

The Magic of the Word

Because...

... or: Do people really think?

Meetup Rationality Freiburg

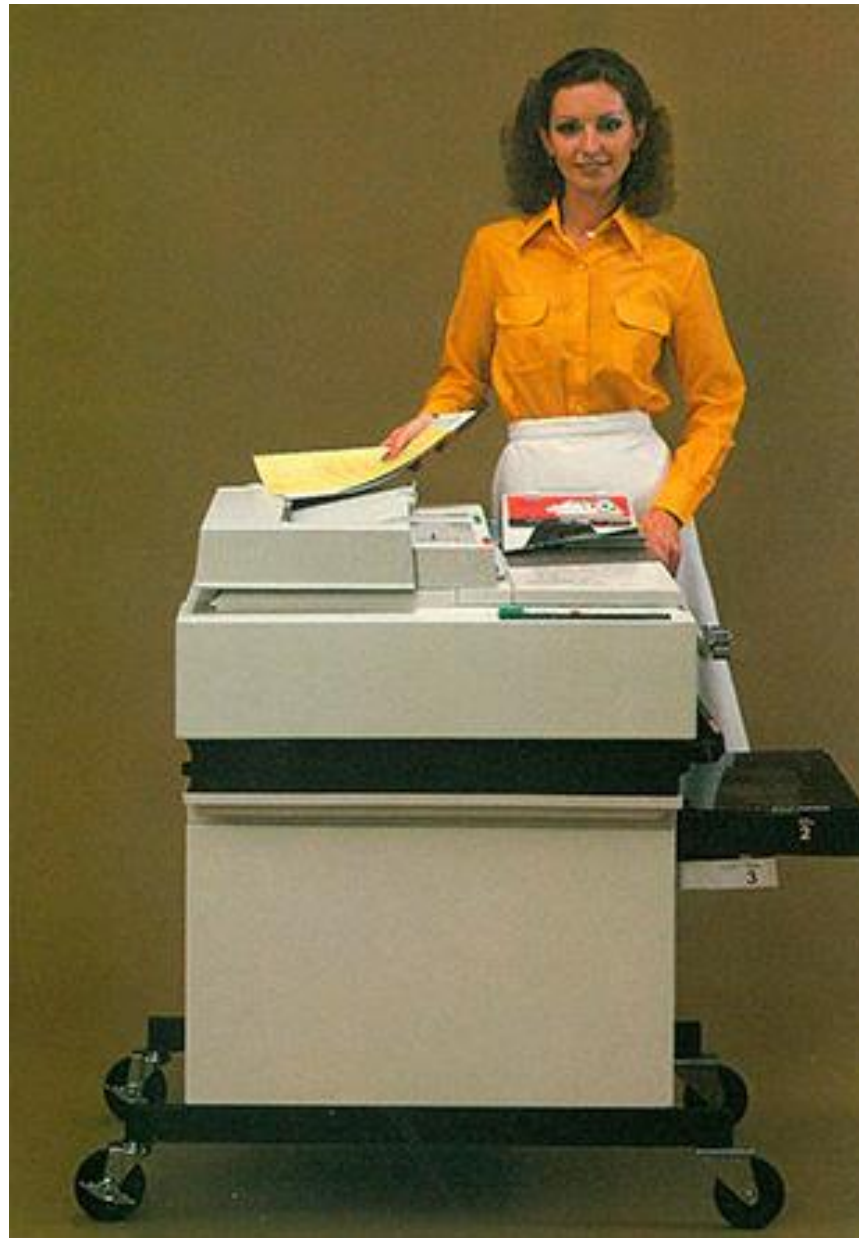
2025-12-19

Rahel



Warm-up: What is this Device?





https://xeroxnostalgia.com/storage/2015/03/Xerox_3109.jpg

<https://xeroxnostalgia.com/2015/03/08/xerox-3109/>

DE GRÅ KOPIENES TID ER FORBI



Nå kan selv mindre firmaer
få ekte Rank Xerox-kopier.

De grå kopiernes tid er forbi. Nå lager Rank Xerox kopieringsmaskiner spesielt for mindre firmaer, kontorer og foreninger.

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**RANK XEROX HAR
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Dermed er det mulig for deg og oss å finne frem til den maskinen som løser akkurat dine behov. Vi demonstrerer gjerne disse modellene for deg, og hjelper med å finne den gunstigste finansieringsformen: kjøp, leie eller leasing.

RANK XEROX

Pilestredet 73, Oslo 3. Tlf. (02) 11 40 50.

BERGEN: Lars Hillest. 22. TE 21 37 32 · BODO: Sandt. 5. TE 24 94 0 · DRAMMEN: Brageries Torg 4. TE 83 89 37 · FREDRIKSTAD: Nygaardsgt. 55. TE 12 23 0 · GJØVIK: Storgt. 20. TE 73 56 1 · HAMAR: Torgt. 73. TE 27 40 5 · HAUGESUND: Handelsgt. 10. TE 21 28 8 · KRISTIANSTAD: Skjervegt. 10. TE 21 52 8 · SKIEN: Kvernåstgt. 5. TE 23 90 7 · STAVANGER: Nøtt. 15. TE 22 03 3 · TRONDH. Skjervegt. 5. TE 33 46 5 · TRONDHEIM: Nordregt. 6. TE 31 10 · TØNSBERG: Stollenberggt. 1. TE 14 84 · ÅLESUND: Kjeser Wølloingst. 22. TE 24 05 5

Xerox og Rank Xerox er registrerte varemerker for Rank Xerox a.s.

