

HEDGING in academic writing.



To 'hedge' means:

- To use an intentionally noncommittal or ambiguous statement or deliberately vague language
- To use verbal and adverbial expressions such as *can*, *perhaps*, *may*, *suggest*, which deal with degrees of probability

In order to distinguish between facts and claims, writers often use careful language such as *it seems likely that...* or *arguably....* This technique is called *hedging* or *vague language*. Hedging is crucial in academic work.

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". It is necessary to make decisions about your position on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making.

Four reasons to hedge

1. By hedging, authors tone down (or 'soften') their statements in order to **reduce the risk of opposition**.
2. Writers want their readers to know that they do not claim to have the final word on the subject and that they are not the experts. Expressing a lack of certainty does not necessarily show confusion or vagueness. You could consider hedges as **ways of being more precise in reporting results**. Hedging may present the true level of the writers' understanding.
3. Hedges may be understood as **positive or negative politeness strategies** in which the writer tries to appear humble rather than arrogant or all-knowing. Once a claim becomes widely accepted, it is then possible to present it without a hedge.
4. Hedging now functions to conform to an **established writing style in English**.

Language used in hedging

Modal auxiliary verbs	may, might, can, could, would, should	'Such a measure <i>might</i> be more sensitive to changes in health after specialist treatment.'
Modal lexical verbs doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing	to seem, to appear (epistemic verbs), to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate	'In spite of its limitations, the study <i>appears</i> to have a number of important strengths.'
Probability adjectives	possible, probable, un/likely	'It is <i>likely</i> to result in failure.'
Nouns	assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion	'An <i>estimate</i> is that one in five marriages end in divorce.'
Adverbs	perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently	'There is, <i>perhaps</i> , a good reason why she chose to write in the first person.'
Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time	approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of	'Fever is present in <i>about</i> a third of cases.'
Introductory phrases	believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that	' <i>We believe</i> that there is no simple explanation.'
"If" clauses	if true, if anything	' <i>If true</i> , our study contradicts the myth that men make better managers than women.'
Compound hedges	seems reasonable, looks probable	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>); triple hedges (it <i>seems reasonable to assume</i> that); quadruple hedges (it <i>would seem somewhat unlikely</i> that, it <i>may appear somewhat speculative</i> that) and so on.

Adapted from: Birkbeck University of London. www.bbk.ac.uk/.../essay-writing/Hedging-in-AcademicWriting.doc

For more practice go to: <http://www2.elc.polyu.edu.hk/cill/eap/hedging.htm>