USING TENTATIVE LANGUAGE

Tentative language, also known as hedging, is a way of softening claims so that they are more defensible. This is a common feature of technical writing, especially in the sciences. This document explores why we use tentative language and how to use it effectively. Much of the information in this document is based on Unit 4 in Academic Writing for Graduate Students, 2nd Ed., by John Swales and Christine Feak (2004).

TENATIVE LANGUAGE: AN INTRODUCTION

The rhetoric used in technical writing is often more tentative than the sentences spoken in normal conversation. Compare the following sentences:

Ex. A-1: The car took the sharp turn too quickly, and the driver was unable to compensate for the high speed coming into the turn.

Ex. A-2: The car may have approached the turn with too much speed, which could have caused the driver to lose control.

The first example is stated as if it were a fact, while the second example is more tentative. As an observer, it is difficult to be completely sure why something happened. It might have appeared that the cause of the accident was high speed, but it could also have been mechanical. Losing control of a vehicle can be caused by driving too fast, but it can also result from being distracted. While the second example does come to the same conclusion as the first, the phrasing suggests that this is just one possible explanation.

Skelton said of doctors that they must be trained to be "confidently uncertain" in their claims.[1] In other words, doctors, and by extension other STEM writers, must state explicitly and declaratively that their hypothesis/theory/justification is indeed a possibility, but never say that it is the only one. Hedges allow the reader to formulate an alternative hypothesis/theory/justification, making the frozen medium of the written word "intellectually interactive."[2] Hedges also make claims less likely to be viewed as "wrong" by a reader.

This document covers six methods[3] to hedge claims:

- Modal auxiliaries
- Adverbs of probability
- Verbs of observation
- Generalization & limitation
- Selection of weaker verbs
- Limiting phrases

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[1] Skelton, J. (1988). The care and maintenance of hedges. ELT Journal, 42(1), 37–43. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/42.1.37

[2] Budgell, B. S. (2009). Hedging Your Bets and Minding Your Modals. In *Writing a Biomedical Research Paper* (pp. 19–23). Springer Japan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-88037-0_5

[3] Swales, J. M. & Feak, C. B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students: essential tasks and skills* (2nd ed.). University of Michigan Press.

MODAL AUXILIARIES

English has several modal auxiliaries. The nine most common ones are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Nine Common Modal Auxiliaries

Can	Could
Shall	Should
Will	Would
May	Might
Must	

By adding these to a sentence (before the verb), they impact the mood. That is, once a modal is added to the sentence, it changes the perception of how the action will happen. In terms of tentative language, the focus is on the likelihood of the action to happen. Compare the sentences in Table 2:

Table 2. Using Modals to Hedge a Sentence

SENTENCE	ANALYSIS
Consuming acrylamide causes cancer.	This is the base sentence with no modal auxiliaries used. It is stated as a fact.
Consuming acrylamide **will** cause cancer.	Using "will" is essentially saying that the outcome is certain.
Consuming acrylamide **must** cause cancer.	Using "must" means that there is no alternative explanation available. It is a conclusion about which the author is nearly certain.
Consuming acrylamide **should** cause cancer.	Using "should" says that this is the most likely outcome, but it is less certain than "must."
Consuming acrylamide **can** cause cancer.	Using "can" means that the ability is there, but it is unsure if it will happen or not.
Consuming acrylamide **could/might/may** cause cancer.	Any of these options are less certain, either about the ability or the outcome (or both).
Consuming acrylamide **cannot** cause cancer.	This is the negative of "can." It means that there is no ability, which also means there is no possibility.

ADVERBS/ADJECTIVES OF PROBABILITY

Adding adverbs or adjectives that pertain to the likelihood of occurrence can also make a claim more tentative. Adverbs typically go before the main verb in these cases. Some popular choices include *possibly*, *probably*, and *potentially*. Adjectives are used within phrases like *it is probable that* or *it is likely that.*

VERBS OF OBSERVATION

Certain verbs can be added to a sentence to provide distance from the claim. They indicate that the claim is based on what has been seen through the eyes of an observer rather than what factually occurred. The following examples show how this works.

*Ex. B-1: Consuming acrylamide **seems to** cause cancer.*

*Ex. B-2: Consuming acrylamide **appears to** cause cancer.*

*Ex. B-3: **It seems that** consuming acrylamide causes cancer.*

*Ex. B-4: **It appears that** consuming acrylamide causes cancer.*

GENERALIZATION & QUALIFICATION

By generalizing (C-1) or qualifying (C-2), the sentence is not always applicable or only valid for a subset.

*Ex. C-1: Consuming acrylamide **tends to** cause cancer.*

*Ex. C-2: Consuming acrylamide causes **some types of** cancer.*

SELECTION OF WEAKER VERBS

The choice of the verb can impact how strong the claim is. Choose verbs with a more tenuous meaning than ones that express certainty. Compare the following sentences:

*Ex. D-1: The results **establish** a link between acrylamide and cancer.*

*Ex. D-2: The results **indicate** a link between acrylamide and cancer.*

*Ex. D-3: The results **demonstrate** that ingesting acrylamide causes cancer.*

*Ex. D-4: The results **suggest** that ingesting acrylamide causes cancer.*

The verbs in examples D-1 and D-3 are too strong. In both cases, they mean that the claim has been proven. *Indicate* and *suggest* mean that reading the results would lead to the conclusion that acrylamide causes cancer, but this conclusion is based only on the results and is not necessarily universally true.

LIMITING PHRASES

Much like generalization, these phrases change the applicability of the sentence. For this method, an added word or phrase ties the claim just to the current study or a certain set of studies. *According to* and *based on* are commonly used phrases of this type.

CAUTIONARY NOTE: BALANCE USAGE

Hedging strategies can be combined within a sentence; however, the writer must be careful to not overload a sentence with them. Observe the following sentence[4] go from certain to completely uncertain:

Ex. E-1: The use of seat belts prevents physical injuries in car accidents.

Ex. E-2: The use of seat belts can prevent physical injuries in car accidents.

Ex. E-3: The use of seat belts can prevent certain types of physical injuries in car accidents.

Ex. E-4: The use of seat belts can reduce certain types of physical injuries in car accidents.

Ex. E-5: According to simulation studies, in some circumstances the use of seat belts may reduce certain types of physical injuries in car accidents.

Ex. E-6: According to some simulation studies, in specific circumstances the use of seat belts may potentially reduce certain types of physical injuries in car accidents.

E-1 is too strong: does using a seatbelt mean that no one will ever be physically injured in a car accident? The claim is weakened further by adding a modal, limiting the object, weakening the verb, and adding qualifying/limiting phrases, respectively. E-6 is too tentative, making the writer sound unconfident. While sentences like E-6 will never be appropriate, ones like E-1 might be needed. When you are certain, it is acceptable to state claims definitively. For instance, "Solar panels convert visible light into energy" is accurate, while "Solar panels might convert visible light into energy" is not.

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[4] Sentences E-1 and E-5 are from Swales, J. M. & Feak, C. B. (2004).