<https://xeroxnostalgia.com>

https://xeroxnostalgia.com/storage/2024/01/Xerox_2202_Norwegian_advert.jpg

The Magic of the Word

Because...

... or: Do people really think?



The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action: The Role of "Placebic" Information in Interpersonal Interaction

Ellen Langer
Harvard University

Arthur Blank and Ben Zion Chanowitz
The Graduate Center
City University of New York

Three field experiments were conducted to test the hypothesis that complex social behavior that appears to be enacted mindfully instead may be performed without conscious attention to relevant semantics. Subjects in compliance paradigms received communications that either were or were not semantically sensible, were or were not structurally consistent with their previous experience, and did or did not request an effortful response. It was hypothesized that unless the communication occasioned an effortful response or was structurally (rather than semantically) novel, responding that suggests ignorance of relevant information would occur. The predictions were confirmed for both oral and written communications. Social psychological theories that rely on humans actively processing incoming information are questioned in light of these results.

Consider the image of man or woman as a creature who, for the most part, attends to the world about him or her and behaves on the basis of reasonable inference drawn from such attention. The view is flattering, perhaps, but is it an accurate accounting of covert human behavior?

Social psychology is replete with theories that take for granted the "fact" that people think. Consistency theories (cf. Abelson et al., 1968), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959), and attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Jones et al., 1972; Kelley, 1967), for example, as well as generally accepted explanations for phenomena like bystander (non)intervention (Darley & Latané, 1968), all start out with the underlying assumption that people attend to their

world and derive behavioral strategies based on *current* incoming information. The question raised here is not whether these formulations are correct, nor is it whether people are capable of thoughtful action. Instead, we question how often people outside of the laboratory are actually mindful of the variables that are relevant for the subject and for the experimenter in the laboratory, and by implication, then, how adequate our theories of social psychology really are.

This article questions whether, in fact, behavior is actually accomplished much of the time without paying attention to the substantive details of the "informative" environment. This idea is obviously not new. Discussions of mind/body dualism by philosophers and the consequences that different versions of this relation have on its status as an isomorphic, deterministic, or necessary relationship between the two are part of psychology's heritage. However, the extent of the implications of this idea has not been fully appreciated nor researched. How much behavior can go on without full awareness? Clearly, simple motor acts may be overlearned and performed auto-

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(seemingly)

„The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action: The Role of ‘Placebic’ Information in Interpersonal Interaction”

Langer, E. J., Blank, A., & Chanowitz, B. (1978). Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36, 635. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.6.635>

Quotations:

- „Social psychology is replete with theories that take for granted the "fact" that people think.”
- “(...) subjects are not thinking about what one thinks they are thinking about (i.e., what is relevant), rather than demonstrating that their minds are relatively blank.”

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Hypothesis:

- Motions → automatic processing
- Complex social behavior → conscious processing of relevant information?
... or rather automatic processing as well?

Experiment

Test Person
(120 random adults)



Graduate Center of the City University of New York

Experimenter



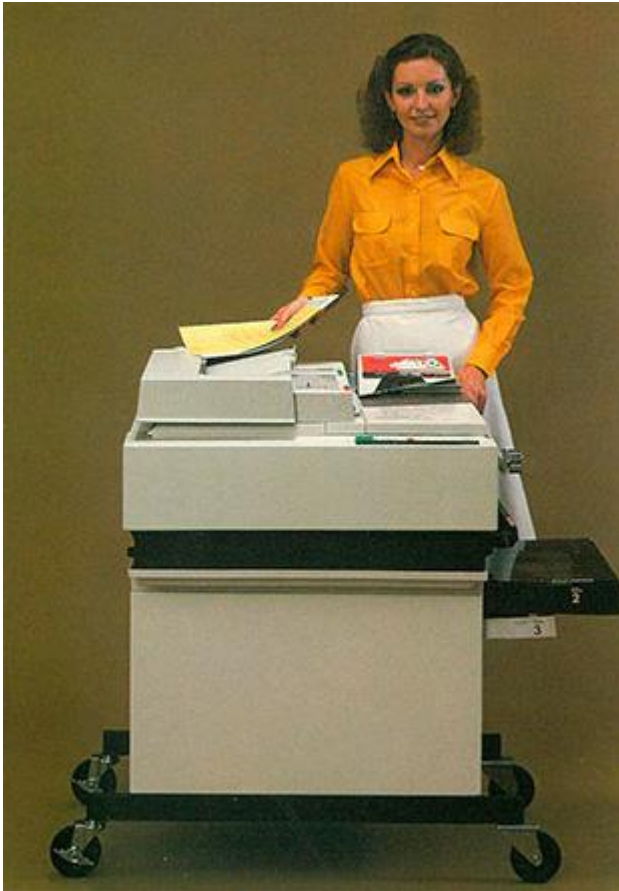
Experiment



Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine?



