

Hedging in Academic Writing



To 'hedge':

- To use an intentionally noncommittal or ambiguous statement
- To use evasive or deliberately vague language
- To avoid fulfilling or answering a question completely
- To be confidently uncertain
- To use verbal and adverbial expressions such as *can*, *perhaps*, *may*, *suggest*, which deal with degrees of probability

In order to distinguish between facts and claims, writers often use tentative language such as *it seems likely that...* or *arguably....* This technique is called *hedging* or *vague language*. Hedging is crucial in academic discourse, and hedge words account for approximately 1 word in every 100 in scientific articles.

Example: "Our results *seem* to *suggest* that in less industrialised countries the extensive use of land to grow exportation products *tends* to impoverish these countries' populations even more".

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual. However an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, or "hedging". It is necessary to make decisions about your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making. The appropriate use of hedging strategies for academic argumentation is a significant resource for student writers and plays an important part in demonstrating competence in a specialist register.

Four reasons to hedge

1. By hedging, authors tone down their statements in order to **reduce the risk of opposition**. This position associates hedges with scientific imprecision and defines them as linguistic cues of bias which avoid personal accountability for statements.
2. Writers want their readers to know that they do not claim to have the final word on the subject. Expressing a lack of certainty does not necessarily show confusion or vagueness. One could consider hedges as **ways of being more precise in reporting results**. Hedging may present the true state of the writers' understanding and may be used to negotiate an accurate representation of the state of the knowledge under discussion. In fact, academic writers may well wish to reduce the strength of claims simply because stronger statements would not be justified by the data or evidence presented.
3. Hedges may be understood as **positive or negative politeness strategies** in which the writer tries to appear humble rather than arrogant or all-knowing. Hedging is a rational interpersonal strategy which supports the writer's position,

builds writer-reader (speaker/listener) relationships and guarantees a certain level of acceptability in a community. Once a claim becomes widely accepted, it is then possible to present it without a hedge.

4. A certain degree of hedging has become conventionalized; hedging now functions to conform to an **established writing style in English**.

Language used in hedging

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| Modal auxiliary verbs | <i>may, might, can, could, would, should</i> | 'Such a measure <i>might</i> be more sensitive to changes in health after specialist treatment.' |
| Modal lexical verbs doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing | <i>to seem, to appear (epistemic verbs), to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate</i> | 'In spite of its limitations, the study <i>appears</i> to have a number of important strengths.' |
| Probability adjectives | <i>possible, probable, un/likely</i> | 'It is <i>likely</i> to result in failure.' |
| Nouns | <i>assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion</i> | 'We <i>estimate</i> that one in five marriages end in divorce.' |
| Adverbs | <i>perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently</i> | 'There is, <i>perhaps</i> , a good reason why she chose to write in the first person.' |
| Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time | <i>approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of</i> | 'Fever is present in <i>about</i> a third of cases.' |
| Introductory phrases | <i>believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that</i> | 'We <i>believe</i> that there is no simple explanation.' |
| "If" clauses | <i>if true, if anything</i> | ' <i>If true</i> , our study contradicts the myth that men make better managers than women.' |
| Compound hedges | <i>seems reasonable, looks probable</i> | Such compound hedges can be double hedges (it <i>may suggest</i> that; it <i>seems likely</i> that; it <i>would indicate</i> that; this <i>probably indicates</i>); treble hedges (it <i>seems reasonable</i> to assume that); quadruple hedges (it <i>would seem somewhat unlikely</i> that, it <i>may appear somewhat speculative</i> that) and so on. |

Source: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/services/facilities/support/essay-writing/Hedging-in-AcademicWriting.doc>