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Hedging, Modality, and Academic Register

Expert writing is judged not only by correctness but by *calibration*: claiming exactly as much as the evidence allows. The grammar of hedging and boosting is the instrument of that calibration.

26.1 The hedging toolkit

Device	Examples
Modal verbs	*may, might, could, would, should*: *This **may** reflect sampling bias.*
Lexical verbs	*seem, appear, suggest, indicate, tend, imply*: *The data **suggest** a link.*
Adverbs	*arguably, possibly, presumably, apparently, largely, generally, typically, somewhat*
Adjectives	*possible, likely, probable, plausible, consistent with*
Nouns	*possibility, tendency, assumption, likelihood*
Approximators	*about, roughly, around, approximately, in most cases, to some extent*
Distancing constructions	*It could be argued that. . . ; According to some accounts. . . ; is thought to. . .*

Compare the uncalibrated and calibrated claims:

✗ *Social media causes depression in teenagers.*
✓ *Heavy social-media use **appears to be associated with** higher rates of depressive symptoms in adolescents, **although** causality **remains** unclear.*

Style & Register

Hedging is dose-dependent. One hedge signals scholarly care; three in a row signal timidity: ✗ *It might perhaps be possible to suggest that. . .* → ✓ *It is possible that. . .* / ✓ *This suggests that. . .* Choose *one* hedge per proposition, at the right strength.

26.2 Boosting

The opposite move — strengthening commitment — has its own grammar: *clearly, undoubtedly, indeed, certainly, in fact, of course; show, demonstrate, establish, prove; it is evident that*. Skilled writers hedge their own novel claims and boost established background: *It is **well established** that X; our results **suggest** that Y.*

26.3 Impersonal constructions

Academic register shifts responsibility from persons to propositions:

- Anticipatory *it*: ***It is likely that*** *the effect generalizes.* ***It should be noted that*** *n was small.*
- Abstract rhetors: ***This paper argues***. . . ***Section 3 shows***. . . ***The findings indicate*** . . .
- Passives of cognition: *is assumed, is taken to, has been interpreted as.*
- Nominalized hedges: *a* ***tendency*** *for scores to decline* rather than *scores tended to decline.*

26.4 Politeness and indirectness

The same distancing grammar softens requests, disagreement, and bad news in professional communication:

- Past tense for politeness: *I* ***wanted*** *to ask about the invoice.* ***Would*** *you have a moment?*
- Progressive softening: *I* ***was wondering*** *whether you* ***were planning*** *to attend.*
- Negative interrogatives inviting agreement: ***Wouldn't*** *it be safer to wait?*
- Understatement (litotes): *The results were* ***not entirely*** *convincing. That was* ***not*** *his* ***finest*** *hour.*
- Softened disagreement: ***I see your point, but***. . . ***I'm not sure I*** *entirely* ***agree.*** ***With respect,*** *the figures point the other way.*

26.5 Register contrasts at a glance

Informal	Formal / academic
a lot of, loads of	*a great deal of, numerous, considerable*
get better / worse	*improve / deteriorate*
find out	*ascertain, determine*
look into	*investigate, examine*
put up with	*tolerate*
about (a topic)	*regarding, concerning, with respect to*
so (linking)	*therefore, consequently*
besides (adding)	*moreover, furthermore*
contractions (*don't, it's*)	full forms (*do not, it is*)
you (generic)	*one*; passive; *readers, users*

Usage Note

Formality is a scale, not a switch. Modern academic and business prose has relaxed: first person (*we show*), contractions in blogs and emails, and phrasal verbs in journalism are all normal. Match the register of the venue you are writing for — the worst error is mixing levels within a sentence: ✗ *The committee will look into the ramifications and stuff.*

Exercises

Exercise 26.1 Calibrate the claims

Rewrite each overclaim as a properly hedged academic sentence.

1. Remote work makes employees more productive.
2. The new drug cures the disease.

3. Video games cause violence.
4. Our model predicts elections.

Exercise 26.2 De-hedge

Each sentence is over-hedged; reduce it to a single, well-chosen hedge.

1. It might possibly be the case that the sample could perhaps be biased.
2. It could arguably be suggested that there is maybe a tendency for prices to somewhat rise.

Exercise 26.3 Shift the register

Rewrite formally (1–3) or informally (4).

1. We found out that lots of users put off updating their software.
2. They looked into the problem but couldn't figure out what set it off.
3. The plan fell through because the backers pulled out.
4. It is regrettable that the anticipated improvement in performance did not materialize. (email to a friendly colleague)