Experiment



Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine?



Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine,
because I have to make copies?

Experiment



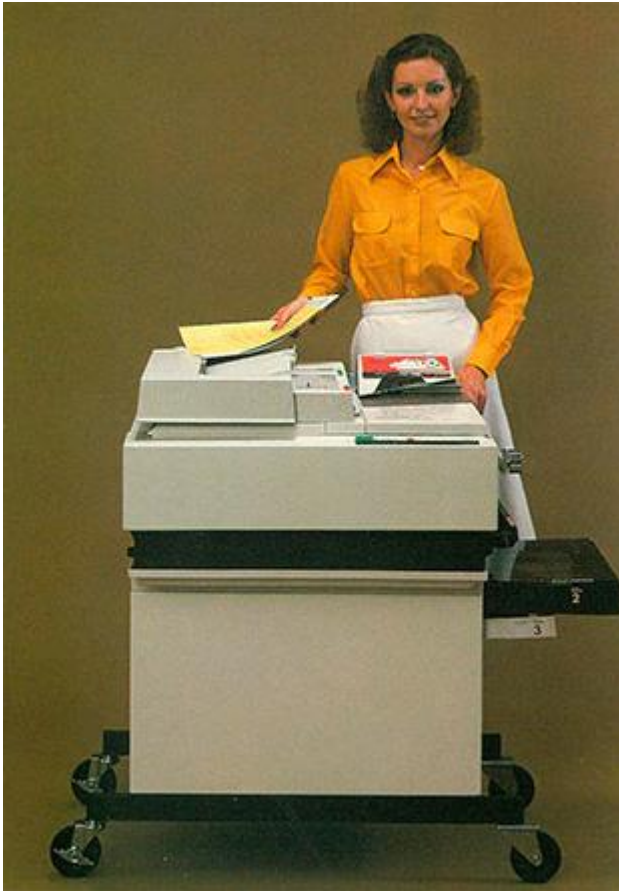
Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine?

Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine,
because I have to make copies?

Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine,
because I'm in a rush?



Experiment



Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine?

request only



Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine,
because I have to make copies?

“placebic” information

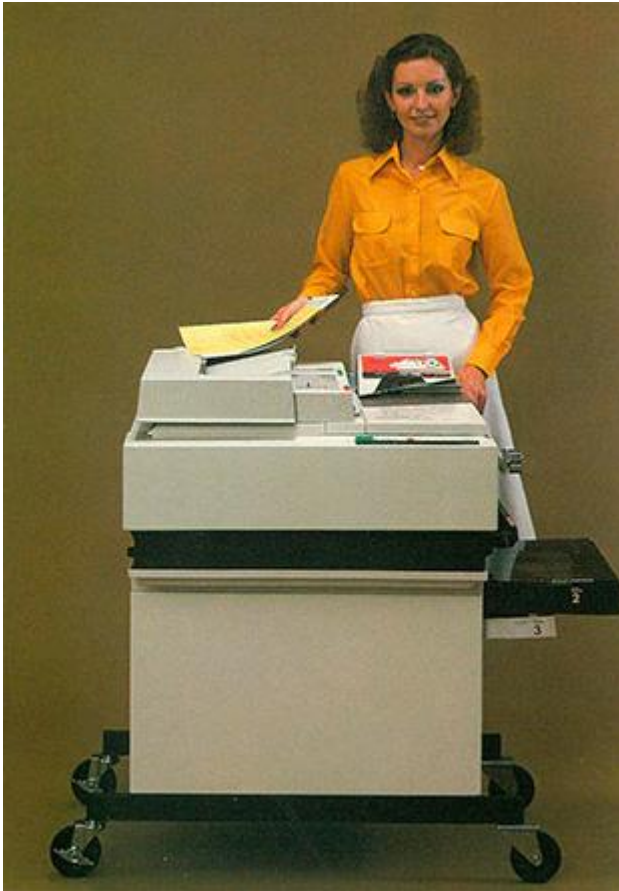
Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
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real information

Experiment

Okay.

Nope.



