

Hedging/Cautious Writing

Here you can learn about

- **how to write cautiously in academic writing.**

An associated worksheet is also available.

General Information

As research results can be interpreted differently, writers of research articles tend to be cautious when making claims. This caution means academic writers have to *hedge*. People use hedged language for different purposes.

- To acknowledge that there may be degrees of uncertainty in claims
- To differentiate between the strength of claims or statements
- To encourage the reader to accept arguments more readily as they may appear more reasonable/not overstated
- To adhere to author guidelines - many journals require a writing style that is objective and cautious
- To acknowledge their claims may have limitations and accept that future research may offer a different perspective.

The table below outlines out some words and phrases that can be used to hedge. Please note, this is not an exhaustive list.

Verbs	seem, look, appear to be, believe, tend, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest, assume, may, could, ought to, would, might	e.g., Several studies <i>suggest</i> that the glacier is already in a stage of collapse and the retreat <i>may</i> be unstoppable.
Adverbs	possibly, perhaps, often, apparently, conceivably, presumably, probably, likely, typically	e.g., <i>Conceivably</i> , the glacier melt-rate will accelerate in the next two years.
That clauses, e.g., <i>It is assumed that, it is generally believed that, it can be observed that, it is possible that.</i>		

Indicating the Level of Certainty in Relation to Evidence or Support

In academic writing, the level of certainty you use to express your opinion should reflect the level of certainty provided by your evidence. The table below shows some words and phrases that can be used in low, medium and high certainty situations.

LOW CERTAINTY	MEDIUM CERTAINTY	HIGH CERTAINTY
conceivably	can be	is, are, will,
could	Probably, typically	must/have to
possibly	should, would,	certainly
may	Usually, often	always
seems	potentially	clearly
	likely, presumably	probable

Adapted from: Halliday, M. & Matthiessen, C. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. London, Arnold

Examples

It seems likely shows less certainty than: The glacier is...

e.g., ***It seems likely*** that the glacier is already in a stage of collapse and the retreat ***may*** be unstoppable (using *seems likely* is less certain than *is likely*. Using *may* also shows low certainty).

e.g., The Antarctic Ice Sheet represents ***a potential contribution*** to sea level rise (the author shows a medium level of certainty with the phrase *potential contribution*).

e.g., The Antarctic Ice Sheet ***is*** changing rapidly and ***contributing notably*** to global sea level rise (this writer has a strong opinion and is not hedging).

Final Comments/Tips

- How cautious authors are when making claims can depend on the individual author, the research results, and the academic field they are working in. Read articles in your target journals and notice how cautious authors are when making claims. Author guidelines sometimes also provide details.
- Although hedging words can be from low to high certainty, medium certainty hedges are the most common in research articles (when used at all).
- Overuse of hedging can confuse your reader as to where you stand on a particular issue. Use hedging language consciously rather than simply out of habit.