Hedging, Softening, and Writer's Distance

Hedging and softening are used in daily conversation and in academic writing. Softening is when you use a less extreme synonym to describe something. Hedging is when you use certain vocabulary to make criticism, opinions, and claims less harsh or rigid. Hedging is also known as cautious language, which is used to convey the certainty of a claim and to ensure that your claim is not easily dismissed or refuted. In academic English, hedging and softening are important to show scientific distance and professionalism, which is also called "writer's distance." While debating or arguing a claim, using this language will help you not sound radical or overconfident, which can affect someone's opinion of your work if you sound too biased.

What is hedging?

Hedging is also known as cautious language and can make your statements sound uncertain, which is often a good thing in academic writing. Being overconfident can undermine your claims. Sometimes saying, "*It might rain tomorrow"* is more appropriate than "*It will rain tomorrow."* In scholarly writing, using hedging while making claims will protect your statements from backlash or aggressive criticism. Using caution instead of making bold statements will add credibility to your claims since it implies you have used critical thinking and analysis.

What is softening?

When you look up synonyms for a word in the thesaurus, usually you can find strong and soft words that mean similar things. There are soft, cautious, or polite words versus emotional, direct, or opinionated words that all fit in certain circumstances and don't in others. This spectrum helps writers sound bold and dramatic or indifferent and reserved. For example, some of the softer words for "bad" are "harmful" or "unethical," whereas the bolder words might be "horrendous" or "cruel." These emotional or opinion-based words involve a value judgement—a personal assessment of something being good or bad based on the writer's own values or priorities. In scholarly writing, using softened vocabulary will make your writing sound analytical and detached, which supports your research by indicating a lack of bias.

When should writer's distance be used?

Research and science are the pursuit of knowledge, and as Socrates said, the one true wisdom is admitting that you know nothing (or something along those lines). Because of this, recognizing that you do not know everything is important for a scholarly and professional dialogue. You should avoid absolutes such as "always" and "never" because the world is rarely that simple. Additionally, absolutes can be presumptuous, and making assumptions like "everyone" and "all" can invite people to point out exceptions. For example, "Everyone believes that the world is round" is not true because there are some people who believe the earth is flat and others who claim that the earth isn't a perfect sphere. Thus, using cautious and unbiased language, such as

hedging and softening, will add professionalism to your writing. When discussing research and data, you should include the right amount of hedging because absolute certainty implies that there is no need for further research. There is a time and place to sound confident in your claims, and hedging helps your writing sound analytical, observant, and professional.

How can hedging and softening be incorporated into academic writing?

Hedging and softening include the tailored use of verbs (e.g., seem, appear), modals (e.g., could, can, might), adjectives of probability and quantity (e.g., possible, one of), adverbs of probability and frequency (e.g., possibly, generally), nouns (e.g., likelihood, probability), and certain phrases (e.g., based on, many scholars agree). When you examine your writing, look for emotional or judgement-based vocabulary. Sometimes it is difficult to know the positive or negative connotation of certain words, but using a thesaurus to look for softer versions is a good place to start. In general, avoid "always," "never," and other absolutes such as "all" or "none."

Verbs and Modals

There are some verbs that indicate uncertainty, possibility, observation, and distance. They can help the believability of your statements so your reader knows that you are leaving enough space in your claim for impartiality and other possibilities. Some possibilities are "seem," "suggest," and "appear." Modal verbs, also known as auxiliary verbs, are not conjugated like other verbs, and they indicate the mood and/or tense of the sentence. For example, "will" is how we express the future tense. Other modals indicate levels of uncertainty, necessity, permission, or possibility. Some you can use are "could," "can," "would," "may," or "might."

> Ex: *Singing sand dunes **could be caused** by grains of sand sliding down the sides.*
> Ex: *The results **would suggest** that honey has healing properties.*
> Ex: *Manatee sightings centuries ago **could be** the origins of the mermaid myth.*
> Ex: *The problem **appears to be** that the computer overheated.*

Adjectives and Adverbs

If you don't want to use a hedging verb or modal, you can use different adverbs or adjectives that provide a similar tone. Some that indicate possibility are "maybe," "possibly," "probably," "most likely," and "less likely." Additionally, because there are times where you don't want to be presumptuous and assume that your claim applies to everything or everyone, you can use quantifiers that hedge the number. Some quantifiers you can use are "some," "many," "most," "one of," or "a portion of." Similarly, assuming the frequency of something can be presumptuous, so you can use words that hedge the frequency, such as "sometimes," "frequently," "often," "usually," or "generally."

> Ex: *It is **likely** that **one of the reasons** why honey has healing properties is due to the high viscosity that creates a protective layer that helps prevent infection.*
> Ex: *A **possible** explanation for tales of will-o-the wisps is methane from decomposing plant matter in bogs or swamps spontaneously catching fire.*
> Ex: ***One of the explanations** for the decrease in bee population is varroa mites.*
> Ex: ***Many** people believe that honey has healing and antibacterial properties.*
> Ex: ***Sometimes** people put honey on wounds to prevent infection.*

Ex: *People don't **often** associate mermaids with manatees, but a hundred years ago, they **possibly** mistook the aquatic creatures for beautiful women trying to lure sailors to their deaths.*

Nouns and Phrases

If you don't want to use a hedging verb or modal, there are some nouns you can use that indicate likelihood or probability. There are phrases that can help as well, such as "based on these early studies," "many scholars agree that," "it is important to consider," or "it is useful to." The last two use the pattern of "it is [adjective]," which takes the writer's opinion out of the statement but still emphasizes the importance of something.

Ex: ***Many researchers agree that*** *the sound of singing sand dunes **could be caused** by grains of sand falling down the sides of the dunes.*
Ex: ***Based on this research***, *the findings suggest that this trait is linked to this outcome.*
Ex: ***It is important*** *to consider that the variables used in this research change over time.*

Activity 1: Soften the Sentences

Below are some opinionated statements, and some of the phrasing makes the claim untrue since it's too definitive or absolute. Use some of the methods above to soften the phrases. Note that there are many possible ways to adjust these statements to add hedging and softening.

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1. A study says that every raven will remember the face of someone that scares or hurts them for a long time.
2. Birds that live in cold climates always lay dark eggs, which keeps them warm.
3. According to everyone, dogs are always cute.
4. What occurred that year was the worst most possible thing to happen to the poverty-stricken community.
5. The utterly atrocious treatment of those people was a horrible travesty.
6. Evidently, the worst problems for recovery are a useless rehabilitation program and terrible family support.
7. The restaurant has amazing food, but the music is terrible.
8. In 1902, the Poison Squad experiment made people eat all the toxic food additives at the time, and it galvanized an extremely important law that made our food way safer.

Answer Key for Activity

1. A study shows that ravens can remember the face of someone that threatens or harms them for approximately 2.7 years.
2. Birds that live in colder climates tend to lay darker eggs, which could help the eggs stay warm.
3. Many individuals find the attributes of dogs endearing.
4. What occurred that year was an unfortunate event that happened to the impoverished community.
5. The unethical and unacceptable treatment of those people was a tragedy for many.
6. Studies show that two significant challenges for recovery are unsuccessful rehabilitation programs and inadequate family support.
7. The restaurant is known to have good food; however, not everyone enjoys the music.

8. In 1902, the Poison Squad experiment asked volunteers to consume food additives that they learned were toxic, and it led to a milestone law that ensures our food is safer.

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