



Reciprocity & Commitment Escalation

Persuasion & Influence · Tier 2 · Component 5 — instructor overview

Grades: 9–10 **Time:** ~45 min (flexible) **Format:** whole-class reading, then individual or pairs

Some of the strongest persuasion never argues with you — it hands you something small, or gets you to agree to something tiny, and rides that into a much larger yes. This component teaches students to see the ladder, spot its first rung, and judge each step on its own.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Explain how a gift creates a felt **debt**, and how a small yes eases a bigger one (the foot in the door).
- Describe the **sunk-cost** pull that makes "don't quit now" feel like a reason.
- Map an escalation ladder and identify the small first ask that set it up.
- Apply the rule: judge the *next step* on its own merits, not on what's already spent.

WHY IT MATTERS

These tactics work through consistency and obligation rather than argument, and they feel like your own free choice — which is exactly why they're effective and hard to notice. Games, subscriptions, sales funnels, and social dynamics all run on them. Seeing the ladder is what lets a student step off it.

This isn't about refusing every free thing. It's about noticing when a small, friendly first step is engineering a much larger commitment you never actually decided to make.

PACING

SEGMENT	TIME	WHAT HAPPENS
Reading	10–12 min	Read the Student pages; pause at the QuestLands example.
Read the ladder	10 min	Activity Part A in pairs.
Find the first rung	12–15 min	Activity Parts B–C.
Debrief	8–10 min	Discussion prompts (Instructor p. 4).

MATERIALS

The 4 Student pages per student or pair. Optional: a real free-trial or game onboarding flow to trace together.



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The mechanism in depth — part 1 of 2

This family of tactics moves people by *consistency and obligation* rather than by making a case. Each rung feels like a free, minor choice; the sequence lands somewhere the person would have refused as an opening offer. The running example is **QuestLands**, a free mobile game engineered to turn a bored download into steady spending.

RECIPROCITY: THE GIFT THAT ISN'T FREE

An unrequested favor — a free sample, a small kindness, a gift — creates a felt debt, and people say yes to a later, larger ask to discharge it. The favor was the setup. QuestLands opens by *giving*: a pile of free gems, a "welcome gift," a generous starter pack. It feels like the game is on your side. That warmth is the point; it builds a quiet sense that you owe the game something back — attention, money, time.

FOOT IN THE DOOR: SMALL YES, THEN BIGGER

Agree to something tiny — install the free app, make a character, tap "just one more level" — and the next, larger ask rides on your wish to stay consistent with the person you just showed yourself to be. You're now "a QuestLands player." QuestLands then asks for slightly more at every step: a free account, then notifications, then a one-time 99-cent starter deal. None of these is the real ask. Each is a rung that makes the next feel natural, because you've already started.



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The mechanism in depth — part 2 of 2

SUNK COST: "YOU'VE COME THIS FAR"

Once time, money, or identity is invested, quitting feels like admitting the whole climb was wasted, so we keep going to justify what we've already put in (sunk-cost commitment, sunk cost fallacy). The pull is sharpened by loss aversion — losing what we've spent hurts more than the uncertain reward ahead (loss aversion) — so the ladder only ratchets one way.

By month two, QuestLands stops giving and starts leveraging what you've built. "Don't lose your 40-day streak." "Your level-30 hero will be deleted unless you renew." "You've invested so much — one purchase keeps it all." Every message points at your *past* investment, not the value of the next purchase. The game is selling you the fear of wasting what you already spent — which is not a reason to spend more.

THE RULE THAT BEATS THE LADDER

One principle cuts through the whole sequence: **judge the next step on its own**. What you already gave, said, or spent is gone either way — economists call it sunk precisely because you can't get it back by continuing. The only real question is whether the *next* rung is worth its price, today, on its own merits. "I've come this far" is the trap; "is the next step worth it?" is the exit.

ONE LINE TO CARRY

What's spent is spent. Judge only the next step. You can step off a ladder at any rung — the sunk cost doesn't get smaller by climbing higher.



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Discussion guide — modular; assemble to fit your period

These blocks are timed so you can build a lesson from them: a single period, or a full unit day. Run the activity with an opener before and a debrief after — pick what fits.

