

## **Hedges**

Hedges are words or expressions used to make a statement less blunt and direct, so that your writing strikes the reader as more subtle, reasonable and believable.

There are two kinds of writing in which hedges are especially valuable. The first is *performance reviews* or similar judgements about people or products; in such cases, it is important to make your points clearly but in a way that will not be interpreted as belligerent or offensive. The second is *academic essays* dealing with genuinely difficult issues that must not be oversimplified; in that kind of writing, you do not want to give the impression of naively thinking that everything is easy and obvious.

Using hedges effectively requires good judgement about both the nature of the topic itself and the expectations of your readers. However, it may be helpful to begin with a brief review of some of the linguistic resources available as hedges. These include:

### **Verbs: Cautious Use of the Bare 'IS'**

It is often perfectly appropriate to write that something *is* the correct conclusion, that a specific feature *is* the most important one, or that a given situation *is* problematic. Sometimes there is very little room for alternative views, and *is* is indeed the best verb to use.

By contrast, however, it may at times be wise to admit that, while a particular viewpoint does have substantial evidence to support it, there could possibly be other perspectives on the question, too. In those circumstances, you can indicate your adoption of a careful and self-aware approach by avoiding absolute statements using the verb *is*. Some options are:

Instead of *It is ... It seems to be... It appears to be ... It may be... It could be... etc*

### **Conventional Phrases**

In the same spirit as the simple alternatives for *is* noted above, English offers a host of conventional words or phrases that have much the same hedging effect, a small sample of which include:

It *could/might be argued* that...[not *It is true that...*]

The data *suggest* that... [not *prove*]

There is evidence *to support the view* that... [not *prove*]

The evidence *tends to* indicate that...[not *The evidence shows/proves that...*]

It *can/might be concluded* that... [not *We must conclude that...*]

This experience *implies* that... [not *proves*]

Such an inference *is consistent with* the data.... [not *The data prove/show that...* ]

### **Adverbs and Adjectives**

In particular, carefully chosen adverbs or adjectives can serve as effective hedges. A few examples are:

This factor *not infrequently* causes [not *This factor causes...*; not *This factor usually/always causes...*]

There have been *more than a few examples* of ... [not *many*]

This result has occurred *in many cases*... [not *every case*; not *This result has always occurred...*]

*One possible* interpretation is... [not *The interpretation is...*]

This factor is a *potential* cause... [not *the cause*]

*One possible* view is that... [not *This means that...*]

It is *reasonable* to conclude that... [not *necessary*]

A *coherent* argument... [not *certain*]

The evidence *available so far*... [not *The evidence*...]

### ***Punctuation***

When you want to introduce the idea that there are two sides to a question, it can be effective to use a topic sentence embodying that complexity in the form of two balanced parts joined by a ***semicolon***.

For instance – *Wind power has been promoted as one of the more environmentally friendly alternatives to fossil fuels; however, it must be recognized that the economic and even the mechanical foundations for implementing this new technology have yet to be demonstrated on more than a very modest scale.*

In this example, the conjunctive adverb ***however*** could have begun a totally new sentence, but using a semicolon to link the two contrasting viewpoints in a single sentence has the effect of ***underlining how closely the writer intends to interconnect discussion of the opposing perspectives***. This strategy helps announce a very subtle treatment of the topic, which may reassure readers who know very well that the debate is complicated and difficult.

Such use of the semicolon can be combined with any contrast-oriented conjunctive adverb or adverb phrase: not just ***however***, but also ***notwithstanding, on the other hand, nevertheless, still, yet***, etc.

### ***General Advice***

The tips provided above will be useful as a starting point, although they definitely do not cover every available option. Bearing those basic tactics in mind may help you read more attentively, so as to become aware of how expert writers use hedges to refine their meaning.

The great difficulty with hedges is to ***use*** them appropriately but not to ***over-use*** them. ***Too few*** hedges can make your writing seem hostile or simple-minded; ***too many*** can give the impression of dishonesty or indecision. Of course, you always need to ***express what you really think***, but in a subtle and gentle way. Balance is critical!