
The Art of Hedging

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Summary: Introduces readers to hedging as a mechanism in academic writing to manage tone and attitude. Provides two techniques for writers to employ hedging.

Learning Objectives: To define hedging. To identify reasons that writers can employ hedging techniques. To identify when a writers' own work might need to use hedging. To hedge statements using the two techniques described.

Hedging is one mechanism that you can use to manage the tone, attitude, and information within your document. In academic writing, hedging involves using language that is tentative or qualifying in nature to enable you to maintain an attitude of objectivity; academic readers often associate objectivity (among other things, like quality research) with the writer's credibility. Hedging is truly an art: the art of hedging comes in discerning when to use hedging or when to avoid using it. Using hedging inappropriately or too much might make your paper sound nebulous or ambiguous.



Hint: The more you read in your field, the better sense you'll get of how to employ hedging in your writing.

This handout will help you understand hedging and its uses in academic writing as well as help you discern when it is necessary to hedge.

What are the reasons for hedging?

Research is a process in which you, as a writer, review the works of experts regarding your topic and then formulate your own argument in relation to the work of others. This can be done in two ways. You can present the expert's argument in a manner that demonstrates its corroboration of your view. Or, you can dispute the expert's findings, showing how the work does not hold up when viewed in connection with other studies in the field or perhaps discussing a flaw in the study that undermines the outcomes or results of the study.

When presenting your argument, you can use hedging for a variety of reasons.

Reasons Related to the Source

All writers, including you, have a position within an academic field. At the moment, you're most likely a graduate student, entering your field and learning its discourse (through reading professional and academic journals and perhaps attending conferences hosted by leading organizations in your field).



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As you write your academic papers, eventually working toward publication in your field, it is important for you to remember your position in relation to others in your academic field. Most individuals who are publishing in the field will be those who have doctorates and/or other advanced degrees. Some of these individuals will have considerable power in the field, will be recognized as authorities on sub-topics within the field, and so on. Again, reading in your field is important: the more you read in your field, the more you'll know about who has power in your field.

Keeping this in mind, there are a couple of reasons why hedging should sometimes be used.

- To show a recognition of the power relationship. In other words, hedging shows that you recognize the status of the researcher by presenting your argument respectfully, modestly, and with courtesy, even if the researcher's work corroborates your own.
- To show a recognition of the author's status in their particular field. In other words, those who produce seminal studies on a subject would have more authority than a recently graduated Ph.D. would. Further, the producer of a seminal work will have several other scholars who will have referenced that work. A slight to the higher authority could be seen as a slight to the others as well.
- To soften or qualify disagreements or disputes, again showing that you recognize the power relationship. The academic community is a rather small one. If you misrepresent an expert's work or present yours as superior, you could alienate yourself from your chosen scholarly field.

Reasons Related to the Audience of the Document

All documents have an audience. Even if the paper is destined only to be read by the instructor, he or she is still an audience to consider. Further, for academic works at the graduate level, the instructor is a member of the field that you will be joining and, most likely, is a researcher in the field. And, if you're working toward publication, members of your audience may include those individuals who you are citing.

The audience factors into hedging in the following ways.

- To protect yourself, as the researcher and writer, in presenting material that you are unsure how the audience will respond to. For example, hedging should be used if the information is potentially inflammatory or could offend the reader.
- To prevent misleading the audience when there is a lack of solid, consistent research on a topic, or there is disagreement in the field about that issue.
- To show you understand the expectations of courtesy in your field.

Reasons Related to the Writer

As the writer, you should be careful to hedge for the following reasons.

- To keep from appearing biased or opinionated. Prevents making absolute statements or overstatements that subject your work to criticism or make the research seem simplistic.
- To acknowledge the limitations of your work.
- To protect yourself if you are not sure that the information is correct.
- To divert opinion away from you, particularly if the information is troublesome or potentially inflammatory.



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- To convey a level of modesty as well as to show courtesy to your readers and to other researchers. In other words, hedging reflects an awareness of your position within the field.

How do I know if my work needs hedging?

As you read academic articles in your field, you'll pick up the many subtle ways that authors use hedging within their work. We'd like to mention four specific situations in which authors often employ hedging: to avoid absolute statements, to distance themselves when the subject is controversial, to distance themselves from the evidence if it doesn't have consistent support in the field, and to distance themselves from the evidence if it (or its author) is well-respected in the field and they want to disagree with it. Let's discuss each of these situations more fully.