TIME BUDGET — MIX AND MATCH

BLOCK	TIME	USE
Opener (before)	5–8 min	Pick one, below.
Activity	22–25 min	The student pages.
Debrief (after)	~5 min each	Pick 1–4 prompts.
Close	3 min	The takeaway.

Single period: opener + activity + one debrief + close. **Full lesson:** opener + activity + two or three debriefs + an extension.

BEFORE — THE OPENER (PICK ONE · 5–8 MIN)

FORMAT: think-pair-share or a quick hands-up. GOAL: surface what students already notice and pose the question. END RESULT: every student has committed to a prediction or named a real example you can return to in the debrief.

- **Predict.** Ask: why do free samples work so well? Take a few answers; revisit after reciprocity.
- **From their world.** Ask for one free-trial, streak, or loyalty ladder they're on now; keep two to map in the debrief.

THE ACTIVITY (BUDGET 22–25 MIN)

CONCRETE GOAL — STUDENTS CAN: map an escalation ladder, name each rung's tactic, and find the small first "yes" that set it up.

AFTER — THE DEBRIEF (PICK 1–4 · ~5 MIN EACH)

FORMAT: whole-class; call on the examples students generated in the opener and activity. END RESULT: students can state the takeaway in their own words and back it with one concrete example from their own life or the activity.

- Why does a free gift make you feel like you owe something?
- How does saying yes to something small make a bigger yes easier?
- Why is "I've already spent so much" a trap and not a reason?
- Take one ladder from the board: where was the first small yes, and where's the cheapest exit?

CLOSE (3 MIN)

Have a few students state the takeaway in their own words: **What's spent is spent. Judge only the next step.**

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Leading the discussion — pacing, redirects, and warm-ups

The previous page is the plan; this page is for running it. Budget the period from the total below, and keep the redirect moves handy — most discussions falter in one of these four ways.

DOES IT FIT THE PERIOD?

ONE PERIOD (~45–50 MIN): opener 6 + activity 22–25 + one debrief 5 + close 3 = **36–39 min.** BLOCK (~90 MIN): add two more debriefs and a differentiation extension from the facilitation page.

WHEN DISCUSSION STALLS OR DERAILS

IF...	MOVE
Silence, or “I don’t know”	Shrink the question: “Just name the first thing you noticed.” Give 30 seconds of silent think-time, then call on a pair, not an individual.
One or two voices dominate	“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t gone yet.” Run it as think-pair-share first, so every student has an answer ready to offer.
It turns personal or heated	Move the trial from the person to the message: “What in the text makes you say that?” Keep the claim on trial, never the classmate.
Answers stay on the surface	Push for evidence: “Where exactly — quote the line.” Then “What would change your mind?” to surface the reasoning underneath.

WARM-UP BANK (SWAP IN FOR ANY OPENER)

Interchangeable with the opener on the previous page. Vary them across a unit so the hook stays fresh.

- **Two-minute hunt.** Find one real example of today’s move on your phone right now; keep the best one for the debrief.
- **Steelman it.** What’s the most honest reason someone would use this technique? Persuasion isn’t always dishonest — name the legitimate version first.
- **Rate and defend.** Put one message on the board; everyone rates it 1–5 for how persuasive, then defends the spread of answers.
- **Odd one out.** Three short examples, one isn’t the move — which, and how can you tell?



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Facilitation, anticipated moves & answer key

ANTICIPATED STUDENT RESPONSES & MISCONCEPTIONS

- **"So I should never accept anything free."** No — gifts are often just gifts. The skill is noticing when a gift is being used to create obligation, and deciding freely anyway.
- **"But I have put so much time in."** That's the sunk-cost feeling itself. Validate that it's real and powerful — then separate it from whether continuing is actually worth it now.
- **Confusing sunk cost with a real reason.** Sometimes finishing is worth it. The test is whether the next step pays off going forward, not whether you've already paid.
- **Missing the first rung.** Students spot the big ask but not the tiny yes that set it up — push them to trace back to step one.

DIFFERENTIATION & EXTENSIONS

Support: give the ladder pre-drawn and have students only label the tactics. **Stretch:** have students map a real game, app, or subscription they use, mark every rung, and identify the cheapest exit; or write the "honest" version of a sunk-cost message. **Cross-curricular:** sunk-cost reasoning in economics; commitment devices in psychology.

