

## Want to be more persuasive online? Use the present tense, study suggests

November 14 2023, by Alexa Battler

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

One Amazon review is written in the past tense: "I was thrilled when I put on this shirt!" Another reads, "I will definitely wear this shirt a lot." Yet another says, "I love wearing this shirt."

It turns out that the third version, written in the present tense, is

significantly more persuasive than the other two, a new University of Toronto study [published](#) in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* finds.

Researchers says that's because the present tense makes a message seem more specific and concrete, which helps audiences better visualize its meaning and feel psychologically closer to the author.

"The more vivid something is, the more real and true it seems," says Sam Maglio, co-author of the study and professor of marketing and psychology at U of T Scarborough. "The past and the future aren't as vivid as the present. In the present tense, you as the reader take a journey with the speaker and you become immersed.

"We are experiencing it together."

Maglio teamed up with David Fang, a U of T alumnus who is pursuing doctoral studies at Stanford University, to dissect millions of Amazon reviews for products in categories from fashion and beauty to video games to automotive. They determined the number of past, present and future verbs in each review and recorded how many upvotes they received (conveniently, Amazon's upvote button just reads: "Helpful"). Then they factored in other features of the [review](#)—such as pictures, how long it was up and its number of stars—to isolate the impact of [verb](#) tense.

Online reviews, on average, tend to use a lot of present tense verbs. Researchers found with every increase in present tense, helpfulness ratings rose considerably, and with every increase in past or future tense, they dropped. The trend persisted when the researchers looked only at reviews with more than zero upvotes, and across reviews collected before Amazon removed its downvote feature in 2019. And when Maglio and Fang brought in hundreds of participants to rate reviews, the

same pattern emerged.

However, researchers found a catch when studying live participants. They had about 500 people rate reviews by helpfulness and told them the reviewers were either relatively nearby (within Canada) or on the other side of the world (in Australia). The reviews written in Canada showed that present tense verbs boosted people's perception of helpfulness, while the Australian reviews showed verb tense made little difference.

"Reviews are maximally helpful when they are right here and they're right now because the closer the reader can come to seeing it, touching it, making it palpable, the more they believe it and the more they trust it," says Maglio, who is cross-appointed to the Rotman School of Management. "It's hard to be immersive and vivid and visceral from a world away."

The impact went beyond website comment sections. The researchers showed about 400 people a pitch asking for donations to a charity that was written in past, present or future tense, and told them they were entered in a lottery with a \$50 payout. When asked what percentage of their winnings they'd give to the charity, the study participants donated about 28% when the proposal was written in future or past tenses. With just a few words switched to present, the figure jumped to about 38% (the researchers then actually donated those percentages to the non-profit Helping Hands).

The study joins a growing body of research that finds communicating about the world in concrete ways makes us seem more believable to audiences. Just as using "the active voice" has become a ubiquitous piece of writing advice, Maglio hopes the present tense will one day become common knowledge.

"People might not even notice the difference between these verb tenses,

but it doesn't mean that they're not impacting how we think," Maglio says. "The secret ingredient to helpfulness is being immersed—and the present tense makes the reader more immersed.

"If you want to be persuasive, write in the present tense."

**More information:** David Fang et al, Time perspective and helpfulness: Are communicators more persuasive in the past, present, or future tense?, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104544](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104544)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Want to be more persuasive online? Use the present tense, study suggests (2023, November 14) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-persuasive-online-tense.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.