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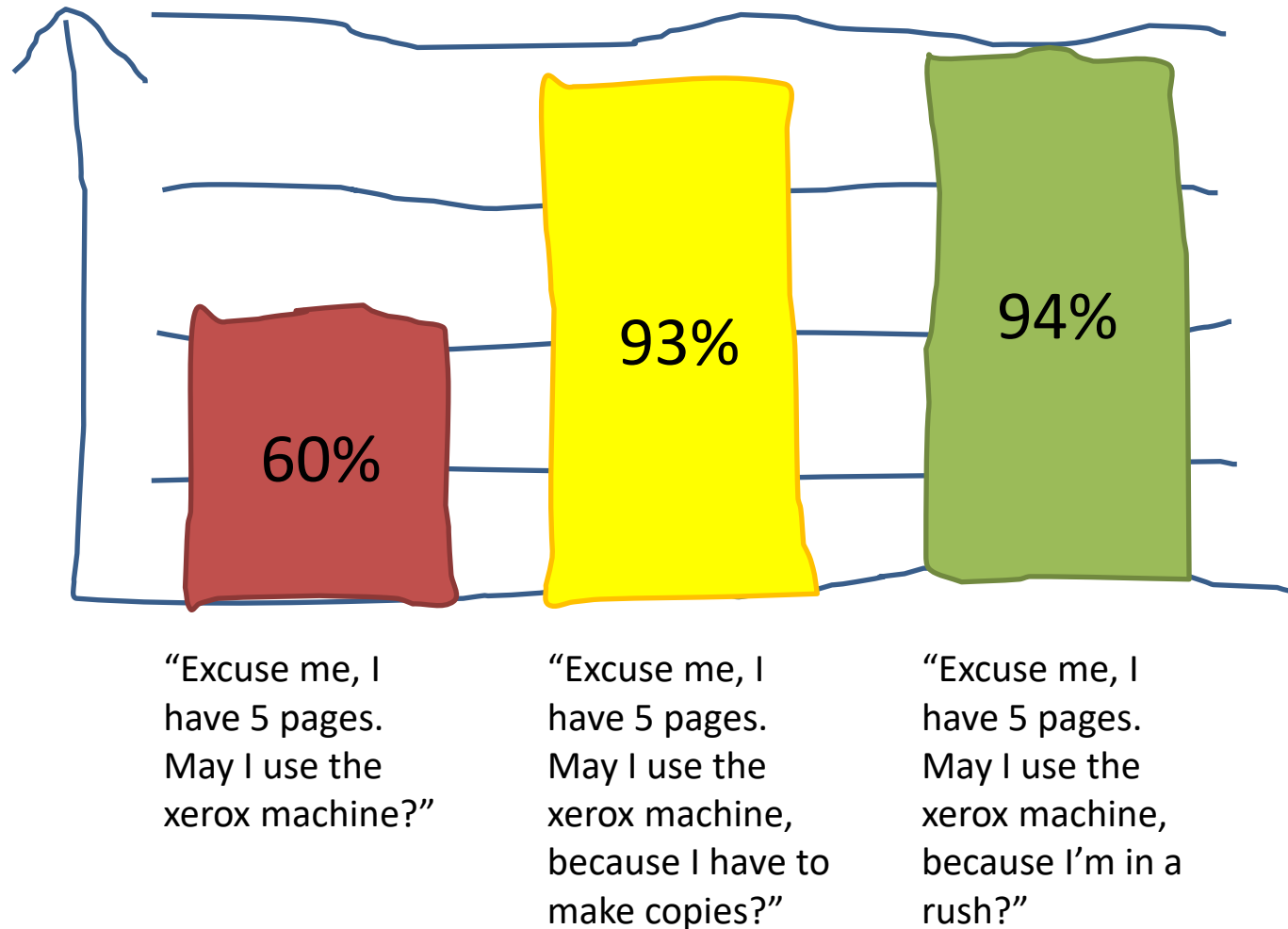
"placebic" information

Excuse me, I have 5 pages.
May I use the xerox machine,
because I'm in a rush?

