued with misleading labels initiated by special interest groups who change the meaning of words used to describe food. For example, in 2003 the House and Senate passed a huge federal spending bill with the last-minute provision that meat, poultry, and dairy products could be labeled “organic” even if the animals were fed partly or entirely nonorganic feed. This rider was added to the bill on behalf of Fieldale farms, which complained about the supply of organic feed (though organic farmers say that what is really at issue is the price, not the supply—which is sufficient). So when does organic mean organic?

Closer to home, college administrators manage to cope with shrinking budgets by hiring lots of cheap labor, often referred to as adjunct faculty to distinguish them from “tenure-line” professors. Teachers hired as adjunct faculty earn a good deal less per course than do their tenured colleagues, receive many fewer, if any, fringe benefits, and don’t enjoy similar job security. This division of labor can be thought of as an academic analogue to the “downsizing” that goes on in the business world.

On a worldwide level, rich nations manage to undercut the labor force of poor ones by manipulating the language of international agreements to their advantage. Farm subsidies unfairly undercut the agricultural industry of developing countries, particularly in Africa, where most farmers are desperately poor, partly because they cannot compete with the subsidized products from the United States and European Union (EU). A world trade agreement was drawn up to prevent this situation from occurring, but the United States and the European Union managed to slide out of it by simply using different language for export subsidies. For instance, instead of violating the agreement with “trade-distorting” subsidies by paying farmers according to the amount they produce,

How much can you squeeze out of a single word, like folks, for example? A lot, according to Susan Anthony. In a trenchant analysis of the dumbing down of America, she explains how the ubiquitous use of folks is symptomatic of the erosion of cultural standards in this country.

The word is everywhere, a plague spread by the President of the United States, television anchors, radio talk show hosts, preachers in megachurches, self-help gurus, and anyone else attempting to demonstrate his or her identification with ordinary, presumably wholesome American values. Only a few decades ago, Americans were addressed as people or, in the more distant past, ladies and gentlemen. Now we are all folks . . . [as in “our prayers go out to those folks” or “I’ve been in contact with our homeland security folks”]

The specific political use of folks . . . designed to make the speaker sound like one of the boys or girls, is symptomatic of a debasement in public speech inelapsable from a more general erosion of American cultural standards. . . . Look up any important presidential speech in the history of the United States before 1980 and you will not find one patronizing appeal to folks. Imagine: “We here highly resolve that these folks shall not have died in vain . . . and that government of the folks, by the folks, for the folks, shall not perish from the earth.”

—The Age of American Unreason (New York: Pantheon, 2008), pp. 3–4
the European Union gives them direct grants that have almost the same effect on the price of these crops as before but are now called “non-distorting” because grants are determined by the amount of land a farmer owns and how much the land produced in the past. 8 Thus the EU is able to undercut the labor force of developing countries without breaking the trade agreement.

Although the United States Constitution grants Congress the sole right to declare war, this has rarely deterred American presidents from waging war without obtaining any such declaration. As we noted earlier in the chapter, they have simply renamed their escapades or declared them not to be wars. Assuming the December 1990 congressional measure allowing President Bush (the elder) to carry out United Nations resolutions did indeed constitute a declaration of war, even though it didn’t actually say we were declaring war, then the Gulf conflict is very likely the only legal war out of at least five fought by the United States since World War II.

In 2002 Congress gave President Bush (the younger) authorization to use the Armed Forces as he considered necessary to defend our country’s national security against the threat of Iraq and to enforce the United Nations Security Council resolutions with regard to Iraq. Thus Congress gave Bush the authority to wage war on Iraq but managed to avoid a congressional declaration of war. This equivocation enabled Congress to pass the buck and avoid criticism if the war went badly. 9

In the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration classified as “enemy combatants” hundreds of suspected al Qaeda and Taliban fighters detained by the United States at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base. Had they been called “prisoners of war,” they would have been entitled to release when the war was over, but as “enemy combatants,” not only could they be detained indefinitely for questioning without charge, they couldn’t challenge their imprisonment in court, nor were they entitled to any other constitutional rights. The case to reverse this decision was appealed for years until it finally worked its way up to the Supreme Court in 2008. In Boumediene v. Bush, the Court ruled that aliens detained as enemy combatants in Guantanamo have a constitutional right to challenge their detention in American courts. Will this ruling stand or will the term enemy combatants morph into another category that manages to slide past the law?

Not all attempts at victory via definition are successful. In the Microsoft antitrust case, the Justice Department wasn’t persuaded by Microsoft’s claim that its Internet Explorer was an integral part of its Windows operating system, “not an add-on, like a flash on a camera or a car radio,” but an integral part of Windows, like “a shutter on a camera or a car’s transmission.” The point was crucial to whether bundling Internet Explorer into Windows was a violation of antitrust laws and thus unfair to competition, chiefly Netscape and its Internet browser. But the analogies didn’t convince the Justice Department. (By the way, why shouldn’t it have?)

