

HEDGING

At one time, HEDGE meant ‘fence’. Now it means a fence that is made out of plants, usually trimmed. It came to mean “barrier” or “border”, so the verb became to be known as “dodge”, “evade” in a way that protects oneself from danger. In finance the term means “to insure oneself against loss”. This is the sense we are use in writing:

If you say you have the best pizza, and I have been to Italy and New York and had pizza that is far, far superior, then you are clearly wrong and have lost the argument you were making.



This linguistic use of the term was coined by George Lakoff as “words whose job is to make things fuzzy or less fuzzy” (471). Writing instructors have approached the concept differently by using alternative phrasing such as “tentative”, “qualifying” or “biased language” or to avoid “absolutist” language. One of the reasons for this¹ is because Lakoff was mostly writing about speech acts and conversation in general, and much of that revolves around politeness, reducing threats², and face-saving. While academic writing certainly includes these aspects, the primary purpose of hedging there is not to show modesty but to reflect the uncertainty of scientific discovery and its evolving knowledge and to avoid exaggeration and hyperbole in claims that can be dismissed with ANY amount of counter evidence.

Thus, hedging is not an attitude but a convention of academic writing. While science has countless laws, proven claims, and established theories, each field will have its own considerations on the status of facts and expect evaluative vs. propositional language accordingly. The difference should become clear when comparing research papers to textbooks; statements that lack hedging are likely statements of established knowledge.

A range of varying categories have been developed to classify what hedges are, but most revolve around the following two terms³ from Salvager & Meyers:



Approximators make content fuzzy by rounding and adapting.

The **preliminary** data show that the trend may be **more** common than thought.

What is considered a hedge is **roughly** agreed upon by teachers.



Shields create fuzziness in the speaker’s commitment to what they state.

Based on these results, **we feel that** the claims require further study.

Hedges will be **mostly effective** in your professional writing career.





Within these two functions of hedging, it is more helpful to focus on the **methods** of hedging. First, academic writers need to learn to avoid what are **not** hedges before learning what are.



the “be” verb in identity & prediction⁴ and the modals *will* and *won’t*

Superlatives: *most, all, none, every, everyone, no one*

Adverbs of Complete Frequency & Probability: *never, always, definitely, certainly*

Epistemic Modals:

may, might, can, could, should

Adverbs of Probability:

*conceivably, possibly, potentially,
probably, perhaps, likely, seemingly*

Doubt and Evaluation over Description:

*seem, appear, apparent(ly), believe,
assume, estimate, speculate, suggest,
tend to, think, argue, indicate, propose,
theoretically, essentially, in principle*

Qualifying Attribution⁵:

presumably, according to, based on



Adverbs of Limited Frequency:



*sometimes, normally, usually,
generally, often, in many cases,
frequently, rarely*

Modifiers & Determiners:

*a few, a great deal, a large number,
many, most, some*

Words of degree & quantity:

*estimated, preliminary, more or less
overall, rough(ly), approximate(ly),
partial(ly), broad(ly) general(ly),
usual(ly), typical(ly)*

Beyond words and phrases, more advanced grammatical patterns produce not only hedging but a more formal academic tone. Passives become more adjectival than *verblike* and nominalization goes even further, as Brown and Levinson note “the more *nouny* an expression, the more removed an actor is from doing or feeling or being something” (208). Also note that shields and approximators are frequently used in combination, and with more informal hedging nearly any word can serve as a hedge in the right context⁶ (Vlasyan 688).

Phrases & Clauses relating to Probability: *seems reasonable, appears likely, looks probable, as far as we can determine, to our knowledge, it would seem ...*

Nominalization: *The possibility of false results is a concern. The assumption is likely unfounded.*

If Conditionals and Counterfactuals: *if it were so, then ...; it could have been likely if ...*

it Extraposition: *it is (un)likely that ..., it would seem that ..., it is possible that ...*

There is/are: *There is doubt that this is possible. There are concerns that this was overlooked.*

Weakening Claims with Agentless Passives and Modals: *it might be suggested that..., it has been assumed that..., it is widely accepted that ..., it is generally agreed upon that ... ; we would (suggest/assume/advocate/claim/argue) that ..., this should allow us to ...*



Correction Exercise: use the suggestions in parenthesis to hedge the following sentences. Some revision and word changes may need to be made.

1. The younger generations are always on their phone and use them for everything. (much; often; almost)
2. After graduation, students face difficulties in finding work. (a large number of, many; could, may)
3. Studies have shown that eating ultra-processed food is extremely dangerous and will shorten your life. (*many, numerous; probably, likely*)
4. In my English class, students never speak up. (*it seems that; rarely*)
5. Teachers believe that rote memorization is the worst way to increase students' vocabularies. (quite a few; probably not, one of the)
6. People who drive in traffic more than two hours a day are always unhappy. (most, many; likely, tend to be)
7. People who use public transportation are never well off. (quite a few, probably not)
8. English language learners never turn in work without errors. (it is possible that, many; sometimes, frequently)
9. Americans who travel to other countries make rude statements and appear impolite. (some, many; are likely to, can possibly)
10. Employers always think that their employees are only there to make money and will not work as hard as they can. (many; commonly, typically; mostly; may; could, may be able to)

Revision Exercise: use the examples from above and on the previous page to create your own hedges for the following sentences.

