

What's in a *Name*?

**Language,
Please**



In July 2025, President Donald Trump's massive **tax and spending bill** became law. It's been widely reported that the legislation will defund **domestic food aid** and **health care** for millions of Americans. Taxes are expected to **go up for the poor** and down for the super-wealthy. Even so, in covering the bill, journalists across media outlets consistently referred to it using **a name** designated by the Trump administration's congressional supporters: the "Big Beautiful Bill." And that's not surprising. Reporters typically call government policies by some portion of their official names. But when a bill's title stands in such stark contrast to its substance, what is a journalist – or any truth-bound communicator – to do?

Let's start with the fact that **language not only describes but creates civic reality**. Words can signal values and feelings, assign moral standing, conjure memories, activate assumptions, smuggle in biases, and elevate the ordinary into something extraordinary. Language functions as both cipher and code, trenchant descriptor or means of obfuscation.

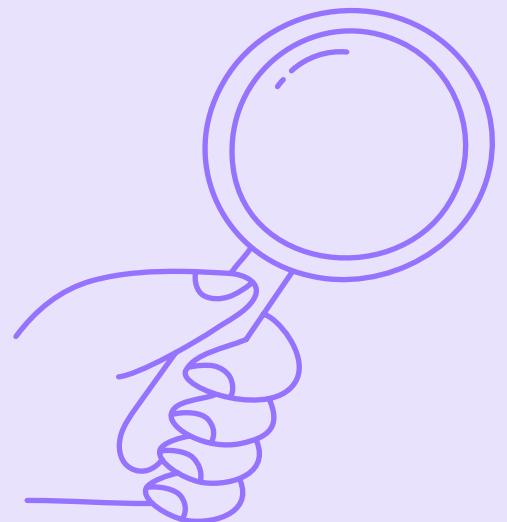
Jennifer Mercieca, a historian of American political rhetoric at Texas A&M University, describes language like the "Big Beautiful Bill" as a product of "frame warfare," the battle to shape how people think, speak about, and address certain issues or experiences. In the frame wars, **words are weapons that form our sense of reality, normality, belonging, and who is connected or loyal to whom**.

*Of course,
not all language
is war.*

Words support forms of play and art. They are essential to maintaining and restoring peace. But understanding the concept of frame warfare and weaponized language is necessary for meaningful journalism or content creation of any kind, and Mercieca recommends that we all acknowledge it exists and learn how it works. Even if your aim is not to join the conflict, more of us are recording and sharing our lives, political and economic polarization is surging, and misinformation is mushrooming by the day. There are people actively trying to manipulate and redefine reality. Making that activity visible helps us all to decide for ourselves what we think.

When people debate language in the context of news and politics, some will dismiss the discussion as ridiculous, indulgent, performative and, very often, “woke” (a term that has itself been weaponized). “It’s not that deep,” some commenters say. But the truth is, all sides of any issue use words to advance life-altering policies and norms. And because weaponized words can appeal to the portions of the human brain primed to make predictions based on past experience, they can feed misunderstanding. Parroting the weaponized language of others can put those communicating with the public in the position of damaging their own credibility as well as the public’s grasp of the facts. Some weaponized terms are potent because they have been supercharged or rendered more believable by a form of bias or a common fear. Repeating them can suggest that they are true.

Understanding the Power of **Words** & **Labels** in **Politics**



President Trump is known for amplifying terms like “fake news,” “lamestream media,” “anchor babies,” “illegals,” and, of course, “bigly” – and has proven himself an extra-skilled combatant in frame warfare. But he is by no means unique. Employers announce layoffs as a “reduction in forces,” “a restructuring,” “impacts,” or “right-sizing” their businesses. Parents condemn accurate, inclusive US history books as “attacks” on their children’s well-being and seek to ban them from classrooms on that basis. Sen. Bernie Sanders is known for his calls to “tax the rich,” amplifying his belief that the wealthy do not pay their fair share of taxes, limiting what the country can do for others. In each case, the goal is to use memorable, evocative language that frames the way the listener should think.

