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# Mind over Memes

## *Passive Listening, Toxic Talk, and Other Modern Language Follies*

by Diana Senechal

October, 2018—In a culture of buzzwords, shorthand, and takeaways, it takes study, cunning, and attention to keep language *meaningful*.

In *Mind over Memes: Passive Listening, Toxic Talk, and Other Modern Language Follies*, Hiett Prize-winner Diana Senechal raises a series of words, concepts, and phrases and gives them her sharp attention. In so-doing, she brings into focus how our culture is changing right before our eyes—our rather right into our ears.

As it turns out, **our language is as full of mindless memes as our social media feeds**. The trick, says Senechal, is to stop, take notice of our language and assumptions, and not thoughtlessly continue repeating bromides.

Drawing from literature, philosophy, music, and technology, Senechal shakes away the accumulated mess surrounding these words, concepts, and phrases to pose questions and suggest more thoughtful meanings and usages. For instance:

- What's left behind when we look for **"the takeaway"**?
- How did **"change"** become a consistently positive idea?
- Mightn't **"a good fit"** be less ideal than "a good misfit"?
- Why are **"team"** and **"teamwork"** so over-applied?
- What are we really saying when we call people **"toxic"**?
- Is **"we"** the best we can do, rhetorically?
- Shouldn't there also be space for an **"unsocial justice"**?
- **"Research has shown"** ...what exactly?

Along the way, Senechal pauses to tease out problems with recent pop-philosophy trends, from **Malcolm Gladwell's** claims about genius, time, and **"creativity"** to **Carol Dweck's** ideas about the importance of having a **"growth mindset."** Nor are **TED Talks** themselves spared; Senechal doubts the utility of the very platform which popularized so many of the ideas and terms she tackles. (Doubts, it should be noted, which Senechal first shared from a TEDx stage herself.)

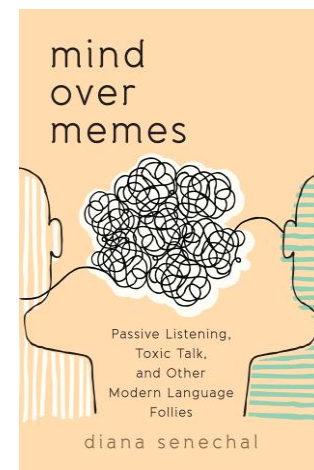
Combining criticism, lyricism, and wit, *Mind over Memes* leads those in education and media—or anyone tasked with communicating ideas—to pause and bestow some uncommon consideration upon some of our most common diction.

This concisely argued book will be of interest to anyone who wishes to deconstruct the truisms that infect so much public discourse.

*Publishers Weekly*

An alluring choice for readers with an academic bent.

*Library Journal*



### About the Author

**Diana Senechal** is an educator whose writing has appeared in *The New Republic*, *Education Week*, *American Educator*, and *The New York Times*. Senechal won the 2011 Hiett for *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*, which was named a *Choice* Outstanding Academic title by the American Library Association.

### Appearances

**Dallas, TX—Oct 30:** Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture

**Nashville, TN—Nov 1-4:** ALSCW (Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers) Conference

**New York, NY—Feb 22:** Book Culture

### Advance Praise for *Mind over Memes*

Based on a series of courses on the intersection of rhetoric and philosophy, this manifesto from educator Senechal (*Republic of Noise*) seeks to defend serious, thoughtful discourse from internet memes, managerial groupthink, and other examples of what George Orwell called “the slovenliness of our language.” Senechal debunks many of the intellectual clichés that cloud thinking, such as the “pocketable answer” or “takeaway” (“It is the tourist trinket, the mutterable motto”), and in particular criticizes TED talks as directed more toward “selling concepts” than toward disseminating ideas. Subsequent chapters take on the idea of change as inherently good, the current fascination for workplace “teams,” the predilection for labeling contrary opinions “toxic,” and even the humble pronoun *we*, which Senechal observes is often deployed to allow one person to speak for another. In each case, she argues that these trendy phrases distract from the hard work of thinking clearly and deliberately. “A life without buzzwords [and] pat solutions,” she states, “opens question after question, insight after insight.” While ignoring some of the more corrosive forms of internet speech (conspicuously, there is no discussion of trolling), **this concisely argued book will nevertheless be of interest to anyone who wishes to deconstruct the truisms that infect so much public discourse.** —*Publishers Weekly*

Educator Senechal (*Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*) begins by thanking her mentor in cantillation—the ritual chanting of Hebrew Bible readings during synagogue services. She then gratefully acknowledges her students in philosophy, language, and literature and gives complexity its due. Both optimist and critic, the author deplores our current national leadership and points to language burdened with terms carelessly applied, such as *change, creativity, the team*, instead endorsing uncertainty that is stimulating, challenging, and uplifting. Senechal warns that popular TED Talks demean science with poor work seductively presented. In a final section that takes on listening, even imperfectly, she inspires readers to live “without panacea” and respond to complexity with a full mind. Overall, the text is well illustrated, thoughtful, and clear, with examples that distinguish between mind-set and theory. **VERDICT An alluring choice for readers with an academic bent.** —*Library Journal*

When Diana Senechal detects a fallacy in received ideas like ‘implicit bias’ and ‘the toxic personality,’ or in clichés like ‘the takeaway,’ she looks under the surface and asks what could have led us there. **These essays are the work of a born teacher and a gifted observer of our intellectual culture.** —David Bromwich, author of *Moral Imagination: Essays*

