



Hedging

Introduction

A feature of academic writing is the need to be cautious in one's statements in order to distinguish between facts and claims. This feature is termed 'hedging'. Hedging can be defined as the use of linguistic devices to show hesitation or uncertainty and to display politeness and indirectness. Hedging is absolutely crucial in good academic writing and hedged words are said to account for 1 in every 100 words.

When writing for academic disciplines it is necessary not only to show that you are able to write in a formal, abstract fashion, but also that you are able to show the extent to which you believe in, or are prepared to stand up for, what you are reporting/claiming.

People use hedged language for several different purposes but perhaps the most fundamental are the following:

- to minimise the possibility of another academic/teacher/lecturer/colleague/student opposing the claims you are making
- to enable you as a writer to be more precise when reporting results, e.g. you can show that something is not 100% proven, but rather that it is indicated and subsequently assumed.
- to enable you to execute a politeness strategy in which you are able to acknowledge that perhaps there may be flaws in your claims
- to conform to a now accepted practice writing style

Objectives

- To raise your awareness of the value of hedging language in academic writing
- To guide you through a series of activities designed to help you build a vocabulary of hedging expressions
- To provide you with a supported framework in which you can practice using hedging expressions.

Activity 1: Identifying a 'hedged' expression

There are many different ways in which language can be 'hedged'. These include using modal verbs such as 'may' and 'might', using modal nouns such as 'probability' and 'assumption', using lexical verbs which denote a sense of caution i.e. 'assume' and 'indicate' and by using expressions which show a sense of caution or vagueness, i.e. 'it can be argued that' or 'it is likely to be the case that'.



Read the following statements:

- Man **will** be able to cure cancer by 2025.
- Computers **will** replace classroom teachers in the 21st century.
- It is **undeniable** that parenting affects children's performance at school.
- Use of nuclear power is **definitely** wrong.
- Life **will** end as a result of global warming.

All of these statements are 'unhedged' sentences, meaning that they are too certain. Words such as *will*, *undeniable*, *is*, and *definitely* make the writing too absolute. Readers may easily challenge these statements because there may be many alternative points of view. In academic writing, writers need to discuss points which are not usually so definite, and which are often debatable. Therefore, careful, uncertain language needs to be used, such as in the following 'hedged' sentences.

- Man **may** be able to cure cancer by 2025.
- It **appears** that computers **may** replace classroom teachers in the 21st century.
- It **seems** that parenting **may** affect children's performance at school.
- Use of nuclear power **may be wrong in some /situations**.
- **There is growing evidence** that life **may** end as a result of global warming.

These sentences are more cautious, more academic and less likely to be challenged by readers with different opinions. It is important, when you are not 100% certain of a point you are making, to use hedging in your academic writing as well.

Some of the language used for hedging includes:

<p>Modal verbs</p> <p>may / may not might / might not can could</p>	<p>Verbs</p> <p>seem(s) to appear(s) to tend(s) to indicate(s) suggest(s) contribute(s)</p>
<p>Adjectives</p> <p>possible some many most</p>	<p>Adverbs</p> <p>possible likely perhaps often usually</p>

Identify the hedging expression in the following sentences:

1. Given that the writers in a university are writing within an academic environment and for the academic discourse community, it is reasonable to suggest that it is the representation of an academic identity that is vital for the writer to develop in order to be identified as an initiate.
2. It is proposed in this thesis that this knowledge might be valuable to student writers as they progress from novice to initiate and to teachers of writing as they scaffold this process for their students.
3. In the case of observations, we are faced with the observer's paradox which may affect the outcome of the research.
4. This is an ideal case study particularly, for PhD theses where changes are likely to be more noticeable due to the sustained period of academic writing over a long period of time.
5. This can be a fairly complex issue for the writer.
6. Perhaps the lack of the 'Freshman Composition Class' equivalent in Britain might explain this phenomena, although in Britain, the dissertation and theses text-types go through a similar rigorous writing process approach as adopted in Freshman Composition classes in the United States and Canada.
7. This study may therefore be viewed as a middle ground between the more qualitative case study approach with small amounts of data, and the more quantitative corpus study approach with larger amounts of data.
8. Perhaps getting some kind of reflection on their writing practices might have provided more insight into the reasons for their choices and their struggles with developing an academic identity.