

Reviewing the Situation: Hedging and Boosting in Academic Writing

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Hedging and Boosting in the Classroom

- ❖ Do you teach hedging language?
- ❖ What examples do you use?
- ❖ How often do your ESOL students make vague generalizations?
- ❖ Do student papers in your class confuse the poetry of false certainty for a balanced, nuanced statement

Crucial Skills

- ❖ Move from poetry to accuracy
- ❖ Teach writing skills
- ❖ demonstrate critical thinking
- ❖ “Confidently uncertain”
(Swales/Feak)

How Do We Introduce Hedging and Boosting

- ❖ Headlines
- ❖ Proverbs
- ❖ Songs
- ❖ Advertisements
- ❖ Consumer reviews
- ❖ Standardized tests
- ❖ A skill that must be taught
- ❖ Vague generalizations in student papers vs. hedged generalizations in research papers in journals

Vague Generalization

- ❖ Appeal
- ❖ Danger

- ❖ United States

What is Hedging?

- ❖ The deliberate use of a noncommittal or ambiguous statement or statements, thus avoiding completely answering a question
- ❖ Weasel Words: might, could, perhaps, seems, appears, probably

What is Boosting?

- ❖ “The greatest”
- ❖ Superlatives
- ❖ Present tense
- ❖ Claim
- ❖ Totally – slang
- ❖ Totally inappropriate
- ❖ Utterly flawed to conception to execution

Hedging vs. Boosting: Academics

- ❖ Most students are familiar with standardized tests – especially language tests such as TOEFL.
- ❖ Give students a chance to discuss 'mock' answers where no question is given.
- ❖ Example:
 - a) The author states that
 - b) Always_____
 - c) Rarely _____
 - d) Many people believe that_____
 - e) There are never_____

Hedging vs. Boosting: Politics and Business



www.biography.com

- ❖ Obama often spoke in legalistic, academic language
- ❖ His statements usually feature language such as 'it is likely...' 'We can...' 'it is possible...'
- ❖ Critics saw this language as Obama avoiding taking a clear stand on issues

Hedging vs. Boosting: Politics and Business



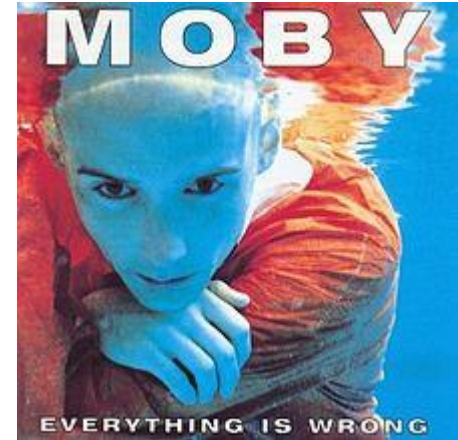
www.whitehouse.gov

- ❖ Trump speaks in the language of business and sales
- ❖ “the greatest”
- ❖ “the worst”
- ❖ His statements often feature language such as ‘tremendous’ ‘extraordinary’ or ‘we will/we must...’
- ❖ Critics often see his language as lacking subtlety

Absolutes: Songs and Proverbs

❖ Songs with absolute claims

- Everything is Wrong.
- Nobody walks in L.A.
- Love is you need.
- Everybody Knows.



www.wikipedia.com

❖ Proverbs

- Time is money.
- You never have a second chance to make a first impression.
- Seeing is believing.
- Time heals all wounds.

Vague Statements: Advertising

- ❖ Just do it - Nike
- ❖ Life is good. – LG
- ❖ Eat Fresh - Subway
- ❖ Diamonds are forever - DeBeers

- ❖ Carlsberg – Probably the Best Beer in the World

From General to Specific

- ❖ Dad says, ‘Father knows best’’:
general statement (clearly not always true!)
- ❖ How do we make this more specific?
By adding hedge words, such as:
 1. “Dad says, ‘Fathers **often** know best’”
(the frequency adverb “often” softens the claim)
 2. “Dad says, ‘Fathers know best about **cars.**’”
(the condition narrows the claim to one area that fathers know best about, instead of all areas)

Academic and Business Contexts

- ❖ In academic contexts we often look at 'hedges' or 'qualifiers'
- ❖ In email and business we often look see this type of language when making suggestions or requests – especially to those who are in a higher position of perceived power.

Should We Hedge in Email?

- Why Hedging Language Undermines Your Writing | Grammarly Spotlight

Why Hedging Is a Problem

- “There are a few reasons a writer might hedge. Hedging makes your statements less direct, and sometimes that feels more polite, especially if you’re expressing disagreement or criticism. Hedging can also feel like an escape hatch. If you turn out to be wrong, well, it was just a random thought you had . . . But the feeling of safety you get from hedging is only that: a feeling. In reality, hedging makes you look uncertain and unconfident.” (grammarly.com)

Five Examples From Grammarly

- ❖ 1 I think . . .
- ❖ Hedging: I think we should set up a meeting.
- ❖ Confident: Let's set up a meeting.
- ❖ 2 I feel like . . .
- ❖ Hedging: I feel like we could find space for one more person.
- ❖ Confident: We could find space for one more person.
- ❖ 3 It would be great if . . .
- ❖ Hedging: It would be great if you could turn in your application by 5:00 p.m. tomorrow.
- ❖ Confident: Please turn in your application by 5:00 p.m. tomorrow.
- ❖ 4 Should be able to . . .
- ❖ Hedging: I think I should be able to finish the research phase this week.
- ❖ Confident: I can finish the research phase this week.
- ❖ 5 Basically . . .
- ❖ Hedging: Basically, I'm still waiting for Tim to answer my questions.
- ❖ Confident: I'm still waiting for Tim to answer my questions.