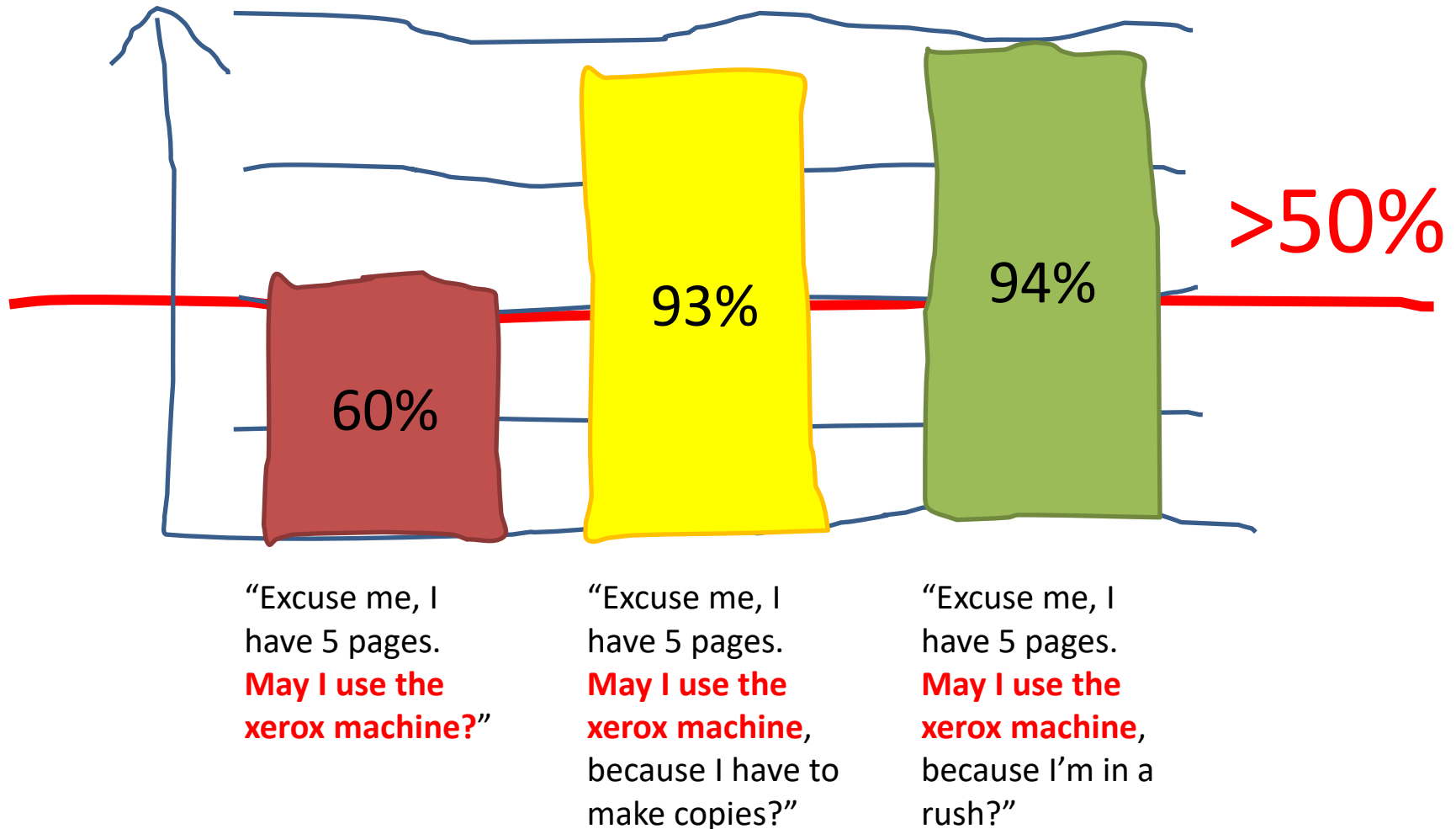
real information



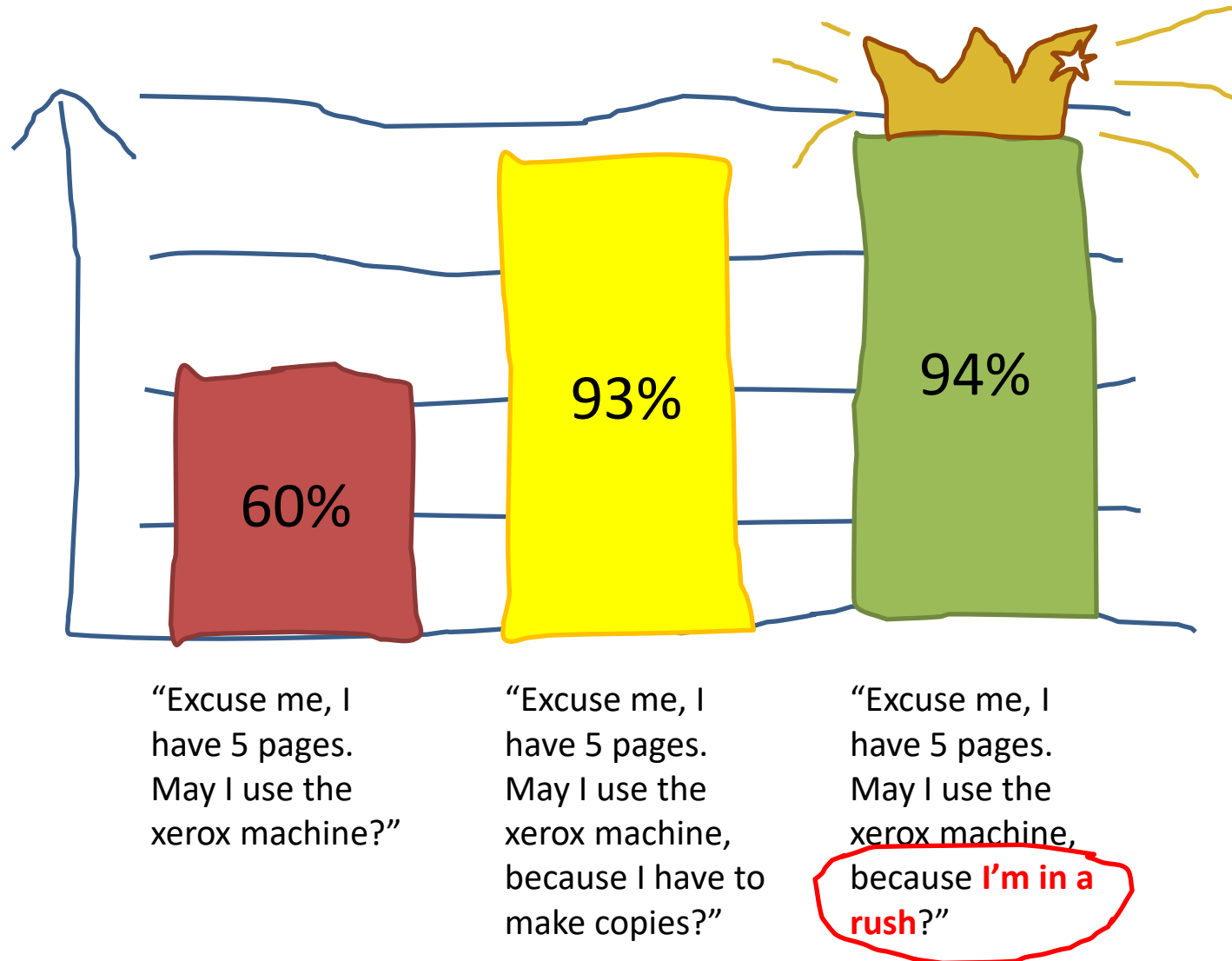