Woe to peddlers of bromides, quick fixes, and slogans. Begone, TED talk mountebanks and jargon-mongers. **Diana Senechal strides through the marketplace of compromised words, examining the wares with devastating lucidity, inviting the reader to skepticism and thoughtful critique.** This book shows what it is to have a free mind. —Rosanna Warren, author of *Ghost in a Red Hat: Poems*

### Praise for *Republic of Noise*

In this remarkable book, Senechal weaves together her experiences as a public school teacher in New York City, a masterful review of the policies and politics of so-called reform in curriculum over the past several decades, a diagnosis of the condition of frantic distraction in society at large, and a detailed evocation of Western traditions of the contemplative life and productive solitude. In the din of contemporary books decrying our hopped-up, hyped-up, wired, Attention-Deficit-Disordered culture, Senechal’s book stands out for its erudition and quiet wisdom. **It’s one of the most inspiring books I’ve read all year.** —*Literary Matters*

**Through sensing something amiss in our schools and culture and naming it a loss of solitude, Senechal invites us to live more fully, more nobly and more humbly, as a part of the world and apart from it.** She invites us to educate ourselves and our children to that careful looking and listening she calls solitude so that it might expand and ignite what is deeply human in us all: wonder, gratitude, compassion, and wisdom. —*Humanum*

For Senechal, living a meaningful life is not simply having the choices resulting from infinite access to information. Rather, a meaningful life develops from having the time to read, think, and consider, alone and with others. **Summing Up: Essential.** —*Choice* (American Library Association)

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## Q&A with *Mind over Memes* Author Diana Senechal

1. **Judging from the title, is it right to say this book is about how internet memes are bad for our minds?**

Not quite. It's actually a book about certain ideas and words that get repeated and passed on (without adequate scrutiny) in workplaces, schools, and daily life. For example, in one chapter I discuss the term "team": why are so many associations called teams, when the team is not the ideal structure for every situation? And why is teamwork always lauded? These are conceptual, linguistic memes that are every bit as insidious as—and perhaps more dangerous than—those proliferating across the web.

2. **What's your beef with the word "takeaway?" How are we supposed to discuss your book without the use of takeaways? (And, ironically, aren't the very answers you're giving to these questions takeaways???)**

There's no avoiding takeaways. We require summaries and distilled statements just to get through the day. The danger lies in mistaking the takeaway for the whole.

We often hear phrases like "You can improve your life in one month by doing X," "science tells us Y," "this poem is saying Z," and so on—complex topics reduced to a pat message or formula. I propose doing the opposite.

One of my high school history teachers would always add, after explaining a historical event or issue, "There's much more to it than that." That stuck with me; I understood, even then, that our studies gave us only a glimpse of the past. Don't remove or prohibit takeaways, but see their limitations.

So interviews like these are useful, often necessary introductions to authors' ideas, but we impoverish ourselves if we mistake them for complete synopses of the books. It sounds obvious, and yet how easy it is to substitute one for the other!

3. **It would seem the antidote to shifting language would be a more scientific approach to conveying information. And yet you warn against the phrase "research has shown"?**

The phrase "research has shown" is not scientific in spirit. Science is about raising questions, recognizing uncertainties, striving for precision and understanding—whereas "research has shown" puts an end to questions and often deceives the listener.

Often the research in question has not "shown" what people say it has shown; especially in the social sciences, research findings are tentative and prone to variation; moreover, the findings may be much subtler than the abstract or press release suggests. Yet too often these findings—in their

oversimplified versions—get touted as the next great solution to education, the economy, or personal life. Far too many education initiatives—such as the idea of teaching “grit” to students—are based on simplistic interpretations of inconclusive research.

Watch out for this phrase! It’s often a warning that you’re about to hear some of the least scientific stuff you can imagine.

**4. Similarly, we describe people as “toxic” in part as a simple shorthand to convey that they should be avoided. Isn’t that useful?**

As used today, the word “toxic” holds two mistaken and harmful assumptions: first, that you can classify people as toxic or not, and second, that if you get rid of all the toxic people, your life will improve.

But clearly most of us are a mixture of good and bad characteristics. What’s more, cutting “toxic” people from your life presumes to cut out difficulty itself—and makes it likely that someone will eventually cut you out too. That is, when dismissing others becomes the norm, people lose their qualms over it. And that leads to the other point: eliminating those “toxic” people from our lives will just make us even more intolerant of difficulty in ourselves and others. Yes, at times it is necessary to keep a distance from certain people or situations—I do not recommend subjecting oneself to danger or distress—but it’s just as important to treat others generously when we can.

**5. What word or phrase do you love? What’s being used well or deserves to be more widespread?**

The word “turn” intrigues me. You can turn around, turn back, turn up, turn down, turn on, turn off, turn out, turn in, or turn over; you can turn in the wind or turn into stone; you can wait for your turn or miss it; and that’s not all; consider turnout, downturn, turnover, turncoat, turnkey, turntable, turnbuckle, and turnstile. I can turn “turn” in my mind for hours and not finish with it. Now it’s your turn. What word or phrase do you love?

**6. I’m surprised this book isn’t more about how technology is changing our diction. Not just via internet memes and Twitter lingo but canned email and text responses.**

Others are covering that terrain and excelling at it: Evgeny Morozov, Sherry Turkle, Jaron Lanier. I recommend them all. What concerns me in *Mind over Memes* is that while we’re rightfully keeping watch on how tech is affecting our diction, other foundational ideas, words, and phrases are shifting beneath our feet. As our very notions of “creativity” and “change” and information conveyance (via “takeaways” and “research has shown”) have evolved, it seems worthwhile to see where we are, and where we’re heading.