



Tentative Language

What is tentative language?

In academic writing we need to acknowledge that many of the statements or claims that we make cannot be absolutely certain. We cannot 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 are delivered on campus and presented using PowerPoint slides.

Consider the following questions:

- Are you 100% sure that **all** lectures are delivered on campus? 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 are **often** delivered on campus 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 evidence to make such a strong claim. If you did have evidence that all lectures are delivered on campus using PowerPoint slides in every University around the world, you could reference this as support for the first sentence.

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.

It **will** result from inexperienced staff but **will not be** a problem if training is provided.

It **may** result from inexperienced staff but **is unlikely to be** a problem if training is provided.

This **occurs** whenever there is a reduction in funding to universities.

This **tends to occur** 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.

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

The 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.

Useful links *(all open in a new window)*

There may be resources that have been created with your lecturers, addressing assignment tasks and topics specific to your courses. Follow the links below to find out:

[Business](#)

[Education, Arts and
Social Sciences](#)

[Health Sciences](#)

[IT, Engineering and the
Environment](#)