Email Problems

- ❖ Over-confident
- ❖ Inaccurate
- ❖ Unprofessional
- ❖ Too direct (in terms of suggestions and advice)

Why do we Hedge?

- ❖ Hedging is considered crucial for academic writing
- ❖ Also known as “vague language” or “cautious language” (Birkbeck)

Hedging – Beyond Modals

- ❖ Many ESL/EFL writers are proficient with can/could/may/might.
- ❖ This can get very repetitive – especially in the discussion sections of academic papers.

Hedging – Beyond Modals

- ❖ Mixing in stock phrases (It is quite possible...) and –ly adverbs (may directly effect) into this type of writing adds both layers of meaning and makes the passages more readable.
- ❖ Memorizing just a few of these phrases and words can help students vary their language greatly.

Five
common
ways to
Hedge

- ❖ Frequency adverbs (**often, sometimes, usually**)
- ❖ Verbs (**seem to, appear to, tend to**)
- ❖ Conditions (**...about the dog, ...in the car, etc.**)
- ❖ Cite Sources (**according to, says, notes**)
- ❖ Add numbers/percentages (**one of, 24%**)

Hedging and Boosting - Verbs

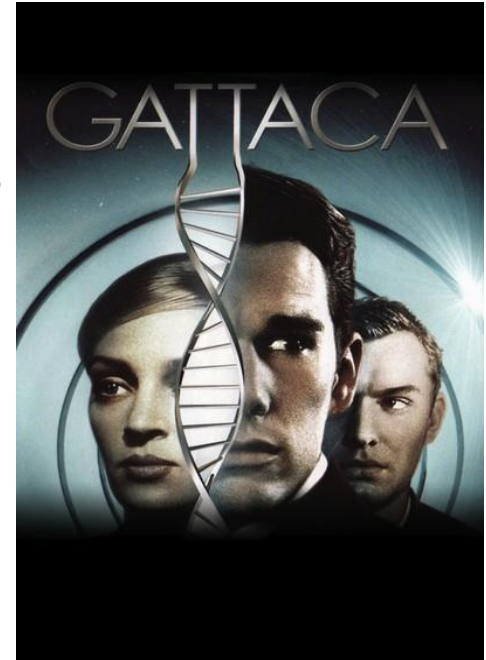
- ❖ Qualify the statement (**seem to, tend to, appear to, might be**), which, in academic writing, leaves room for opinion, and softens the claim.
 - That piece of pizza is rotten.
 - **It appears** that that piece of pizza is rotten.
- ❖ Create a sentence which uses a verb to soften a claim. Or add a verb to one of the proverbs/songs/ads from the beginning.

Hedging – Frequency Adverbs

- ❖ Give situation(s) or times at which something is true (**often, sometimes, usually, frequently, regularly**), since something might not be true all the time (this lessens the claim).
 - It rains when Alex walks the dog
 - It **often** rains when Alex walks the dog.
- ❖ Create a sentence which uses a frequency adverb to lessen/specify a claim. Or add a frequency adverb to one of the proverbs/songs/ads from the beginning.

Movie Reviews

- ❖ The greatest movie ever!
- ❖ A great science fiction movie
- ❖ One of the year's best movies
- ❖ A good science fiction movie
- ❖ A nice sci-fi story for teenagers



<https://www.rogerebert.com>

Product Reviews

- ❖ Consumer culture
- ❖ Target audience
- ❖ Value
- ❖ Amazon reviews
- ❖ Compare to other choices
- ❖ Review comparatives and superlatives
- ❖ The best vs one of the best
- ❖ A good vs better than
- ❖ Popular assignment

Problem & Solution Papers & Presentation

- ❖ World full of problems
- ❖ Field problem-solutions
- ❖ Local/ national/global topics
- ❖ Identify the background
- ❖ Provide detailed description – short/long term
- ❖ Describe and compare possible responses/solutions
- ❖ Context counts
- ❖ Possibility vs probability vs certainty

Conditions

- ❖ Narrow the claim to within a certain area/subject (**...about the dog, ...in the car, etc.**)
 - Sandra knows more than Ben does.
 - Sandra knows more **about the dog** than Ben does.
- ❖ Create a sentence which uses a condition to narrow a claim. Or add a condition to one of the proverbs/songs/ads from the beginning.

Hedging in Academic Writing

- ❖ Hedging is a key feature of academic/scientific writing
- ❖ Establishes the writer's stance
- ❖ Helps students move beyond the superficial
- ❖ Develops critical thinking
- ❖ The language of possibility and probability

Combining Hedging Techniques

- ❖ Use at least two of the above techniques (frequency adverb, verb, condition) to hedge a sentence.
- ❖ Example:
 - Sentence: It is cold in Indianapolis.
 - ❖ Frequency adv+condition:
 - It is **usually** cold in Indianapolis **in the winter.**

More Hedging Exercises

Using English for Academic Purposes:

<http://www.uefap.com/writing/exercise/feature/hedgeex.htm>

Thank You!



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