

Hedging

In academic writing, authors often have to be very cautious about the way they present their hypotheses, results, and conclusions. **To indicate less than one hundred percent certainty they hedge, i.e. avoid a categorical statement.** They do so for two reasons:

- to tone down their statements in order to reduce the threat of opposition from other researchers,
- to avoid overstating their results as they are aware that theirs may not be the final word on the issue.

Since the certainty of any research is hardly ever one hundred percent, the use of hedging (unless overdone) is part of academic writing.

The following words and phrases are used as **hedges**:

- **modal verbs**, e.g. *may, might, could, would*
- **verbs**, e.g. *appear, seem, suggest, indicate, assume, estimate, argue, tend to*
- **nouns**, e.g. *assumption, suggestion, claim, possibility, estimate*
- **adjectives**, e.g. *likely, probable, possible, apparent, certain*
- **adverbs**, e.g. *perhaps, probably, possibly, apparently, certainly, presumably*
- **words/phrases expressing degree, quantity, frequency**, e.g. *approximately, roughly, reasonably, about, somehow, somewhat, usually, generally, in general, as a rule*
- **introductory phrases**, e.g. *in our opinion/view, we feel/believe that, to our knowledge, it is our view that, one would expect that*
- **if clauses**, e.g. *if true*

EXERCISES

I. Order the sentences from the most categorical statement to the most hedged.

- a) The Earth is probably round.
- b) The Earth is possibly round.
- c) The Earth is round.
- d) The Earth is apparently round.
- e) The Earth is said to be round.

II. First underline the hedges and then reformulate the sentences so that they express categorical statements.

1. Issues highlighted in this study may be applicable to many higher education institutions across the country.
2. Agreement between the measured and predicted results is reasonably close.
3. In general, it is difficult to accurately detect the frequencies that have insignificant magnitudes.
4. As claimed by many, this new technique is very effective.
5. It appears that the differences between these two approaches are not great.
6. Support from the government and involvement of the private sector might help spread knowledge and skill to use the Internet to thousands of new users in developing countries.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

III. Reformulate the text, avoiding hedging.

To the best of my knowledge, nobody blamed the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico on research scientists. Apparently, poor engineering decisions allowed gas to escape from a well in deep water, which in turn caused a fatal explosion. One might expect that if poor engineering got us into this mess, only good engineering could get us out of it. Few do, however, doubt that by vetoing the proposed engineering tactics, the government and research scientists only prolonged the crisis.

(Based on information from IEEE Spectrum, December 2010, p. 8.)

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IV. Use hedging to make the following statements less categorical. Choose hedges from the list below. In some cases, there are several options.

suggest
probable

would
may

indicate
could

seem
tend to

1. The initial results prove that our hypothesis was right.
2. This type of sensor is suitable for humidity detection.
3. People behave in accord with their personal interests.
4. It is useful to increase the sampling, both in terms of number and more diverse sample profile.
5. Certain groups of consumers react to the delays in delivery more negatively than others.
6. Another reason is that the error was due to inaccuracy of the experimental setup.
7. Table IV shows a good match between the measured and calculated high-frequency losses.
8. The error is caused by the fabrication error of the sensor device.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

7.
8.

V. Reformulate the following text, using the hedges below. The hedges have been ordered in the same order as they should appear in the text.

estimate	probably	if not; likely	experts claim
presumably	may	most probably	apparently

In Germany, the number of job openings for engineers will continue to grow rapidly in the next few years. The gap between the number of such positions and the number of engineers available will widen. This problem must be addressed soon; otherwise, the German economy will stagnate. There are several reasons for this shortage. One of them is the declining population due to the lowest birth rate in Europe. Another is the rising demand for transportation and energy technology. The demand for engineers will increase as we move towards an all-electric society. More companies will simply need more engines.
(Based on information from IEEE Spectrum, September 2011, p. 15)

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**VI. Divide into two groups: - proponents of alternative sources of energy
- proponents of traditional sources of energy.**

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of sources, using hedging to avoid categorical atatements.

Example

Solar energy

Group 1: Solar panels are a clean source of energy.

Group 2: They may be clean but they spoil the landscape.

That is true, but it is very likely that one day they might cause a big waste disposal problem.