

Hedges: Softening Claims in Academic Writing

In academic settings, writers need to be cautious and critical about the claims they make. With the help of the special language, called “hedges”, writers can soften their statements to avoid criticism for being radical or overconfident. Consider this example:

Children living in poverty do poorly in school.

Do all children living in poverty do poorly in school? Definitely not, and no research can collect the data about every child in the world. Also, a socio-economic situation is only one of the factors that can determine children’s performance in school. As we can see, the original argument can be easily refuted, and as a result readers might question writer’s credibility. To avoid this situation, the sentence could be modified as:

Children living in poverty tend to do poorly in school.

Due to adding the verb *tend*, a writer acknowledges that this is just a tendency and that there are still poor children who are successful in school.

Some of the ways to soften claims include the use of:

Category		Example
a) Verbs	<i>appear, seem, tend</i>	Although the results seem to support previous findings,...
b) Modal auxiliaries	<i>can, could, may, might</i>	This discrepancy could be attributed to...
c) Adjectives		
Expressing probability	<i>likely, unlikely, probable, possible</i>	It is likely that the experimental group...
Expressing quantity	<i>some, many, much (also expression one of)</i>	Inflation is one of the causes of...
d) Adverbs		
Expressing probability	<i>perhaps, possibly, probably, apparently, evidently, presumably, relatively</i>	The number of patients will probably increase...
Expressing frequency	<i>occasionally, sometimes, generally, usually, often, seldom</i>	Acceptance rates are generally high...
e) Expressions showing writer’s distance	<i>Based on the limited data..., according to this preliminary study..., in the view of many scholars..., according to some earlier studies...</i>	In the view of many applied linguists , phrasal verbs are difficult for language learners to master.

The opposite of hedges is “boosters”, the language used to emphasize or strengthen points. Boosters are less common in academic writing, but they are used to strengthen the position when writers are absolutely committed to their statements. Some examples of boosters include *definitely, absolutely, certainly, and I firmly believe.*

Practice

Underline words and phrases that are used to hedge and boost claims.

There are a number of explanations for why musicians have superior cognitive abilities to non-musician controls. First, it is possible that only the more intellectually rigorous people continue with music training once they have been exposed to it. Practicing a musical instrument takes a tremendous amount of discipline. Individuals who are willing to work that hard may also work hard in academic settings, thus improving their cognitive abilities. Secondly, socio-economic class could be playing a role. In a study comparing scholastic aptitude among musicians and non-musicians, Phillips found a difference in the two groups, but once socio-economic class was taken into account the difference nearly disappeared (Phillips, 1976). It is possible that the differences between musicians and non-musicians is actually innate or caused by something not musically related in the environment.

Adapted from Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press. – pp.156-164

Extra Resources

For more examples of hedges and boosters, see the sections of Manchester Academic Phrasebank:

- “Being Cautious” – <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/using-cautious-language/>
- “Describing Trends” – <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/describing-trends/>

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