Weaponizing language is a form of verbal persuasion that can tip into manipulation, and it’s not a new phenomenon.

In a 1946 essay called “Politics and the English Language,” author George Orwell decried the widespread use of political rhetoric aimed to hide rather than expose the truth; he made the case for precise, spare, active, and concrete language instead. It was advice Orwell did not always follow. But when he published the novel 1984 a few years later, it highlighted the role of misleading language in manipulating and controlling the public, and there were plenty of real-world examples to draw from.

By the late 1940s, a husband and wife team credited with developing the nation’s now-massive political consulting industry seeded the term “socialized medicine” into the lexicon. Their goal: stop President Harry Truman’s efforts to create a national health care system in the United States. Their client: the American Medical Association. When President Bill Clinton attempted to create something similar five decades later, terms like socialized medicine and other insinuations of communism were still strong enough to help kill the bill.

In 1990, a PAC controlled by then-House Minority Whip and later House Speaker Newt Gingrich issued a memo labeled, “Language: A Key Mechanism of Control.” It aimed to give Republican newcomers to Congress the skill to “speak like Newt.” That is, to prosecute the case against Democrats and their policy ideas and then champion their own in ways that would be appealing, memorable, even infectious.

Mercieca argues that Democrats are less effective than Republicans at developing quippy, biting, weaponized language to push their agenda. A case to consider is the 1994 Defense Department directive known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” a policy that barred homophobic harassment, bullying, or questioning about a person’s sexuality in the military, but also forbade any conversation about nonheterosexual relationships, family life, or activities. Elected Democrats described the policy as just and inclusive. But contained within it was the concept that to be LGBTQ+ was only tolerable in the military when hidden. DADT remained policy for 17 years, until President Barack Obama, a Democrat, ended the ban on openly gay members of the military in 2011. And now, 14 years later, the rights of some LGBTQ+ service members are once again being targeted, this time by Trump's 2025 executive order banning trans people from military service. Executive Order 14183 was entitled, "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness." The frame wars continue.

We live with weaponized words for long **after their originators leave power.** Take former President Ronald Reagan’s “welfare queen.” The phrase is so potent that it continues to shape the debate about social safety net programs, the frequency of fraud, and even what individuals must prove to receive public assistance to this day.

What's a **Writer** To Do?



Make intentional decisions about when to use language that has been weaponized and when to replace it with other, more accurate terms.



Here's a guide.

- * **Slow down.** That's easier said than done, particularly on deadline. But, try to give yourself a few minutes before you report or research an issue, before you write, and after your first draft is done, to spot the ways that your sources have framed an issue in their own interest. Take note of the language they used to do so. Consider and gather information about the implications of the source's goals; the emotions, ideas, and assumptions they are trying to activate. Do this often. As with all skills, with time, you will get better at dipping beneath the surface, thinking beyond the obvious.
- * **Pay particular attention to words and phrases that are repeated** by sources, terms that vary from the usual way in which something is often described, and verbiage that aligns with what is widely loathed or with common stereotypes (for example, the lazy gamer in the basement), fears, biases, or oxymorons (for example, "welfare queen"). These are often signs that a term has been weaponized and that your source's quotes will require additional context.