Success Rates



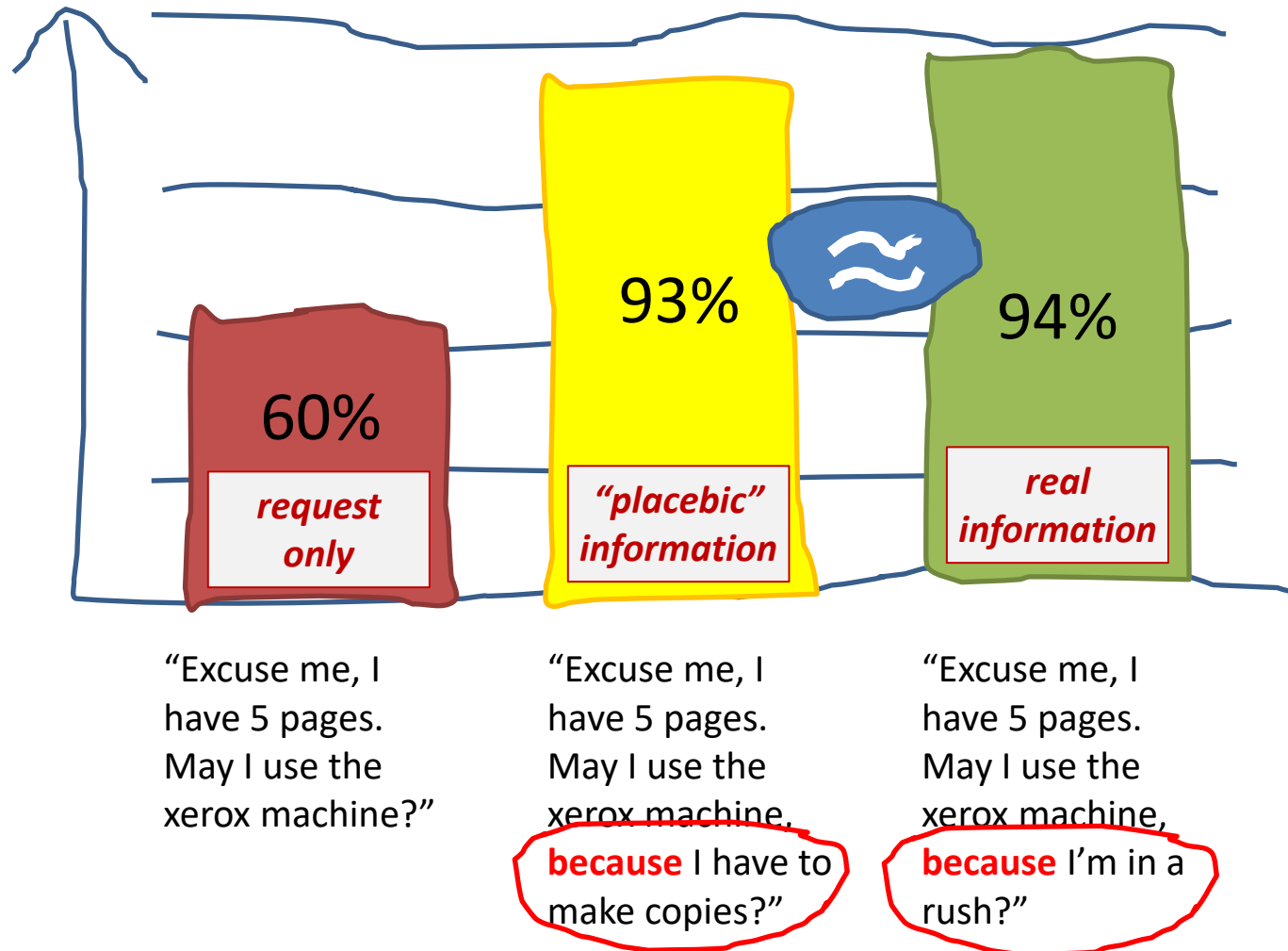
Conclusion #1 (only mine):
→ *Politeness probably helps.*



