

Formal writing (hedging)

Hedging language can make a big difference to the way you express your ideas and opinions in **academic writing**.

What are hedging words examples?

The language of hedging includes:

- **Adverbs of frequency** (sometimes or often but not ALWAYS)
- **Quantifiers** (some or many but not ALL)
- **Modals** (may or might, but not WILL)
- **‘Cautious’ verbs** (indicate, suggest, appear)
- **Modal adverbs** (possibly, arguably)
- **Modifiers** (quite, somewhat)

See the full list below.

In this lesson you’ll learn the purpose and benefits of hedging, plus 9 examples that you can use NOW to make your writing sound more academic in Writing Task 2.

What is hedging language in academic writing?

Compare the two statements below. Which one is more appropriate for academic writing?

1. ‘Young people prefer to eat fast food.’
2. ‘It is often thought that many young people tend to eat food which may be considered to be unhealthy. Although some youngsters might go to fast food outlets quite regularly when compared to older age groups, evidence suggests that in general this assumption is largely untrue’.

Answer

Why do we use hedging language?

In academic writing it is REALLY important to show the difference between

1. your **opinion**
2. the **facts**

A simple way to do this is to say '*In my opinion*' or '*I believe/think that...*'

e.g. '*I believe that young people prefer to eat fast food*'.

But you can't do this for every sentence.

So if you're not 100% sure that your claims are correct (you have no evidence to support your **claims***) you need to '*hedge*'.

[***claim** (noun) = a statement that something is true, even though it has not been proved]

***Hedging* (or 'being cautious') has many benefits:**

- It stops the reader from **dismissing your claims** or disagreeing with you
- It allows you to tell the reader **how sure you are** about your claims
- It helps you to **avoid generalisations**
- It stops you from presenting your **ideas as facts**
- It shows your awareness of the '**bigger picture**'
- It makes your language **more precise**

How to use hedging language in a sentence

Look again at the long sentence I wrote (Sentence 2 above).

How many examples of hedging can you identify?

'[It is often thought that] [many] young people [tend to] eat food [which may be considered to be] unhealthy. [Although] [some] youngsters [might] go to fast food outlets [quite] [regularly] [when compared to older age groups], [evidence suggests] that [in general] this [assumption] is [largely] untrue'.

You can see that if you take out the hedging **[in brackets]** you are left with a statement that may be untrue, inaccurate or just too general.

Types of hedging language

Here are some options for you to use in your own writing:

1. **'It' and 'That' clauses**
2. **Adverbs of frequency**

3. **Quantifiers**
4. **Hedging verbs**
5. **Modals**
6. **Passives**
7. **Modifiers**
8. **Comparison**
9. **Evidence**

‘It’ and ‘That’ clauses

- **It is often thought that**
- It could be suggested that
- It might be the case that
- It is generally agreed that
- It is (un)likely that
- There is a possibility that
- There is every hope/likelihood that

Adverbs of frequency

- **often**
- usually
- commonly
- regularly
- frequently
- sometimes
- occasionally
- rarely
- hardly ever

Quantifiers

- **many**
- most
- the majority (of)
- several
- some
- a few
- a minority of
- a fraction of
- a proportion of
- in certain situations
- to some extent

‘Hedging’ verbs

- **tend to/** have a tendency to
- appear to
- seem to
- , which may suggest that...
- , which may indicate that..
- which appears to be

Modals

- **may**
- might/could/can

Modal language

- has the potential to
- has the possibility of
- is able to

Modal Adverbs

- probably
- perhaps
- possibly
- presumably
- certainly
- definitely
- arguably

Passives

- **is considered to be**
- can be described as
- is sometimes labelled as
- the term is often used to mean...

Modifiers

- **quite**
- rather
- somewhat
- largely
- mostly
- somehow
- in general

- as a rule
- approximately
- about

Comparison

- **when compared to**
- in comparison with
- more/less than
- in a (kinder) way than

Evidence

- **evidence suggests that**
- evidence appears to indicate that
- There is some evidence which indicates that

Task 1: Can you spot the hedging in these sentences?

Task 2: Take this generalization and ‘hedge’ it e.g.

‘Men prefer science subjects whereas women choose arts subjects’.

Answer 1

Warning: Don’t ‘over-hedge’

If you are new to hedging, there is a danger that you might hedge too much and use too many ‘redundant’ words (words that you don’t need to say).

Here are some examples that I wrote when I was trying to create the ‘hedging sentence’ that I posted at the start of this blog.

Topic: The danger of video games

Too simplistic:

‘Video games make people violent’.

Too much hedging:

'It is often thought by some people that perhaps many youngsters might possibly prefer to spend a large proportion of their time playing video games that might be considered as arguably having the potential to be dangerous in certain circumstances.'

Appropriate level of hedging:

- *'There is **some** evidence to suggest that video games **may** be linked to violence.'*
- *'It is **often** thought that playing video games **can** have a harmful effect on young people'.*

Topic: British food

Too simplistic:

'British food is awful.'

Too much hedging:

'It is likely that some aspects of British cuisine might arguably be considered to be somewhat bland when compared to other cuisines which tend to favour using a wider variety of flavourings which have the potential to produce food which can safely be labelled as 'tasty'.

Appropriate level of hedging

'British food is often considered to be somewhat lacking in variety when compared to the cuisines of other countries'.