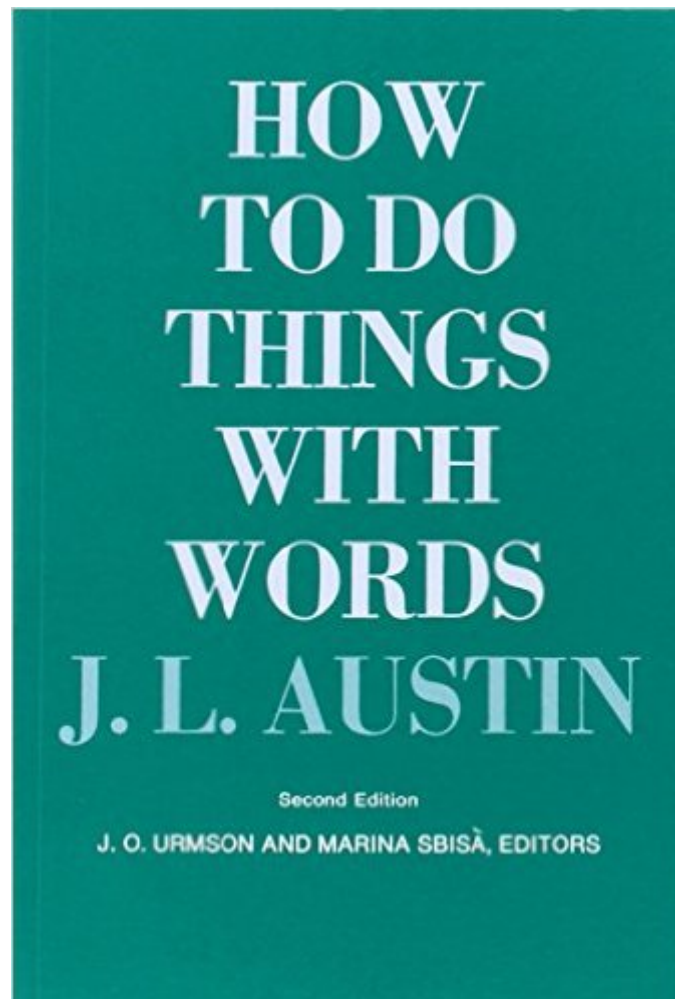


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# How To Do Things With Words: Second Edition (The William James Lectures)



## Synopsis

John L. Austin was one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century. The William James Lectures presented Austin's conclusions in the field to which he directed his main efforts on a wide variety of philosophical problems. These talks became the classic *How to Do Things with Words*. For this second edition, the editors have returned to Austin's original lecture notes, amending the printed text where it seemed necessary. Students will find the new text clearer, and, at the same time, more faithful to the actual lectures. An appendix contains literal transcriptions of a number of marginal notes made by Austin but not included in the text. Comparison of the text with these annotations provides new dimensions to the study of Austin's work.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The ancient Greeks constantly harped on the contrast between words and actions, provoking Housman's parody in his *Fragment of a Greek Tragedy* 'Oh! I am smitten with a hatchet's jaw, And that in deed and not in word alone.' It seems a simple and basic distinction, but when one thinks about it it's not so simple as it looks. If I say 'John promises to do that' I am simply reporting John's action of promising; but if I say 'I promise to do that' I am actually doing the promising by saying so. Certain forms of words are actions as well, and not just in the trivial sense that to say something is to perform the act of saying something. Moreover, forms of words that seem very similar in meaning turn out not to behave in identical ways. 'Apologise' behaves much like 'promise', in the sense that when I say 'I apologise for my behaviour' I am performing the act of apologising. However when I

say 'I am sorry for my behaviour' I may or may not be apologising - I may be reporting my feeling of sorrow, as if I had said 'I am sad about my behaviour.' The general idea is very easy to grasp, but the amount of variety in the ordinary expressions we use can seem mind-boggling. What's the story on 'bequeath' for instance? If I say in my will 'I bequeath you 1 million \$' and if I have 1 million \$ to bequeath you then I am performing the act of bequeathing by saying so. However if I don't have it I am bequeathing you nothing, whatever I say. Similarly, if I say 'I anoint you Archbishop of Peoria' simply saying so doesn't make you that. In the first place I need the authority to perform this act, in the second place I need something to anoint you with, and in the third place you need to be willing to be so anointed.

We live in language, listening and speaking with each other. Every human invention happens in language. Our concerns, our institutions, our dreams, our families and communities, and our projects are constructed first in language. This book is about how that happens (not just in English, but in every language). Here is the fundamental structure of the language of business, innovation, design, politics, social relations, the construction of trust in our communities, and much more. Our children study language throughout their school years, and no one ever teaches them that if they want to cause something to happen, they must make a request or an offer. If, in our notes and letters, meetings and speeches, arguments and efforts to convince and market, we don't do the action of uttering or communicating a request or an offer, then whatever actions that occur afterwards are all but accidental. "Requests" and "Offers" are two classes of Professor Austin's performative verbs. We teach our children how to be politically correct in their speaking, but not how to make things happen. How can that be? I think that should be enough to build more interest in this wonderful little book. I recommend it highly. However, there are two more things that I want to say about the book. First, I urge the potential reader not to be deceived. This jewel is walking around in a disguise. The book is assembled from talks that Austin gave in 1955 at Harvard University. The language of "the analytic philosophy of language" has served as a successful strategy for hiding the profound relevance of Austin's work for our everyday lives. From the picture of him available on the Internet, John Langshaw Austin was the perfect 20th Century Oxford Don -- a super-geek.

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