When To Use Cautious Language

Hedging, or "being cautious," refers to how a writer expresses certainty or uncertainty. Hedging is an important component of academic style that allows writers to 1) avoid expressing absolute certainty where there may be a small degree of uncertainty and 2) avoid making overgeneralizations where a small number of exceptions might exist. Hedging helps your writing sound analytical, observant, and professional; it protects your statements from backlash or aggressive criticism.

Note that sometimes a strong statement is necessary in academic writing, such as the thesis statement of an argumentative/persuasive essay. The following guidelines explain how to use cautious language where appropriate.

1) Avoid totalizing words that make an oversimplified claim and turn a complex situation into an irrefutable fact, which is frowned upon in the scholarly community.

Incorrect	The number of cars on the road **has caused** global climate change.
Correct	The number of cars on the road **has contributed** to global climate change.

The first example is a totalizing statement that places the blame of climate change solely on cars. Cars might add to climate change, but they have not caused it single-handedly.

2) Lessen the strength of a statement or claim by using the following hedging devices:

Introductory verbs	Modal verbs	Adverbs	Adjectives	Nouns
tend to indicate estimate seem to appear to be suggest	may might can could would	probably possibly seemingly apparently arguably perhaps	probable possible likely unlikely doubtful	assumption tendency evidence trend claim
Examples of phrases				
In general, … One study reported that… Recent research suggests that… These data appear to support…		These factors likely account for… One possible implication of this study is that… A reasonable solution would be… This surprising result may be due to…		

When discussing research and data, you should incorporate appropriate hedging because absolute certainty implies that there is no need for further research. Here are some examples:

Data show that today's young adults **seem to** value experiences over material possessions.
Other studies **suggest that** input alone is not sufficient for language acquisition.

3) Use quantifiers that hedge numbers so as not to include everything or everyone.

Such quantifiers include *some, many, most, one of,* or *a portion of*. Similarly, assuming the frequency of something can be presumptuous, so you can use words that hedge the frequency, such as *sometimes, frequently, often, usually,* or *generally*. Below are some opinionated statements that sound too definitive or absolute. Suggestions to soften the claims follow each example.

Original	One study says that every raven will remember the face of someone who scares or hurts them for a long time.
Improved	One study shows that ravens can remember the face of someone who threatens or harms them for approximately three years.
Original	The restaurant has amazing food, but the music is terrible.
Improved	The restaurant is known to have good food; however, not everyone enjoys the music.

4) Use a thesaurus to find more cautious or polite synonyms of emotional, direct, or opinionated words that involve a value judgment (a personal assessment of something as good or bad based on the writer's own values or priorities). For example, some of the softer words for *bad* are *harmful* or *unethical*, whereas bolder words include *horrendous* or *cruel*. In scholarly writing, using softened vocabulary will make your writing sound analytical and detached, which supports your research by indicating a lack of bias.

Original	The utterly atrocious treatment of those people was a horrible travesty.[1]
Softened	The unethical and unacceptable treatment of those people was a tragedy for many.[1]

Material quoted from:
[1]https://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/docs/handouts/Hedging-Softening-Distance.pdf
References:
https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/using-cautious-language/
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-language/media/BEAP/5.4/index.html