Sometimes common sense prevails, and redefinition backfires outside the courtroom. In 2008 when the biggest financial institutions were sliding into bankruptcy and the economy was in free fall, John McCain reassured the American people that the fundamentals of the economy were still good. That didn’t play well with the liberals or the conservatives or anyone else, for that matter. So McCain quickly revised his message and

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8For more on this see the (London) Guardian, June 3, 2003.
redefined *fundamentals* to mean the *workers*, not unemployment rates nor trade statistics nor any of the usual economic guideposts. Those hardworking Americans, the backbone of our country, were the fundamentals that were good. Well, no one would argue that the workers weren’t good, but whether they were economic fundamentals was another matter. That redefinition unleashed a raft of satiric responses that eventually laughed it into oblivion.

When language is manipulated, it isn’t always easy to determine whether there is some sort of sleight of hand going on. For years, the psychologist Thomas Szasz has been campaigning against the use of the expression *mental illness*, on grounds that there is no such thing as *mental* illness. Declaring John Hinckley “not guilty by reason of insanity” after his attempt to assassinate President Reagan was for Szasz just an extreme example of what happens when we take the analogy between physical illness and alleged mental illness seriously. (He does believe, however, that sometimes what is thought of as mental illness really is physical dysfunction.)

But Szasz is in the minority on this point, with the result, he claims, that various kinds of serious abuses of civil rights occur. One is that close relatives of the “mentally ill” often are able to have them “hospitalized for treatment” against their will. Forcing people into institutions in this way is a practice some see as not unlike the one that used to be common in the Soviet Union of confining political opponents in “mental institutions.” In a similar vein, Szasz argues, “we call self-starvation either *anorexia nervosa*, a *hunger strike*, a *suicide attempt*, or some other name, depending on how we want to respond.”

Well, then, is Szasz right about this? A number of psychologists find his position modestly persuasive, while the majority do not. The reason for this split of opinion is
that good arguments can be made on both sides of the issue, making it difficult to choose one over the other. Which choice we should make may well depend, as Szasz notes, on how we wish to deal with whatever circumstances our decisions affect. (Philosophy students might note the connection of this sort of case to the age-old conundrum about whether, when every part of an old ship has been replaced over the years by a new part, it is still the same ship; the answer, at least half of this writing team believes, is that it depends on who we wish to have title to ships repaired in this way, not on any truth written in the sky.)

**Those Who Frame Public Policy**

Redefining words is one way to influence public opinion; another is to use loaded language to evoke a worldview that persuades people to adopt policies—even if these policies go against their own interests. Over the past decade, George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, has become well known (and controversial) for developing a theory about the science and art of framing the debate that has attracted attention across the political spectrum.

Lakoff defines frames as “mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies.”

We recognize frames through language, and since people usually make decisions about politics based on their values, the language creates the frame that evokes those values. Lakoff uses as an example the loaded phrase “tax relief,” conjured up by Republicans to hype their campaign for tax cuts (a neutral, but accurate term). The notion of relief suggests that there is an affliction that must be removed. Those who remove the affliction are the good guys; those who oppose it, the bad guys. The “frame” taps into the voters’ value systems, and they, in turn, buy into the idea. Meanwhile the media repeats the phrase over and over until it enters the political lexicon. Other examples include the ominous sounding “death tax” and the emotionally charged “partial birth abortion,” loaded phrases that nudge voters into supporting tax cuts and banning third-term abortions.

Democrats invented their own political frames. When Republicans threatened to eliminate the filibuster procedure that Democrats were using to prevent a quick confirmation of Bush-appointed judges, the Democrats framed their attack as an “abuse of power.” Day after day they hammered away at the message that they were fighting for

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*Conservative, n.* A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.

—Ambrose Bierce (*The Devil’s Dictionary*)

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democracy against a Republican abuse of power that was not what our founders intended. This frame evoked the world view that we value democracy and want to preserve it. Republicans were attempting to undermine democracy by eliminating the filibuster, an American birthright that is central to our republic. In fact, the filibuster is a parliamentary procedure (not a birthright) that is typically used to prevent the Senate majority from ending a debate. The Democrats were actually breaking tradition in using it to block the confirmation of an entire slate of judges. Nonetheless the public was persuaded, and Republicans backed down under pressure.\footnote{For more on this see “The Framing Wars,” by Matt Bai, \textit{New York Times Magazine}, July 17, 2005, an in-depth discussion of Lakoff’s theory.}

Whether or not we agree with Lakoff’s theory, there is enough truth in it to make us wary of the way politicians use language to manipulate us to side with them on critical issues.

Psychologists use the term \textit{framing effects} to describe similar phenomena that influence our decisions. For instance, weight-conscious people are more likely to eat hamburgers described as 90 percent lean rather than 10 percent fat, even though the amount of fat is the same in either case. Charities rake in more money when they urge donors to give pennies a day rather than dollars per year. People are more likely to spend money described as a bonus (because it is extra income and thus dispensable) and more likely to save money described as a rebate (because it implies a return on money spent within their income that should not be squandered). Politicians could have used this ploy to good effect in 2008 if they had coined the term \textit{tax bonus} instead of \textit{tax rebate} to describe money returned to people so that they will spend it and thus stimulate the lagging economy.\footnote{See “Rebate Psychology,” by Nicholas Epley, \textit{New York Times}, January 31, 2008.} And, of course, advertisers regularly rely on framing effects to manipulate consumers into buying their products.