ANSWER KEY — ACTIVITY

ITEM	SAMPLE RESPONSE
A1 "free 7-day trial, no commitment"	<i>Foot in the door + gift — you're now a user.</i>
A2 "5-day streak — don't break it!"	<i>Small commitment + fear of loss (sunk cost + loss aversion).</i>
A3 "you've come this far — upgrade to keep progress"	<i>Sunk cost cashed in for the big ask.</i>
B (first rung)	<i>The free trial / install — the small yes that made every later step feel consistent.</i>
C (the gift trap)	<i>Name reciprocity; respond without letting the freebie decide.</i>



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The ladder of small yeses

You download QuestLands because you're bored in a waiting room. It's free, and it's *generous* — a welcome gift of gems, a starter pack, everything on the house. Two months later you're spending real money to protect a hero you've leveled for forty days. At no point did anyone argue that QuestLands was worth your money. You were never sold. You were *climbed* — one small, friendly step at a time.

Some of the strongest persuasion never argues at all. It gives you something small, or gets you to agree to something tiny, then rides that into a much bigger yes — each rung feeling like your own free choice. Three moves build the ladder.

RECIPROCITY: THE "FREE" GIFT

A free sample, a favor you didn't ask for, a little kindness — and suddenly you feel like you *owe* something back. That feeling of debt is the whole point; the gift was the setup for the ask. QuestLands opens by giving you gems and a warm welcome. It feels like the game is on your side, and that warmth quietly builds a sense that you owe it your attention — and later, your money.

FOOT IN THE DOOR: SMALL YES → BIG YES

Say yes to something tiny — install the app, make a character, tap "one more level" — and the next, larger request gets easier, because now you want to stay consistent with the person who already said yes. You're "a QuestLands player" now. So the game asks for a bit more each time: an account, then notifications, then a 99-cent "one-time" deal. None of these is the real ask. Each is a rung that makes the next feel normal.



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Sunk cost, and how to step off

SUNK COST: "YOU'VE COME THIS FAR"

Once you've put in time, money, or effort, quitting feels like losing all of it — so you keep going to justify what you already spent. And because losing what you've invested hurts more than the reward ahead excites you, the ladder only turns one way: forward. This is the engine of the whole trap.

By month two, QuestLands stops giving and starts using what you've built. "Don't lose your 40-day streak." "Your hero will be deleted unless you renew." "You've invested so much — one purchase keeps it all." Notice that every one of these points at your *past* — not at whether the next purchase is actually worth it. The game is selling you the fear of wasting what you already spent. But that money and time are already gone; spending more doesn't bring them back.

THE RULE THAT BEATS THE LADDER

Here's the whole defense in one line: **judge the next step on its own.** Not "how far have I come?" but "is the *next* rung worth its price, today?" What you've already spent is gone either way — that's what makes it sunk. Sometimes the next step really is worth it, and you take it on purpose. Often it isn't, and "I've come too far to stop" is just the trap talking.

You can step off a ladder at any rung. The pile of what you've spent doesn't shrink by climbing higher — so stop measuring the climb behind you, and look only at the next stair.

THE ONE LINE

What's spent is spent. Judge only the next step.



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Name: _____ Date: _____

The ladder: Gift → debt · Small yes → big yes · Sunk cost → "don't quit now" · **Rule:** judge only the next step

PART A — READ THE LADDER

Next to each rung, name the tactic (gift / small-yes / sunk-cost).

RUNG	TACTIC
1. "Free 7-day trial — no commitment!"	
2. "You're on a 5-day streak — don't break it!"	
3. "You've come this far — upgrade to keep your progress."	

PART B — FIND THE FIRST RUNG

Which step was the **foot in the door** — the small yes that set up all the rest? Why start there instead of asking for the upgrade directly?

**PART C — THE GIFT TRAP**

A vendor hands you a "free" wristband, then asks you to sign up for their newsletter. Name the tactic, and write a response that doesn't let the gift do the deciding.

PART D — STEP OFF

Think of a real ladder you've been on (a game, a subscription, a group chat you can't leave). Write the "you've come this far" thought — then rewrite it judging *only the next step*.

The trap thought

Judging only the next step

PART E — DESIGN A RUNG

You're designing an app that wants people to subscribe. Write the small first "yes" you'd ask for — then explain how it sets up the bigger ask later.
