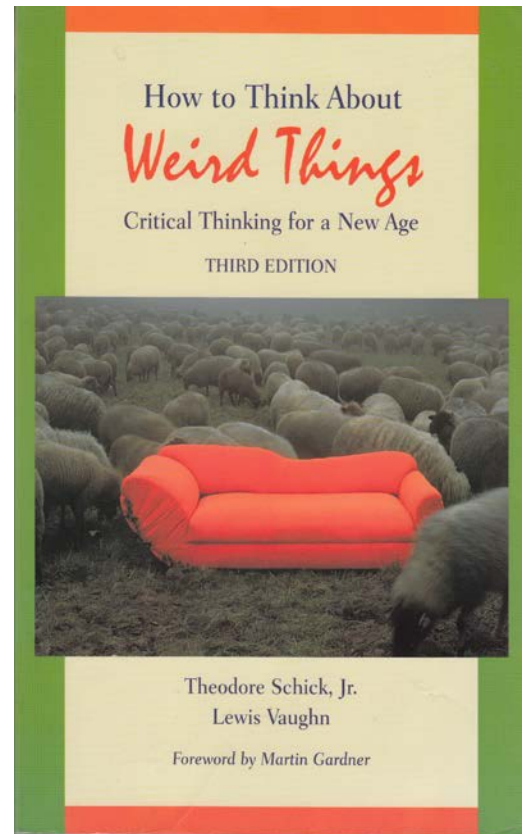


Excerpt from Theodor Schick and Lewis Vaughan (2002). *How to think about Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age*, 3rd edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, pp222-2.

Weasels Are on the Loose

Weaseling is a writing trick used in many fields, including advertising, politics, and health journalism. It's the use of certain words (called *weasel words*) to weaken a claim so that the author can say something without actually saying it and be shielded from criticism. Weaseling is often misleading yet allows the author to plead innocent to any charge of dishonesty. Perhaps the all-time prizewinning example of weaseling is the junk mail advertising come-on, "You may have already won a MILLION DOLLARS!!" Technically, the statement is true since it's physically possible that you *have* won a million dollars. But since the odds of your winning are often something like 1 in 50,000,000, the implication that you're close to being a millionaire is misleading - and, of course, is meant to be. The advertiser, however, can claim that nothing untruthful was uttered; the weasel word *may* gets him off the hook.



Cover image Jan Erik Posth

Some other examples:

- Let's say that in a study of laboratory rats, doses of garlic were found to inhibit the AIDS virus. Then you read this headline referring to the study: "Garlic *may* fight AIDS!" The headline writer can claim that he said nothing untruthful since he merely pointed out that garlic may be effective against AIDS in humans. But since a rat study is extremely weak evidence for garlic's effects on the AIDS virus in humans (and most treatments found effective in animals rarely pan out in humans), the headline is misleading. Yet the writer can weasel out of any charge of dishonesty.
- Say 99.9 percent of nutritional scientists believe that taking doses of vitamin C does not prevent the common cold, and the remaining 0.1 percent believe that taking vitamin C does prevent colds. Then you read this statement in a magazine: "Good news: Some nutritional scientists believe that taking vitamin C can prevent colds." Technically,

the claim is true. But it is very misleading because it doesn't tell you the whole story. The weasel word *some* allows the writer to weasel out of any blame.

- You come across an ad like this: "Formula 100B-Plus is packed with B vitamins and reportedly 'fires up' the metabolic systems that may contribute directly to bursts of energy. It may contain the combination of factors that is possibly the most powerful 'ignition' for every functioning system. Experts theorize that 100B is the very best medicine to ensure daily stamina. This ad seems to promise extraordinary benefits from the product. But because of the weasel words *reportedly*, *may*, *possibly*, and *theorize*, it actually promises nothing.

In health journalism, *may* seems to be the favorite weasel word. The reason is probably that *may* can cover a multitude of meanings (or sins). *May*, which indicates a degree of probability, can be used to mean everything from "very probable but not certain" to "virtually no chance whatsoever." Too often, scientists use *may* to convey a certain level of probability regarding research results; then some journalists use the same word to imply a very different level of probability in the results.

In 1992 a *Time* magazine article on vitamins was criticized for one-sided reporting and weaseling. The National Council Against Health Fraud said, "The April 6 issue of *Time* read like [a] health food magazine as it shouted the headlines: 'New research shows they [vitamins] may help fight cancer, heart disease and the ravages of aging.' (ed. note: 'may' is a weasel word that automatically states 'may not') The article's false premise is that scientific positions which question the benefits of self-prescribed supplementation with glamour nutrients (i.e., those popularized by enthusiasts) are now outmoded. Scientists were selectively quoted Many who spoke favorably of supplements are, or have been, supported by the supplement industry." (NACF Newsletter, May/June, 1992) *Probe* magazine (1st May 1992) also critiqued the *Time* article. It said that "in one *Time* table [the weasel word *may*] appears an incredible fifteen times. But the powerful thrust of the piece, and the media message, is that the 'mays' are but quibbles."

All words used to weasel, of course, can also have legitimate uses. They can be employed to add crucial qualifications to statements in order to increase precision or improve accuracy. How can you tell when weaseling is going on and when it isn't? You have to evaluate the subject, the writer, and the context. Generally, you should suspect weaseling when the words are used to imply more than what's justified or to shield the writer from criticism or blame in case his or her statements are challenged.