



Go The Distance

The language of argument

Part 1: Signposting language

Let's imagine you've done your research, put together a strong structure, and it's now time to start writing your assignment. You need some 'glue' to help it all stick together, and some 'signposts' to help guide your reader through your argument. Take a look at these useful phrases.

Making claims

- It can be argued that...
- This paper asserts that...
- This indicates that...

Other verbs we could use include:

- contends, believes, demonstrates, proves, suggests, explains

Giving evidence

- There is evidence to suggest that...
- This supports the conclusion that...
- It has been argued that...
- According to Carter (2016) ...
- Carter (2016) claims that...
- Research shows that...
- Further evidence for this is...

Making a warrant

This is often a simple statement, for example:

- There is a clear link between X and Y...
- X is known to...
- It is generally accepted that...

Making counter-arguments

- Carter (2016) asserts that... Nevertheless, ...
- It has been suggested that... Nonetheless, ...
- It could be maintained that... However, ...

Stating limitations

- The results of this survey are limited by...
- This data must be interpreted with caution because...
- It is important to bear in mind the potential for bias in these responses...

Activity 1

Now, let's try using these phrases in context. In the box below is an extract from a student assignment. Read it and fill each gap with a phrase from this list. If you need help, take a look at the hints underneath the box.

- this paper therefore argues that
- nonetheless
- data is limited by
- this is supported by evidence that suggests
- according to the WHO (2013)

Assignment title: Are mobile phones a cancer risk?

1) _____ there is "no indication" that mobile phone use increases the risk of brain cancer. To the world's 6 billion mobile phone users (World Bank, 2016), this may seem like good news. 2) _____, "no indication of risk" is not the same as "no risk"; it means that in the studies carried out so far, no risk has been identified. 3) _____ the short duration of experiments carried out to date: the WHO recommends researching across periods of over 15 years to yield more useful results. 4) _____ brain cancer can take decades to develop. 5) _____ it is too early to predict the long-term effects of mobile phone use on cancer. More work needs to be done.

Hints

- 1) This could be evidence or counter-argument. Did you notice the quote?
- 2) This looks like it is disagreeing with sentence 1.
- 3) Here, the author is saying that data is insufficient.
- 4) This gives further evidence why longer experiments are needed.
- 5) "Therefore"... It looks like it's combining all the evidence together.

Answer

The answers are **bolded**.

Assignment title: Are mobile phones a cancer risk?

1) **According to the WHO (2013)**, there is "no indication" that mobile phone use increases the risk of brain cancer. To the world's 6 billion mobile phone users (World Bank, 2016), this may seem like good news. 2) **Nonetheless**, "no indication of risk" is not the same as "no risk"; it means that in the studies carried out so far, no risk has been identified. 3) **Data is limited by** the short duration of experiments carried out to date: the WHO recommends researching across periods of over 15 years to yield more useful results. 4) **This is supported by evidence that suggests** brain cancer can take decades to develop. 5) **This paper therefore argues that** it is too early to predict the long-term effects of mobile phone use on cancer. More work needs to be done.

Part 2: Hedging

While your job is to persuade readers that your argument is strong and valid, this does not mean you can always be 100% sure you are correct. Some degree of uncertainty is common. And of course, there's always an exception to every rule! So, how can you avoid making bold statements that can't be supported in every single scenario? You can use hedging.

No, not the kind of hedge you might find at the end of a field or garden!

Hedging is a way of expressing yourself in academic writing. Let's look at these two sentences. What's the difference?

1. Research proves that eating too much salt increases the risk of type II diabetes.
2. Research suggests that eating too much salt may increase the risk of type II diabetes.

The first example presents the statement as fact – the research "proves" something, whereas the second one uses "suggests" and the modal auxiliary "may" to indicate there could be other possibilities. Even if the statistics show us that for most people, salt increases the diabetes risk, we can't be sure that this will be true for every individual, unless we carry out experiments on everyone!

Hedging language can take the form of verbs or modals as above, but nouns, adjectives, adverbs and approximators can also be used to hedge, often as part of set phrases.

Activity 2

Read this paragraph, and try to find as many examples of hedging language as possible.

Assignment title: Is having a dog good for your health?

