



# Being cautious

*Extra practice in softening academic claims*

A careful writer does not claim more than the evidence shows. A soft word like suggest, may, or tend to is called a hedge. To hedge means to soften a claim so it is not too strong. The rule for this whole sheet: use enough caution – not too little, not too much. In a short claim, one or two careful signals are usually enough.

may / might / could  
not sure

is likely to  
fairly sure

almost certainly  
very sure

In many parts of a paper, especially when explaining results, the soft end on the left is safer. Strong claims need strong proof.

SEE — *choose the more cautious word*

Write your choice on the line.

1. These early results \_\_\_\_\_ that the new coating slows rust. (suggest / prove)
2. The interviews \_\_\_\_\_ that staff want clearer feedback. (confirm / indicate)
3. Our data \_\_\_\_\_ a possible link between diet and sleep. (show beyond doubt / point to)
4. The model \_\_\_\_\_ that demand will rise next year. (predicts / guarantees)

TRY — *match the strength to the evidence*

Underline the modal that fits how sure the writer can be.

5. With only eight participants, this difference ( could / will ) be due to chance.
6. Many large trials gave the same result, so the effect ( might / is likely to ) be real.
7. The sensor failed twice, so these readings ( may / must ) be unreliable.
8. We have strong, repeated evidence, so the drug ( is likely to / may possibly ) help.

ACT — *rewrite to allow for exceptions*

Each sentence is too strong. Rewrite it using in general, tend to, or most.

9. City students always score higher than rural students.

> \_\_\_\_\_

10. People who exercise are never overweight.

> \_\_\_\_\_

11. Older machines break down more than new ones, without exception.

> \_\_\_\_\_

ACT — *report a common view, at a distance*

Rewrite each claim to report a shared view. Begin with *It is thought that...* or *There is some evidence that...*

12. The temple was built for trade.

> \_\_\_\_\_

13. Stress is the cause of most of these headaches.

> \_\_\_\_\_

14. The species died out because of climate change.

> \_\_\_\_\_

ACT — *trim the over-hedged sentences*

Each sentence uses too many hedges. Cross out the extra ones so the sentence is cautious but not weak.

15. It may possibly perhaps be the case that noise affects focus.

> \_\_\_\_\_

16. These results could maybe seem to suggest a small effect.

> \_\_\_\_\_

17. There is perhaps a chance that the method might possibly work.

> \_\_\_\_\_

REFLECT — *judge the three versions*

Three writers report the same finding from one small study. Mark the best one, then say what is wrong with the other two.

\_\_\_\_\_ a. This small study proves that music boosts memory.

\_\_\_\_\_ b. This small study suggests that music may boost memory.

\_\_\_\_\_ c. This small study could perhaps possibly hint that music might boost memory.

Best: \_\_\_\_\_ What is wrong with the other two?

> \_\_\_\_\_



# Being cautious

*Model answers and short explanations*

SEE – careful verb

1. suggest – early results point to an idea; they do not prove it.
2. indicate – softer than 'confirm', which claims certainty.
3. point to – 'show beyond doubt' is far too strong for a possible link.
4. predicts – a model predicts; it cannot guarantee the future.

TRY – match the strength

5. could – a tiny sample means low certainty.
6. is likely to – many large trials support a fairly strong, but still careful, claim.
7. may – a fault suggests doubt, not certainty ('must').
8. is likely to – strong evidence; 'may possibly' would be too weak and doubled.

ACT – avoid over-generalising (sample answers)

9. In general, city students tend to score higher than rural students.
10. People who exercise are less likely to be overweight.
11. Older machines tend to break down more often than new ones.

Other wordings are fine if they leave room for exceptions.

ACT – report a common view (sample answers)

12. It is thought that the temple was built for trade.
13. There is some evidence that stress may contribute to many of these headaches.
14. It is believed that the species died out because of climate change.

ACT – trim the over-hedged (cautious, not weak)

15. It may be the case that noise affects focus.
16. These results suggest a small effect.
17. The method might work.

Any version is fine if it is cautious but not weak – usually one clear hedge.

REFLECT – judge the three versions

Best: b – 'suggests' and 'may' make it careful without making it weak.

a and c are both poor. 'a' is too strong: 'proves' is far too certain for one small study. 'c' is too soft: four hedges piled up (could, perhaps, possibly, might) sound unsure.

'a' over-claims and 'c' over-hedges. They fail in opposite ways; both are worse than the careful 'b'.

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Source note. All sentences in this worksheet are original, written for teaching. The phrase stems (for example, it is thought that, there is some evidence that) are short, generic academic expressions, informed by the Academic Phrasebank (John Morley, University of Manchester, 2023). No part of the Phrasebank PDF is reproduced here.