Conclusion #2 (only mine): → *Always being late helps.*

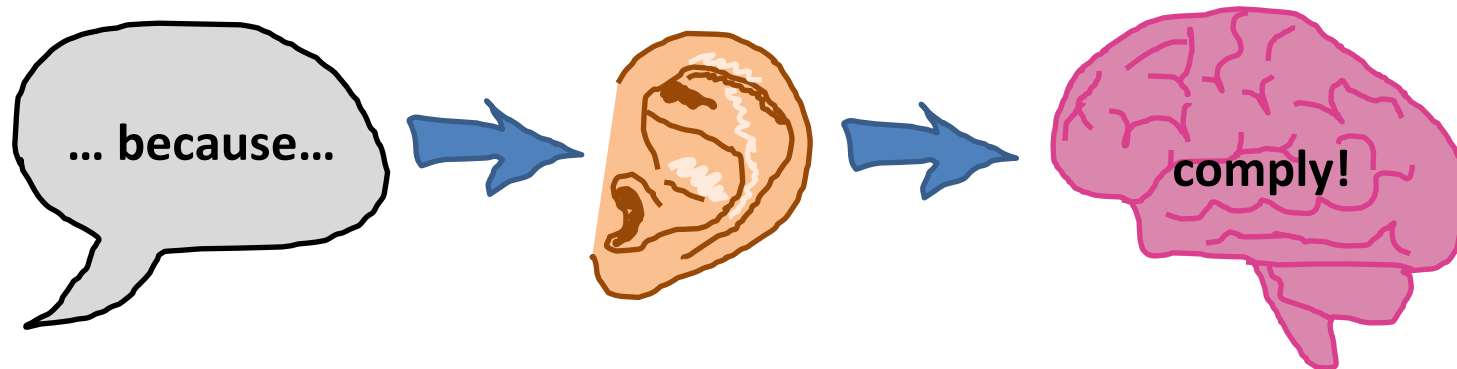


Conclusion #3 (the real one): → „*BECAUSE*“ is a magic word!



But why?

- People learned in earlier situations:
 - If someone asks for a favor they usually have a profound reason, so comply with their wish!
 - Expressing reasons often start with „because“



- If stakes are low:
 - „Energy saving mode“ / autopilot behavior, even in complex interactions
 - Don't bother to process factual information for making decisions
 - Script-like reacting on cues („because“) is enough

What if the stakes are higher?

Hmm...
That would cost me
like 15 minutes!



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request only

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because I have to make copies?

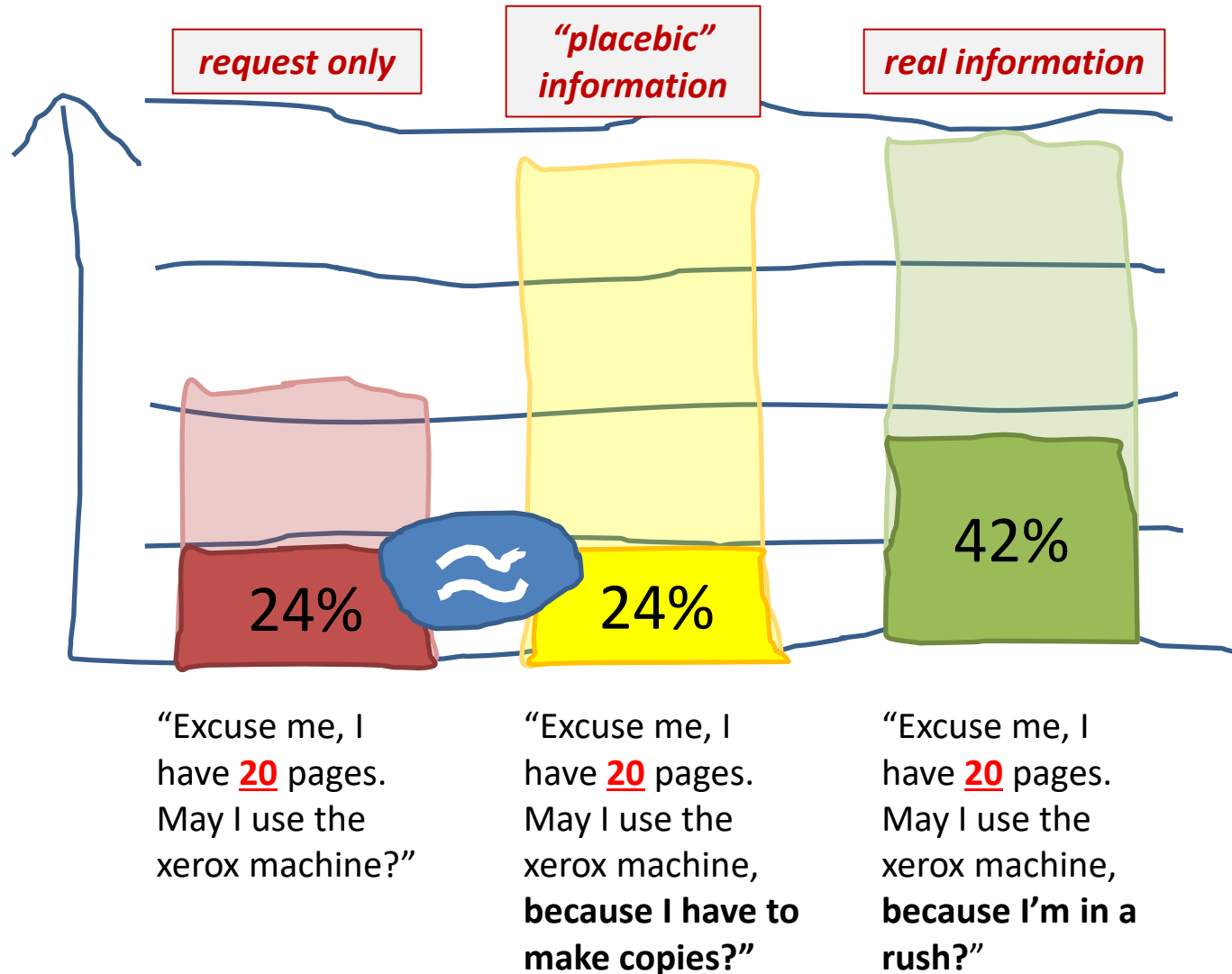
"placebic" information

Excuse me, I have 20 pages.
May I use the xerox machine,
because I'm in a rush?