Consider Using Hedging to Avoid Absolute Statements

Generally, the first things to look for in your academic paper to determine if you need to use hedging are absolute statements, overstatements, or broad sweeping generalizations.



An absolute statement makes a direct claim about an issue, idea, or event that may or may not be true, when an issue is a matter of opinion rather than a hard fact. Absolutes are words like *all*, *none*, *everyone*, *no one*, *always*, *never*, etc. They are absolute claims because they imply the statement must be true all of the time, no exceptions.

For example, “everyone should conserve water” is an absolute statement because it makes the absolute claim that everyone should do it. It is also something that the author believes, but that not everyone may agree with. However, the “chemical formula for water is H₂O” is a hard fact which no one can dispute.

The reason that absolute statements and generalizations are a problem in writing is they open the door to challenges. Unless you have read every piece of research that has ever been done on a given subject, you probably cannot speak with the authority that using an absolute demands. Even respected authors in the field who make absolute claims should probably be treated with some degree of skepticism.

Further, statements of unqualified opinion could make your reader question the objectivity of your methods. In other words, they may question whether you researched the subject thoroughly and analytically or only looked at material that supported your ideas on the subject. Additionally, many absolutes have the potential to offend a reader because they seem to make the writing questionable by coming across as biased or they run counter to the beliefs or knowledge of the reader.

Let's look at an example.

The current economic problems can be traced to the greed of corporate CEOs, who are more concerned about their own wealth than the wellbeing of others.

While there are many people who may agree with the above statement, the truth is that the issue is much more complicated than this statement would have the reader believe. The sentence seems to make the absolute claim that all CEOs are greedy which could easily offend the reader. Also, most individuals familiar with economic trends would know that the



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causes of economic issues are complex, so this statement is easily contested. Additionally, the lack of hedging creates a tone that is one of superiority, which only emphasizes the feeling that this statement may not be based on credible research but is an expression of the writer's own resentment or bias. For a better way to present this information, see the next section.

Consider Using Hedging if the Subject is Controversial

A second thing to consider is whether or not the subject is particularly controversial. Some subject matter will be contested, sometimes hotly, in a given field, and writers often have to pick a side. You need to make sure that the fallacies or limitations of the side you are disputing are adequately presented in a way that focuses on their limitations. Your work should be presented in a manner that points out the logic of your argument rather than just the negatives of the other side. Again, this is as much a matter of knowing your place and your role in your field as a recognition of the power relationships inherent in academia, which gives rise to another reason for hedging in this situation: you may want to distance yourself from inflammatory arguments or opinions.

Consider Using Hedging if the Evidence doesn't have Consistent Support

Another instance where hedging would be encouraged is when you lack solid, consistent evidence. While it is not uncommon to find dissenting voices in any field of scholarly work, unless the subject is one that has generated a major debate, most works will tend to have fairly consistent support. If for some reason you encounter a subject matter that does not have widespread, consistent support in the field, it is best to hedge. Generally, this would occur if there is a newer piece of scholarship on a subject or a revisiting of an older one.

Consider Using Hedging if You're Contesting Evidence that is Well-Respected in the Field

Finally, if you are contesting a long-standing or well-respected piece of scholarship, it is best to hedge. This is an issue of modesty. There is nothing wrong with challenging certain pieces of work, but if you do it in a way that does not give credence to the authority of the work, you have the potential to alienate yourself from the field. This is important particularly when dealing with certain historical or theoretical frameworks. For example, almost all historical works dealing with the post-Civil War South will refer in some form to C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South*. While they may not all backup or correspond to Woodward, they at least refer to or build on his thesis. If a writer would suddenly attack or dispute Woodward, the writer not only separates himself or herself from that author, but also all of those who have supported him.

What is hedging and how does it work?

To hedge in writing is to temper the statement. There are two ways you can do this.

One way is to use words that reduce the absolute value of the statement. The other option is to divert the opinion away from the writer.

Using the same example ("The current economic problems can be traced to the greed of corporate CEOs, who are more concerned about their own wealth than the wellbeing of others.") as the one in the prior section, let's consider these two methods. Look at this first revision.

CEOs, who seem to be more concerned about their own wealth than the wellbeing of others, may share some of the blame for the current economic problems.



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This first sentence uses the tempering method. By using the words *may* and *seem*, it no longer places all the blame on corporate leaders.

Since there is a negative connotation to this sentence and since most readers of business research are business people, this may be one of the claims that is best diverted away from you as the writer. One way to do this is to cite a specific expert if available.

Jones (2007) implies that CEOs who appear to be more concerned about their own wealth than the wellbeing of others share some of the blame.