Example section from the assignment: Over the years, many studies have noted a connection between pet ownership and improved health. So, can we say that pets are good for you? It seems, sadly, that we can't. New research by RAND (2017) indicates that there might not be a direct relationship after all. The RAND study points out those who raise pets are usually wealthier and enjoy a better standard of living than those who don't. It can be concluded that these factors drive the difference in health, rather than the pets themselves. Pet lovers may be consoled by the possibility that with further research, results could be different.

Answers

The hedging language is **bolded**.

Assignment title: Is having a dog good for your health?

Example section from the assignment: Over the years, many studies have noted a connection between pet ownership and improved health. So, can we say that pets are good for you? It **seems**, sadly, that we can't. New research by RAND (2017) **indicates** that there **might** not be a direct relationship after all. The RAND study points out those who raise pets are **usually** wealthier and enjoy a better standard of living than those who don't. It **can** be concluded that these factors drive the difference in health, rather than the pets themselves. Pet lovers may be consoled by the **possibility** that with further research, results **could** be different.

Here is some of the language we can use to hedge:

Modals	might, may, can, could, should, would
Adjectives	probable, possible, conceivable, likely, unlikely
Nouns	probability, possibility, likelihood, suggestion, assumption
Verbs	seem, appear, suggest, indicate
Adverbs	probably, possibly, apparently, seemingly, presumably, perhaps
Approximators of degree	sometimes, usually, roughly, generally, approximately, in general

What is the writer's stance?

Can you identify hedging? What about when a writer agrees or disagrees with what they are saying? It's important to tune in to these small differences. Look for words and phrases that might give you a clue.

Activity 3

Read the sentences below and decide what the writer's stance is from the options a) – d).

- 1) Martins (2003) proves that consuming too much alcohol can lead to high blood pressure.

Hint: Think about the verb "proves".

- a) The writer agrees
- b) The writer is hedging
- c) The writer disagrees
- d) The writer is neutral

2) This appears to indicate that left-handedness is not linked to creativity after all.

Hint: Why is the writer using "appears to indicate"?

- a) The writer agrees
- b) The writer is hedging
- c) The writer disagrees
- d) The writer is neutral

3) Needham (1954) attempts to show why modern science developed first in Europe.

Hint: The clue is the word "attempts".

- a) The writer agrees
- b) The writer is hedging
- c) The writer disagrees
- d) The writer is neutral

4) This could be related to the rise in greenhouse emissions.

Hint: There's a modal here...

- a) The writer agrees
- b) The writer is hedging
- c) The writer disagrees
- d) The writer is neutral

5) It seems likely that the ancient Greeks ate a largely similar diet to that of modern Greeks.

Hint: It "seems likely", but is it certain?

- a) The writer agrees
- b) The writer is hedging
- c) The writer disagrees
- d) The writer is neutral

6) Chomsky argues that humans possess an innate and unique ability to learn language.

Hint: Positive or negative? It's hard to tell.

- a) The writer agrees
- b) The writer is hedging
- c) The writer disagrees
- d) The writer is neutral

Answers

- 1) The writer agrees. The use of the verb "proves" indicates that the author agrees with and the results of Martins' research. Note that the modal "can" is also used, which often indicates hedging. Here, though, "can" relates to Martins' own assessment of his findings, rather than indicating the author's view.
- 2) The writer is hedging. "Appears" and "indicate" both suggest that the writer is not completely certain, and wants to avoid making a bold statement.
- 3) The writer disagrees. The use of "attempts" indicates that the author thinks Needham was not successful in his argument.
- 4) The writer is hedging. The modal "could" indicates the writer is not fully sure how true the statement is.
- 5) The writer is hedging. Although "likely" is stronger than "possible", it is still not "certain". Add in the other hedging words "seem" and "largely", and we have a classic example of hedging.
- 6) The writer is not hedging here. The writer is simply reporting Chomsky's theory. From this sentence alone, with its use of "argues", we might safely assume the writer is neutral. However, it is also possible to follow this sentence with one that either agrees or disagrees.

More

Remember to check our 'language of argument' webpages for information and activities to practise:

- Key concepts in academic argumentation
- Identifying arguments
- Essential argumentation vocabulary

You can find these materials at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zpyftv4>