Academic Hedging

What is Hedging?

Hedging helps to make your writing more precise, persuasive, and scholarly. While this tip sheet is designed to introduce you to academic hedging, you probably already use a different kind of hedging – *informal* hedging – in your everyday conversations.
Here are a few examples of informal hedging:

"I **kind of** enjoy the class. **I think** the professor is **a little bit** boring."
"She texted me at, **like,** midnight, and **seemed to be** excited."
"Toronto is a **pretty** big city. **Usually,** there is a lot to do here."

As you can see, the hedging phrases indicated in bold ("kind of," "I think," "a little bit," "usually") help to *soften* your statements. Hedging phrases make your statements more precise, and allow room for disagreement or correction. They also tell your readers or listeners that you are not the final authority on a topic. For example, using "I think" in the sentence above makes it clear to your friends that the professor is boring only *in your opinion* – another student might find her fascinating.

Academic hedging serves many of the same purposes as informal hedging. It may sound like a contradiction, but when you include academic hedging in your writing, you actually sound *more* persuasive, well-informed, and scholarly. In fact, academic hedging is so important that your instructors will expect you to use it. Hedging is an essential feature of academic writing.

What Can Academic Hedging Do For You?

We have already seen that hedging is a useful way for you to present balanced claims in your everyday speech, to acknowledge the possibility that others might disagree with or correct you, and to make it clear to your listeners that you don't think you are the final authority on a particular topic – that is, you can't make your claim with 100% certainty.

These moves are extremely important in academic writing, because *no one* is the final authority when it comes to academic research. Scholars disagree with, revise, correct, and question one another all the time. This continual questioning is central to academic culture.

To establish yourself as a credible academic writer, then, you must show your readers that you anticipate their objections, questions, and critiques. Academic hedging helps you to do this.

Tips & Strategies For Successful Hedging

Including hedging in your writing is sometimes a simple matter of adding a phrase or two to a sentence. For example, consider the following statement:

Women in medieval Europe had no rights or freedoms.

An academic reader would find this statement unconvincing because it is *much too broad.* "No rights or freedoms?" such a reader would reply; "None at all? Really? Have you considered--" …and this expert reader might go on to cite laws regarding medieval women's property rights; launch into a discussion of the status of noblewomen in medieval Venice; and ask you what exactly you mean when you use the words "medieval" and "Europe."

Clearly, your statement needs some revision. But don't worry; as a University student, your job is not to address all of these potential objections in detail. Instead, you can simply *anticipate* your reader's critiques by using hedging to narrow and soften your claims.
Consider this revised version of the sentence:

In general, most *women in thirteenth-century France had* ***fewer*** *rights and freedoms than men.*

As you can see, this statement is more specific and precise than the first version. Using "in general" also helps to forestall your reader's objections by making clear that you realize there may be exceptions to your claim. Finally, setting up the comparison with men transforms your claim into a *relative,* not an *absolute,* statement, making it sound more narrow and believable.
Let's look at another example, this time from a scientific paper.

Organic strawberries are of higher quality than non-organic strawberries.

This time, a picky reader would likely ask: "What do you mean by 'higher quality'? How are you defining this term? And where is your proof for this statement, anyway?"
You need to tell your reader more a bit more about your methodology, the way you are defining terms, and the limitations of your research findings.
This revised version uses hedging to address these issues:

Our findings suggest that *organic strawberries are of higher quality than non-organic strawberries,* ***based on measures of*** *antioxidant activity, shelf life, flavour, and appearance.* ***Additional research is needed*** *to determine the effects of organic soil on strawberry plants.*

Here, you are making it clear from the start that your claim about organic strawberries is based on your research ("our findings suggest") and is not established fact. You are also defining what you mean by "higher quality" ("based on measures of…") and acknowledging the need for further research to reinforce your conclusions.

Final Thoughts

As you write, try to imagine a skeptical expert questioning you and raising objections to your claims, then use hedging to try to satisfy this expert reader's objections. (Experienced academic writers make a habit of having imaginary "conversations" with this annoying character, for better or worse.)
Continually ask yourself: "Do I sound *too* vague or *too* broad? What objections might an academic reader have to my claim?"
The table, below, may be a helpful reference for you.

Your Goal	**Helpful Hedging Phrases**
To indicate that you are talking about *most, but not all,* situations	In general, usually, for the most part, by and large, commonly, often, most of the time
To demonstrate that a statement represents *your own view*, not settled fact	I argue, I suggest, we take the position that, it seems, apparently, in my opinion, this suggests, probably, likely
To show comparison	More than, greater than, less than, fewer than
To soften the force of your claim	Somewhat, rather, slightly, a bit, fairly

<u>For Further Reading</u>
Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Persuasive Writing* (Norton, 2012).
Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago, 1990).

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