* Mercieca suggests that you do what ancient thinkers like Aristotle and Ovid did: use a **research and analysis** method known as **points of stasis** to parse weaponized words and phrases. **Ask yourself and, as often as possible, your sources, what the word or term means, and why they have used it.**

- Does the problem or issue raised really exist, and what is the relevant proof or facts?
- What caused the issue or problem?
- Who is responsible for the issue?
- Why is this issue of concern, and what ethical or safety issues must be considered? What is the evidence that the situation is good or bad?
- Are the right set of people, experts, or affected individuals weighing in? Can you elevate their voices, particularly if they are rarely heard or locked out of the debate?
- What do those who are involved in the debate have to say? What are their core arguments? Are they true? Have you checked?
- Find out what the source's preferred fix or approach (think policy, rules, guidelines) would do and why the source seeks that outcome. Consider using this information and language to describe the matter that has been weaponized in your story rather than parroting source-selected terms.
- Give some thought to time. Has the weaponized term become the way that something is best known? If so, including it once may be necessary for clarity. Or, **has the weaponized word been claimed or outfitted with new meaning by those with a different perspective or political aims?** If so, try to include this context in brief and identify when the politics or the meaning of the weaponized word changed. For example, consider the **trajectory of the term "Obamacare."**

- * When necessary for clarity, **consider limiting the weaponized word or term to direct quotes** from sources or a single early mention in the piece (for example, referring to the 2025 legislation as Trump's massive tax and spending bill). Many news organizations also **use modifying language** such as "so-called," "known as," or similar terms to signal to readers that the language or title in question has been curated, or that a source's embrace of or attempt at weaponized language is happening. Remember that writing or speaking about complex topics in clear ways is the essence of the job.
- * Note that headline and caption writers as well as social media teams face a particular set of challenges including extreme space limitations and concerns about capturing the immediate attention of those seeking information on a specific topic. **Quotation marks can be useful when dealing with weaponized language** in a headline, caption, or social media post. But the need to be particularly thoughtful about inventing new language is imperative.
- * Remember that **new terms are an expansive feature of any language in active use**. Headline and caption writers and those generating pieces may coin new phrases or terms or bring words into the mainstream from other countries, academia, social media, or other settings. This can sometimes be helpful when attempting to draw attention to a story, describe a physical place or object, crystallize the connection between a set of events, or illuminate a social phenomenon. For example, the term **heterofatalism** – a word capturing how untold numbers of straight women feel about modern dating – appears to have first been published in the New York Times in 2025 and drawn from **academic research**. When you create or import a term, ask yourself if there is already a known term that would accurately describe what you are getting at. Then consider whether the new term in any way obscures the truth or potentially manipulates those who encounter it.

- * **Dig deep.** Does using a source's language serve the goal of accuracy? If so, consider using it. Is it simply easy or does it feel like a small sacrifice to court favor with the source or a subset of your audience? If so, strongly consider removing or limiting the weaponized term. When straying from longstanding or common ways to describe a process, event, place, or person/group of people, have you discerned why? Does doing so help to more accurately illuminate the issues or experiences at hand, or does it champion a spin or hide a contradiction?
- * Recognize that this is **critical thinking**. As the world continues to grow more complex, we'll all need the capacity to describe and explain it. Remember that significant shares of the American public apparently heard terms like “mass deportation,” “tariffs,” “budget cuts” and “government efficiency,” and presumed these meant things they would fully support. Seven months after Trump's second term began and many of his policy ideas had been put in action, polling suggested otherwise. You can embrace critical thought and help your audience to do the same.

Before we close, a final thought experiment:

What if, instead of reducing words to warfare, we take hold of their power in a different way?

What if we begin with the premise that language is a situation? With every word we choose, we do more than describe reality. We give it shape. We create benefits and obstacles, invite and block connection, and establish what is possible to imagine. **We literally and figuratively set the terms for what can happen next.**

So, next time you sit down to draft a piece, ask yourself: What situation am I producing with the language I use? Is there anything further I need to do to align my language with truth, fairness, and thoughtful action?



Additional resources

- **How politicians abuse language to magnify fear and reflect grievances** (Poynter)
- **The linguistics of mass persuasion, part 2: Choose your own adventure** (Lingua Obscura)
- **Gingrich's language set a new course** (Atlanta Journal Constitution)
- **The weaponisation of victimhood** (London School of Economics and Political Science)
- **How stasis theory helps you write a better paper** (Press Books)

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