real information

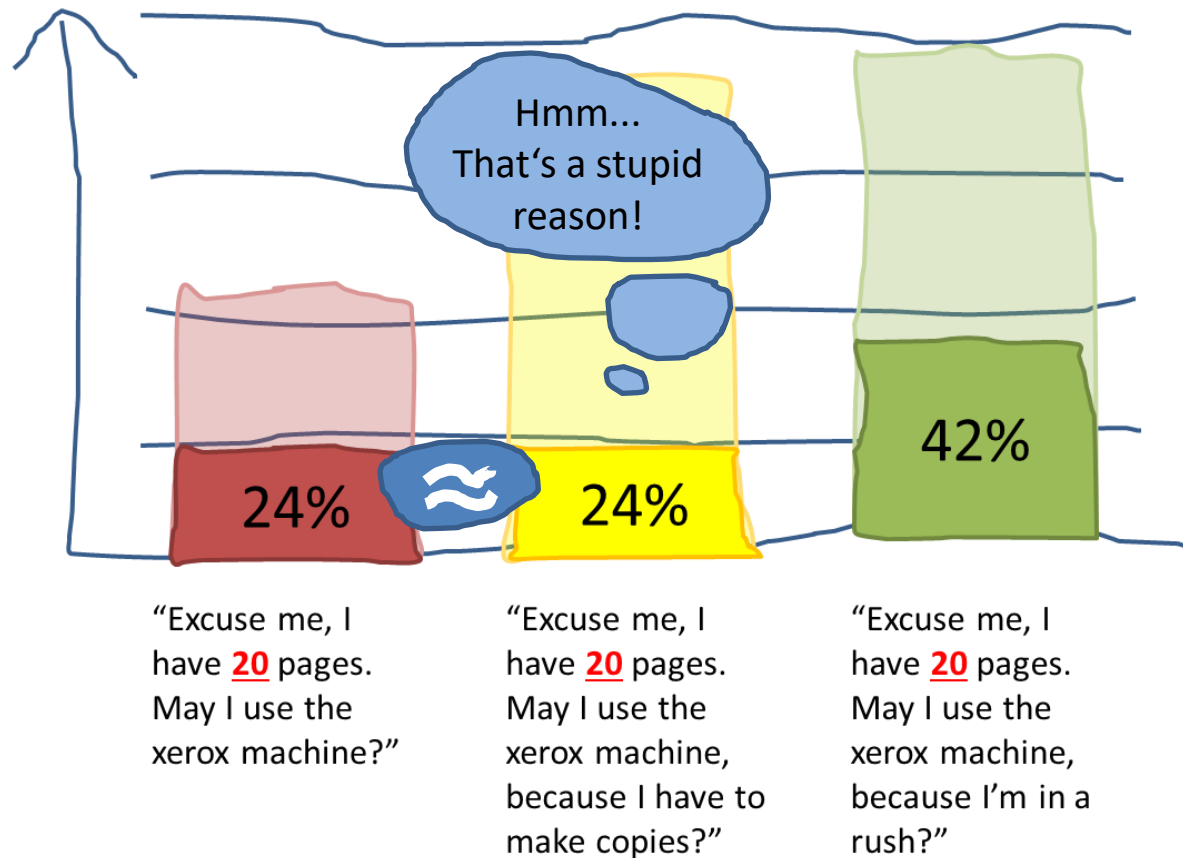


Success Rates: 20 Pages



Success Rates: 20 Pages

- If stakes increase people start thinking, processing real information
→ “Placebic” information is just as good as no information
→ “Because” loses its magic... ☹️



References

Original paper:

- <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1979-23568-001>
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232505985_The_mindlessness_of_ostensibly_thoughtful_action_The_role_of_placebic_information_in_interpersonal_interaction/link/0c96051532b5ca0ad9000000/download

Summary:

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-wise/201310/the-power-of-the-word-because-to-get-people-to-do-stuff>

Excuse me, I have 1 chip.
May I have your chips
because otherwise
I have to re-buy?



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Navy_090620-N-2798F-033_Sailors_assigned_to_the_aircraft_carrier_USS_Harry_S._Truman_\(CVN_75\)_and_Carrier_Air_Wing_\(CVW\)_3_compete_in_a_Texas_Hold_%27Em_Poker_tournament_ aboard_Harry_S._Truman.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Navy_090620-N-2798F-033_Sailors_assigned_to_the_aircraft_carrier_USS_Harry_S._Truman_(CVN_75)_and_Carrier_Air_Wing_(CVW)_3_compete_in_a_Texas_Hold_%27Em_Poker_tournament_ aboard_Harry_S._Truman.jpg)
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