

Using the Right Words to Shape the User Experience

By John S. Rhodes

*"Wisdom is not in words; Wisdom is meaning within words.
~ Kahlil Gibran"*

Words matter. The words you're reading right now -- on this page -- influence you. They make you think. They cause you to react and respond. They shape your experience, and your life.

To understand the true impact of words on the user experience, we need only look at a small slice of psychology. Let's consider how words shape memories...

For well over 25 years, American psychologist [Elizabeth F. Loftus](#) has demonstrated that human memory is easily broken and corrupted. She's spent her career researching how we reconstruct the world based on previous experience but also current information, including the words that we see and hear.

In a classic experiment [Loftus and Palmer \(1974\)](#) demonstrated that the words used to describe an accident (i.e., smashed, collided, bumped, hit, contacted) significantly influenced how people recalled the details of the scene they saw in a picture. People were more likely to estimate that the speeds were higher with the more aggressive words. But, they also were more likely to actually recall seeing broken glass -- although none was present in the picture they saw.

There are many more experiments like the one I just described. And, you can find research that spreads out beyond human memory to attention, emotions, and satisfaction. The bottom line is that an even slight change in wording has a real and lasting impact on how we view the world, and experience it.

In the realm of user experience and usability, words play a play special role. Let's talk about information architecture to make this concrete. Say that we're trying to set up a navigation system. We know that the labels and headings matter. If you don't have the right groupings with the right headings, people won't remember the details.

To be even more practical, imagine that you're trying to set up a small automotive web site. Let's also pretend that you have these automobiles to group: Honda Civic, Honda Accord, and Honda CR-V. You could group these items under various labels, such as Vehicles, Cars, or Hondas.

The next time you're creating something for people and you need to use words, consider the impact you're going to have. Don't be afraid to test different words, just as you'd test widgets, buttons, and graphics. Break out the thesaurus. Get the words directly from users through smart questionnaires and surveys. Choose words carefully.