



Using cautious language in your writing

Introduction

Direct statements or statements implying full certainty should be avoided in academic writing. This is to show your lecturer that you have applied **critical** and **reasoned evaluation**, taking into account a number of perspectives and a range of evidence regarding a particular topic.

You can never state research as being absolute fact within an assignment (as other authors may find something different). Therefore, using cautious language allows you to indicate that on this occasion a finding was true. Remember to include a **reference** to show where the information originated.

Using **cautious language** allows ideas, arguments, evaluations and conclusions expressed in your academic writing to remain open to interpretation by the reader. This is therefore a very important academic writing convention.

Example

Consider the following statement:

Jones (2014) stated that attending study skills classes improves students' academic achievement at university.

In the following examples, cautious expressions have been used to modify the statement above:

- Students' academic achievement at university **may be** improved by attending study skills classes (Jones, 2014).
- **It is suggested** that attending study skills classes improves students' academic achievement at university (Jones, 2014).
- Attending study skills classes **tends to** improve students' academic achievement at university (Jones, 2014).
- **It is likely that** students' academic achievement at university **could** be improved by attending study skills classes (Jones, 2014).

Showing caution in your writing

Key strategies involve using **impersonal verbs** as well as **quantity, frequency,** and **probability verbs, adverbs,** and **adjectives** to imply varying degrees of caution.

Impersonal verbs

Your academic writing should be impersonal in keeping with the correct style for academic assignments. Below is a list of impersonal verb phrases that you could use in your assignments to express caution:

- It appears to/ that...
- It would appear to/that...
- It seems to/that...
- It would seem to/that...
- It tends to be...
- There is a tendency to/for...
- It is said that...
- It has been suggested that...
- It is generally agreed that...

Examples:

- It would seem that attending academic study skills classes could improve students' academic achievement at university (Jones, 2014)
- The evidence would appear to point to the conclusion that students' academic achievement at university could be improved by attending study skills classes (Jones, 2014)

Degrees of caution

Caution can be expressed with varying degrees, ranging from **less** to **more certain**. Using language that implies varying degrees of caution allows you to express your opinion on a particular topic in an **impersonal** way, in keeping with a correct academic style of writing.

The table below shows words, phrases, and expressions you may use in your academic writing according to the degree of certainty they imply. The terms in **bold** imply a certain amount of caution and can be used in your academic assignments but try to avoid using the terms that imply 100% or 0% certainty as these are usually inappropriate for academic writing.

Percentage Guide	Quantity	Frequency	Probability		
			Adverbs	Adjectives	Verbs
 100% 0%	all/every/each	always	certainly	certain	Will
	most	usually	definitely	definite	is/are
	a majority of	normally	undoubtedly	undoubted	must/have to
	many/much	generally	clearly	clear	should
	enough	on the whole	presumably	(un)likely	would
	a number (of)	regularly	conceivably	Conceivable	ought to
	several	often	possibly	Probable	may
	a minority (of)	frequently	perhaps	Possible	might
	a few/a little	occasionally		uncertain	could
	few/little	rarely			can
	seldom	never			
	no/none				

The following examples show expressions implying **more certainty**, which are higher on the percentage scale above, and **less certainty** which are lower on the scale.

Examples:

1. More certainty

It **seems likely** that attending academic study skills classes **would** improve students' academic achievement at university, taking into account the outcomes of the research by Jones (2012) and Brown (2013).

2. Less certainty

It is **possible** that attending study skills classes **may** improve students' academic achievement at university, however the evidence is inconclusive.

Using cautious language when linking to evidence

You should also use cautious language when linking your **evaluations** and **conclusions** to evidence in your reading, **using reasoned evaluation** of the evidence presented to draw conclusions on a particular topic or issue. In the following example language that expresses caution is highlighted in **green**:

Example:

Jones (2012) researched the introduction of study skills classes across a range of disciplines at UK universities and found that, **on the whole**, this had a positive effect on academic achievement within these universities. In a similar study, Brown (2013) found that **the majority of** students showed improved levels of academic writing after following a course of study skills classes alongside their subject course. Collectively, **the evidence suggests that** students' academic achievement at university **is likely to be** improved by attending study skills classes.

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit:
lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub

