

HEDGING; TENSES

To 'hedge':

- To use an intentionally noncommittal or ambiguous statement
- To use evasive or deliberately vague language
- To avoid answering a question completely
- To be confidently uncertain
- To use verbal and adverbial expressions such as *can, perhaps, may, suggest, presumably...*, which indicate degrees of probability

In order to distinguish between facts and claims, writers often use tentative language such as *it seems likely that...* or *arguably...*. This technique is called *hedging* or *vague language*. Hedging is crucial in academic discourse, and hedge words account for approximately 1 word in every 100 in scientific articles.

Example

“Our results *seem* to *suggest* that in less industrialised countries the extensive use of land to grow exportation products *tends* to impoverish these countries' populations even more”.

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual. However an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, or "hedging", which reflects a writer's stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims he/she is making. The appropriate use of hedging strategies for academic argumentation plays an important part in demonstrating competence in a specialist register.

Reasons to hedge

1. By hedging, authors tone down their statements in order to **reduce the risk of opposition** and avoid personal accountability for statements.
2. Writers want their readers to know that they do not claim to have the final word on the subject. Expressing a lack of certainty does not necessarily show confusion or vagueness. Hedges can be considered to be **ways of being more precise in reporting results** as they allow accurate representation of the true state of the writers' understanding. Writers often need to reduce the strength of their claims simply because stronger statements cannot be justified by the data or evidence presented.
3. Hedges may be understood as **politeness strategies** in which the writer tries to appear humble rather than arrogant or all-knowing. Hedging is a rational interpersonal strategy which supports the writer's position, builds writer-reader (or speaker/listener) relationships and guarantees a certain level of acceptability in a community. Once a claim becomes widely accepted, it is then possible to present it without a hedge.

Language used in hedging

Modal auxiliary verbs	<i>may, might, can, could, would, should</i>	‘Such a measure <i>might</i> be more sensitive to changes in health after specialist treatment.’
Verbs of doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing	<i>to seem, to appear, to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate</i>	‘In spite of its limitations, the study <i>appears</i> to have a number of important strengths.’
Probability adjectives	<i>possible, probable, likely, unlikely</i>	‘Children in densely populated urban areas <i>are likely</i> to have been exposed to the infectious agent and built up an immunity to it.’
Nouns	<i>assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion</i>	‘According to a WHO <i>estimate</i> , in some Latin American countries, about one half of maternal deaths are due to illegal abortions.’
Adverbs	<i>perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently</i>	‘There is, <i>perhaps</i> , a good reason why she chose to write in the first person.’
Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time	<i>approximately, roughly, about, around, often, occasionally, generally, in general, as a rule, usually, somewhat, somehow, reasonably</i>	‘Fever is present in <i>about</i> a third of cases.’
Introductory phrases	<i>believe, to (the best of) our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that, one would expect that</i>	‘Avon Health 89-90 <i>is believed to be</i> the only local guide to both orthodox and complementary health care.’
“If” clauses	<i>if true, if anything</i>	‘ <i>If true</i> , our study contradicts the myth that men make better managers than women.’
Compound hedges	<i>seems reasonable, looks probable</i>	Such compound hedges can be double hedges (it <i>may suggest</i> that; it <i>seems likely</i> that; it <i>would indicate</i> that; this <i>probably indicates</i>); treble hedges (it <i>seems reasonable to assume</i> that); quadruple hedges (it <i>would seem somewhat unlikely</i> that), quintuple hedges (it <i>may appear somewhat speculative to suggest</i> that) etc...

Source: www.bbk.ac.uk/studyskills

Order these sentences from most categorical to most cautious. How many degrees of certainty/uncertainty are represented?

- A reduced speed limit **could** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **may well** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **may** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **will** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **could well** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **would** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **might well** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **might** result in fewer highway injuries.

Order the following expressions from most to least certain.

- It's quite likely that ...
- It is very unlikely/highly improbable that...
- It is possible that...
- It is unlikely that...
- It is beyond doubt that ...
- It is very probable/highly likely that...
- It is doubtful that ...
- It is probable/likely that...
- It is almost certain that...
- It is certain that...

Now do the same with these ...

- There is a negligible possibility that ...
- There is a strong possibility that...
- There is a remote possibility that...
- There is a definite possibility that...
- There is some possibility that ...
- There is a slight possibility that ...
- There is no possibility that ...
- There is a good possibility that...
- There is the remotest of possibilities that ...
- There's a real possibility that ...

Task 1: Underline the hedges in the following statements and then reformulate the sentences to make categorical statements.

1. Issues highlighted in this study may be applicable to many higher education institutions across the country.
2. Agreement between the measured and predicted results is reasonably close.
3. In general, it is difficult to accurately detect the frequencies that have insignificant magnitudes.
4. This new technique is claimed by many to be very effective.
5. The differences between the two approaches appear to be minimal.
6. Support from the government and the involvement of the private sector might help deliver Internet services to thousands of new users in developing countries.
7. To the best of my knowledge, nobody blamed the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico on research scientists.
8. Apparently, poor engineering decisions allowed gas to escape from a well in deep water, which in turn caused a fatal explosion.

Task 2: Use hedging to make the following statements less categorical. Choose hedges from the list below. There may be more than one correct hedging formula and you may also combine hedge words.

**suggest
probably**

**would
may**

**indicate
could**

**seem
tend to**

**generally
often**

1. The initial results prove that our hypothesis was right.
2. This type of sensor is suitable for humidity detection.
3. People behave in accordance with their personal interests and agendas.
4. Certain groups of consumers react to the delays more negatively than others.
5. Another reason is that the error was due to inaccuracy in the experimental setup.
6. The evidence proves that undergraduates never speak to their parents or grandparents in English.
7. The problem is caused by a manufacturing error.
8. This shows that gestational iodine status plays a pivotal role in neuro-intellectual development.

Task 3: Cautious language is commonly found in conclusions. Compare the two conclusions below and underline examples of hedging in the second one.

<p>This literature review has discussed both the advantages and disadvantages to countries of origin and receiving states of the free movement of labour within EU countries. Whilst the right will ultimately be of benefit to all member states, a transition period during which adjustments to the new circumstances can be made is desirable. It is obviously useful if future policy is informed by the consequences of past practice, and it is therefore worthy of note that the literature which draws on the experience of certain countries at the time of past EU enlargements supports this view. The evidence is not unsubstantial, and a strategy which permits member states, unilaterally, to introduce transition period legislation is the most sensible option. The desirability and workability of such an option, and models for legislation, are the subject of the following study</p>	<p>This literature review has discussed both the potential advantages and disadvantages to countries of origin and receiving states of the free movement of labour within EU countries. Whilst it seems likely that the right will ultimately be of benefit to all member states, a transition period during which adjustments to the new circumstances can be made may well be desirable. It is often useful if future policy is informed by the consequences of past practice, and it may therefore be worthy of note that much of the literature which draws on the experience of certain countries at the time of past EU enlargements appears to support this view. Whilst further research is clearly needed, the body of existing evidence is not unsubstantial, and a strategy which permits member states, unilaterally, to introduce transition period legislation could well be the most sensible option. The desirability and workability of such an option, and possible models for legislation, are the subject of the following study.</p>
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Avoiding sweeping generalizations

The classic verb for defending a generalization is *to tend*.

- Consumers **have** less confidence in the economy.
- Consumers **tend to have** less confidence in the economy.

Another way to defend a generalization is to **qualify the subject**.

- Many consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- A majority of consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- In most parts of the country, consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- Consumers in most income brackets have less confidence in the economy.

You may also **add exceptions...**

- **With the exception of** two European capitals...
- **Apart from** a few oil-rich states ...
- **Except for** the very youngest children ...

Use of tenses in scientific writing

The English tense system is complicated and there are many verb forms to choose from:

1. He works for BP.
2. He is working for BP.
3. He worked for BP.
4. He was working for BP.
5. He has worked for BP.
6. He has been working for BP.
7. He had worked for BP.
8. He had been working for BP.
9. He will work for BP.
10. He will be working for BP.
11. He will have worked for BP.
12. He will have been working for BP.
13. He would work for BP.
14. He would be working for BP.
15. He would have worked for BP.
16. He would have been working for BP.

Can you name the tenses? Which do you use regularly?

Most of these tenses are infrequent in scientific/academic writing. Research shows that **three main tenses** dominate scientific writing: **simple present, simple past and present perfect**.

For uses of these three tenses see [UNC Writing Centre 'Verb Tenses' guide](#).

The past perfect is less frequent but important for clarifying chronologies. Use past perfect to describe two related events that occurred at different times in the past, as in 'By the time they were sown, the seeds had already germinated' and 'Those subjects that had been exposed to radiation earlier were excluded.'

The simple future (will) is also used to indicate the future course of action suggested by the results of current research, e.g. 'Future research will seek to demonstrate how effective management systems can be designed.'

How frequently a given tense is used varies with the section of the paper:

- the simple present is used in the **introduction** to state the reasons for undertaking the research described and to describe what is currently known about the topic;
- the simple past is used in the **results** and **materials and methods** sections to describe work that is complete at the time of writing;
- the present perfect may be used in the **introduction** and **discussion** sections to show how past and present work, experience and states of knowledge relate to each other.
- The past perfect may be used in the **materials and methods** and **discussion** sections to describe sequences of actions or reactions when it is important to highlight their order of occurrence;
- the simple future is a natural choice towards the end of the **discussion** section to indicate the direction of future research.

