

## **PRESENTING YOUR IDEAS: HEDGING IN ACADEMIC WRITING** **(p. 84)**

Your choice of words can show a reader what you think about the ideas you are presenting. One essential feature of American academic writing is hedging. When a writer hedges, she is expressing her level of certainty towards the idea she is presenting. Here's an example.

Original Sentence: Eating organically grown food will improve your health.

Sentence with a hedge: Eating organically grown food may improve your health.

Hedging in formal academic writing is one way for the writer to establish her academic integrity. It helps the writer show that she is careful not to exaggerate the ideas that she presents. In the example above, the use of the modal “may” allows the writer to avoid an overstatement that eating organically grown food will always improve health.

The frequent use of hedging in academic writing may seem unusual for writers who come from cultures with different expectations, but in the American university setting, it is an important skill to learn.

Two strategies for hedging in academic writing:

- Modals and possibility phrases to reduce the strength of a claim
- Adverbials and quantifiers to reduce the scope of a claim

### **Modals and Phrases that Reduce the Strength of a Claim**

The modals “may”, “can” and “could” are frequently used to hedge an idea.

#### **Examples**

This information is important to public health officials because better understanding of gender differences in eating habits can help them create more targeted strategies for prevention.

There is growing evidence that the long term consumption of the typical high-sugar, high-calorie American diet may lead to a variety of health problems.

The use of “will” expresses a level of certainty that is usually too strong for academic writing. “May”, “can” and “could” are more appropriate. Notice the difference in tone if “will” is substituted for the modals “can” and “may” in the above sentences.

Phrases such as “it is likely that” and “it is possible that” are also useful tools for hedging.

Example

It is possible that changing eating habits can improve study skills.

### **Adverbials and Quantifiers to Reduce the Scope of a Claim**

Adverbials such as “usually”, “generally”, “in general”, “at times” and “almost always” can help the writer show that she is not claiming that her idea is true in all situations.

Examples

Programs intended to improve nutrition often fall short of expectations.

In general men are more likely to report eating meat and poultry items and women are more likely to report eating fruits and vegetables.

It is important to avoid writing statements that exaggerate who or what is included in an idea. For example, a writer would not want to claim that “All students dislike homework.” Quantifiers such as “many”, “some”, “a number of” and “most” can help the writer present a claim without overstating it.

Examples

Many programs and campaigns to change eating habits, such as the “Five Fruits and Vegetables a Day,” have met with costly, disappointing, short term results.”

For some men, pressure to conform to magazine images of men can lead to unhealthy and potentially dangerous behaviors to try to reach that ideal.