



# Tentative Language

## What is tentative language?

In academic writing, it is acknowledged that many of the statements or claims that we present cannot be made with absolutely certainty. We should not make statements without evidence (research or data) and often we cannot be certain that our statements or ideas are true in every case. Therefore academic writing requires us to qualify our statements and to do this we often use tentative or cautious language.

Read the following statement:

1. Lectures run for 50 minutes and are presented using PowerPoint slides.

Consider the following questions:

- Are you 100% sure that **all** lectures run for 50 minutes? Is it possible to know this about every lecture?
- Does every lecturer use PowerPoint slides? How do you know? Could you support it with evidence?

How can you make this sentence more tentative? See the example below:

2. Lectures **often** run for 50 minutes and **may be** presented using PowerPoint slides.

The addition of the words in bold changes the meaning of the sentence by softening the statement, and making it less absolute. This demonstrates your awareness that you don't have sufficient evidence to make such a strong claim. By using tentative language in this example, you are acknowledging that there could be variation in the length of lectures and their method of delivery around the world.

## Examples

Examples of tentative phrases/vocabulary include:

- may/might/can/could
- possibly/probably
- it is likely/possible/unlikely/probable
- tends to
- appears to
- suggests that
- seems to

Notice how the meaning of each sentence becomes more tentative.

A drop in production **will** result from inexperienced staff but **will not** happen if training is provided.

A drop in production **may** result from inexperienced staff but **is unlikely to** happen if training is provided.

Research outputs **decrease** whenever there is a reduction in funding to universities.

Research outputs **tend to decrease** whenever there is a reduction in funding to universities.

The writer **is** trivialising a very serious matter in this article.

The writer **appears to be** trivialising a very serious matter in this article.

Research **shows that** this method of intervention is the most effective.

Research **suggests that** this method of intervention is the most effective.

University students **have difficulty** in approaching assignment tasks which do not match their experience.

University students **seem to have difficulty** in approaching assignment tasks which do not match their experience.