1. Standardized tests limit educational equity.
2. Social media harms adolescent mental health.
3. Economic inequality weakens democratic institutions.
4. The new law increases unemployment.
5. The data proves that exercise improves cardiovascular health.
6. The theory fails to explain cultural differences.
7. The study design contains fundamental flaws.
8. The author portrays the main character as the villain.
9. Everybody is totally against GMOs even though they can provide so many benefits.
10. We must have information from the internet so advertisements and restrictions to access need to be eliminated.



Identification Exercise

In pairs or small groups, identify all the hedges in the following paragraph. Attempt to categorize them as either approximators or shields and find an alternative hedge that fulfills the same purpose.

The issue on how the passive is used in academics has frequently been addressed, and it might be that despite such discussions some writing teachers resist the normalization of the passive voice as they worry it will lead students to produce a bureaucratic tone that obscures ideas rather than one that speaks directly to the reader. This concern appears to be predominantly held by those who teach writing in the k-12 systems. Those who work with advanced language learners, however, may feel that the grammatical complexity of the passive voice and other nominalization strategies could lead to better writing skills by students who employ them. Since the passive voice is widely implemented within academic writing and even more greatly among the hard sciences, writing instructors in higher education often feel they must prepare their students for the expectations of instructors in a wide range of fields.

Editorial Exercise

The following paragraph implements too many hedges which can create a tone that appears noncommittal and jargony. Identify the hedges and identify which ones can be eliminated.

The question of how to improve zoning to address the effects of sprawl seems to have never been undertaken by the council. This is unfortunate as it might be that improvements, apparently proven relatively effective in other municipalities, could be effectively implemented here if the council could find the time to review the potential economic merits they may have. Specifically, it seems that it has been assumed by the council that parking minimums must be implemented according to national standards even though the standard's economic effectiveness has often been called into question. One possible example could be our neighboring jurisdictions that appear to have already abandoned the national standards of zoning for codes more tailor fit for their communities. Perhaps the council could be made more aware of such potential benefits should they decide to act more independently.



Identifying Exercise

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Answers:

Sentence 1: A, S, A Sentence 2: S, A Sentence 3: S, S Sentence 4: A, A, A, A

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Suggestions:

While the paragraph displays extreme wordiness as well, reducing the hedging is an effective first step at improving the paragraph. The following four phrases are the most in need of revision:

“apparently proven relatively” “if the council could”
“one possible example could” “Perhaps the council could”



NOTES

1. Since some beginning writers struggle with making strong claims, instructors who wish to help students develop their own voices will not emphasize hedging and even prescribe an avoidance of the passive to prevent leading their students into what is often called bureaucratic or official language. However, this can create issues for students who are entering more academic and scientific areas of study (Salager-Meyer 21).
2. More than politeness and face-saving in academic writing, Myers notes that “any academic knowledge claim is a threat ... to other researchers in the field because it infringes on their ‘freedom to act’” (qtd in Crompton 275). While most students won’t be challenging academically published findings, the notion of intellectual protectiveness is something they should learn to recognize in their field.
3. Her model includes two more categories that lack consensus (Crompton 280) but “expressions of doubt and involvement” can effectively be categorized as shields and a brief note on “emotionally charged intensifiers” is included the final note here (7).
4. E-prime is an extreme form of hedging that avoids all ‘be’ verbs to attain more scientific clarity. As a writing exercise it is very useful, but the avoidance of the be verb’s functions of identity and prediction (rather than all functions) is its strongest contribution to effective hedging.
5. Crompton (279, 283) summarizes how reporting a hedge is not typically seen as hedge and raises the idea that authors are responsible in interpreting the proposition of another author (whether direct or fuzzy). The following examples show how (a) and (b) should not be considered hedges while (c) is a hedge. Note that in (b), the phrase “according to” refers to the entirety of the clause that follows while in (c) Smith is only used for the results and not the interpretation of a suggested relationship. So either the author is agreeing with Smith’s suggestions (adopting the original hedge as their own) or weakening Smith’s original claim by stating they “only suggest” rather than “show”.
 - a. Smith **suggests that** the results show a strong causal relationship.
 - b. **According to Smith**, the results suggest a strong causal relationship.
 - c. The results **reported by Smith** suggest a strong causal relationship.
6. While the assertion that nearly any word might serve as a hedge appears strong, when we expand the vagueness of hedging to more informal and common varieties where it marks “shared knowledge” and “in-group membership” (Pullum 202), categorizing hedging becomes increasingly daunting. Vlayasan offers a more informal version of the following example:

Smith **thinks** that the results are unusual. (think as a hedge)

Smith **thinks** about how to improve the results. (think as a lexical verb)



But if we consider spoken discourse, the difference of stressing the indefinite article also demonstrates the potential of hedging in almost any word:

There is a study that supports this theory.

Without irregular stress, the sentence is a simple unhedged report, but by stressing the article the speaker is stating that the support is limited and the theory may not stand.

Two other methods of hedging worth mentioning are how negation can serve to weaken absolutes,

This has been **mis**interpreted.

Such an occurrence would be **un**likely.

It is **not** necessarily so.

It might **not** be so.

It is **not** very well understood.

This is **not** entirely (accurate/certain).

This does **not** have to be the only possibility.

and Salager-Meyer's inclusion of "emotionally charged intensifiers," which can weaken the authors commitment to the strength of the proposition.

The results *unexpectedly* support the X's conclusion. (i.e. perhaps the experiment needs review or to be run again)

The results were *particularly* encouraging. (i.e. but still need more support)

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