Of all these tenses the **present perfect** is the one most often used incorrectly. As its name suggests, the **present perfect** is really concerned with **the present situation**, even though the action that the verb refers to happened or started in the past. Use the present perfect instead of the **simple past** when you are interested in the **present consequences of past events** or when you wish to **describe current/new trends**.

Task 4: Analyse the text ‘The New Archaeology’ and decide what determined the choices of tense in each case.

The New Archaeology

Over 20 years ago, Old World archaeologists recognized¹ that the chronologies of European prehistory, which had been based on the radiocarbon dating method, were² incorrect owing to flaws in the method. Another chronology has been proposed³ that has resulted⁴ not simply in the redating of individual monuments but rather, in terms defined by British archaeologist Colin Renfrew, in the establishment of a new approach to prehistoric cultural development. Previously, cultural achievements such as the development of metallurgy were thought⁵ to have radiated from a single point of invention in the Middle East. Now, multiple sites of invention have been posited⁶, leading to a conception of humans as much more innovative than previously supposed.

Since the 1980s, archaeologists in North America, Australia, and New Zealand have increasingly been called upon⁷ to adapt their research strategies to the wishes and interests of indigenous peoples, who have not only demanded⁸ the return and reburial of human skeletal remains and certain artefacts but also insisted⁹ that their cultural values be respected when excavations are conducted. The accommodation of scientific research strategies to traditional cultural sensitivities marks¹⁰ a new direction in archaeological practice and is a development that was scarcely contemplated¹¹ a few decades ago, when it was assumed¹² that rigidly scientific objectivity would soon dominate archaeology.

Task 5: The following text is part of a report on waterborne diseases. Some verbs and other words (such as ‘not’, and some adverbs) have been removed. The missing words are shown in brackets. Use either the SIMPLE PAST or the PRESENT PERFECT and the word(s) in brackets to fill the gaps.

N.B. one verb is *not* in the Past or Present Perfect.

WATERBORNE DISEASES

Cholera and typhoid ¹..... (BE) widespread in Europe and North America 100 years ago, but now ².....(almost, DISAPPEAR) from the developed world, largely because of improved water supplies and sanitation. However, this ³.....(not, HAPPEN) to the same extent in developing countries. In Peru, for example, where there ⁴..... (BE) more than 500 000 cases of cholera since 1991, social expenditure ⁵..... (DECLINE) over the past 10 years and the supply of water to almost 90 per cent of the rural population ⁶..... (still, BE) grossly contaminated. The World Bank ⁷..... (ESTIMATE) in 1993 that diarrhoea and intestinal worm infections caused by poor water supplies and bad sanitation ⁸..... (ACCOUNT FOR) as much as 10 per cent of the entire disease burden of developing countries.

The United Nations, recognising that most of the disease ⁹..... (BE) the result of polluted water supplies, ¹⁰..... (SET UP) a Decade of Water, 1981/1990. Its aim ¹¹..... (BE) to provide safe water supply and adequate sanitation for everyone. Over the decade, the number of people lacking a safe water supply in less well developed countries ¹²..... (DROP) from 1800 million to 1200 million. Although the number of people without lavatories ¹³..... (REMAIN) at around 1700 million, against a continued population increase, this ¹⁴..... (BE) significant progress.

REFERENCE AND PRACTICE ...

Hedging

- ✓ <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/using-cautious-language/>
- ✓ <http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/hedge.htm>

Tenses

- ✓ <http://ung.edu/writing-center/uploads/files/gainesville/resources/Feeling-Tense-about-Tenses.pdf>
- ✓ <http://www.englishservicesforscientists.com/speaking-science-blog/grammar-guide-3-simple-past-vs-present-perfect>
- ✓ <http://hswriting.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/hswriting/article/view/3340/1476>



HOMEWORK

1. **WRITE** a short text in which you speculate about how the world might look and be organized in the 22nd century (based on current knowledge and trends).
- or**
2. **WRITE** a short autobiographical text on your academic/professional life so far. Pay special attention to your choice of tenses, in particular to your use of the present perfect and simple past.

Don't forget ... the SEVEN STAGES of the WRITING PROCESS

<u>PLANNING</u>	<u>DRAFTING</u>	<u>REVISING</u>
1. Choose a topic	4. Write the first draft	5. Edit and revise
2. Generate ideas		6. Proofread
3. Create an outline		7. Submit