By using the name of an author who expresses this opinion, you move the claim away from yourself as the writer, limiting the potential to offend the audience. In other words, the reader will connect Jones with the negative remark rather than you directly.

Be careful not to change the meaning of your sentence when you use methods of diversion in particular. For example,

In these current economic times, it would be easy to assume that CEOs who appear to be more concerned about their own wealth than the wellbeing of others share some of the blame.

The error that occurs here is that while the claim is diverted from the author by stating “it would be easy to assume” the entire meaning has been changed because of the nuance of the phrase. Now instead of simply diverting the claim, a new one has been created that implies that the assumption is incorrect and that the rest of the paper will discuss the fallacies of this assumption.

How do you know which method to use?

Deciding which method to use depends on the intent of the statement and the audience for the paper. If the audience has a great deal of knowledge on the subject, it may be best to use the diversion method if the statement is not 100% supportable or if it has the potential to offend the audience. Consider this example.

The period of Republican Reconstruction was an absolute failure.

This period of history did have its problems, but a lot of good occurred as well, which most historians recognize. Therefore, it would be best to divert this opinion away from the writer and place the statement on the source that it came from.

In the past, many Southern writers, such as Ramsdell (1964) and Dunning (1907), saw the period of Republican Reconstruction as an absolute failure.

You will want to use tempering when you feel the statement should be made, but cannot make the claim under another’s authority.

Children who do not have parental support will always do poorly in school.

This statement could anger or offend some readers. A tempered version that does not make such a broad sweeping statement would show better audience awareness.

Children without parental support may not do as well in school as those whose



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parents are actively involved in their education.

You can also use tempering when there is a lack of solid, consistent support. When dealing with a new piece of scholarship, for example, you could use a method that implies that this is important, but that it is still new.

This method of managing culturally diverse teams, though not tested in a vast array of businesses, shows promise for future applications.

Here, the sentence acknowledges that the research is limited, but expresses the view that it seems to be a good method.

Practice Exercises

Each of the sentences below is an absolute statement. Rewrite the sentence using one of the methods of hedging.

1. Female managers, due to their nurturing nature, avoid confrontation and delegation of duties.
2. The standardized method of testing is ineffective for indicating student success.
3. Corporations operating overseas do so to avoid environment regulations and other methods of corporate governance.
4. Play therapy is the best option when working with children.
5. Poststructuralist theory can only be seen as destructive since it questions other epistemological frameworks without providing alternatives.
6. The use of cultural dialect in *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* is insulting and demeaning to African Americans.
7. Sex education always leads to promiscuity in young people.
8. Graduate schools consider GPA above all other elements when determining a student's admission.
9. The only way to help alleviate the pain from this disorder is through physical therapy.
10. Managers will be unable to initiate changes within an organization if they do not have the support of their employees.
11. Never use that font for this style of writing.
12. That structure has a shoddy design and shows terrible workmanship.
13. Only female nurses will be able to develop an empathetic relationship with the patient.
14. Exercise between activities is the only way to keep children focused during the day.
15. Graft and corruption are rampant in today's workplace.

Answers

Note that the answers here are just one option. There may be other ways to rewrite these sentences. Try more than one strategy and consider the difference in meaning between them. Also, be aware that if you use diversion, you may need to provide names of researchers who say that (see questions 1, 5, 7, and 13).

1. Some claim that female managers avoid confrontation and delegation of duties because women are more nurturing.
2. The standardized method of testing may not be the most effective method of indicating student success.



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3. Some of the corporations operating overseas do so to avoid environmental regulations and other methods of corporate governance.
4. Play therapy can be an effective option when working with children.
5. Many philosophers claim that poststructuralist theory can only be seen as destructive since it questions other epistemological frameworks without providing alternatives.
6. The use of cultural dialect in *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* is sometimes considered to be insulting and demeaning to African Americans.
7. Critics maintain that sex education can lead to promiscuity in young people.
8. Graduate schools consider several elements, including GPA, when determining a student's admission.
9. To date, physical therapy has been the most effective method of alleviating pain with this disorder.
10. Managers who do not have the support of their employees will have a more difficult time initiating changes within their organization.
11. Style guides discourage the use of a font other than one with a serif for this style of writing.
12. That structure appears to have been poorly designed and the workmanship seems questionable.
13. Studies suggest that patients see female nurses as more empathetic than their male counterparts.
14. Children who have some movement between educational activities appear to be able to focus their attention better.
15. Unethical behavior appears to be more common in today's workplace.



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