



The need to avoid absolute statements was mentioned in Unit 2.10 Style. This unit presents more examples of tentative or cautious language, using modal verbs, adverbs and verbs, and practises its use.

1 The use of caution

A cautious style is necessary in many areas of academic writing to avoid making statements that can be contradicted:

Demand for healthcare **usually** exceeds supply.

Most students find writing exam essays difficult.

Fertility rates **tend to** fall as societies get richer.

Areas where caution is particularly important include:

- (a) outlining a hypothesis that needs to be tested (e.g. in an introduction)
- (b) discussing the results of a study, which may not be conclusive
- (c) commenting on the work of other writers
- (d) making predictions (normally with **may** or **might**)



2 The language of caution

Caution is also needed to avoid making statements that are too simplistic:

Crime is linked to poor education.

Such statements are rarely completely true. There is usually an exception that needs to be considered. Caution can be shown in several ways:

Crime **may** be linked to poor education. *(modal verb)*

Crime is **frequently** linked to poor education. *(adverb)*

Crime **tends to** be linked to poor education. *(verb)*

■ Complete the table below with more examples of each.

Modals	Adverbs	Verb/phrase
can	commonly	tends to

▶ See Unit 2.7 Generalisations

3 Using modifiers

Another way to express caution is to use **quite**, **rather** or **fairly** before an adjective.

a **fairly** accurate summary

a **rather** inconvenient location

quite a significant discovery

NB. **quite** is often used before the article. It is generally used positively, while **rather** tends to be used negatively.

■ **Insert quite/ rather/ fairly in the following to emphasise caution.**

- (a) The company's efforts to save energy were successful.
- (b) The survey was a comprehensive study of student opinion.
- (c) His second book had a hostile reception.
- (d) The first year students were fascinated by her lectures.
- (e) The latest type of arthritis drug is expensive.

4 Practice A

■ **Rewrite the following sentences in a more cautious way.**

- (a) Private companies are more efficient than state-owned businesses.
- (b) Exploring space is a waste of valuable resources.
- (c) Older students perform better at university than younger ones.
- (d) Word-of-mouth is the best kind of advertising.
- (e) English pronunciation is confusing.
- (f) Some cancers are caused by psychological factors.
- (g) Global warming will cause the sea level to rise.
- (h) Most shopping will be done on the internet in ten years' time.

5 Caution in verbs

When referring to sources, the verb used indicates the degree of caution appropriate. Compare:

Tilic (2004) **states** that the cost of living . . .
(*positive*)

Lee (2007) **suggests** that more research is needed . . .
(*cautious*)

Other verbs which imply tentative or cautious findings are:

think/ consider/ hypothesise/ believe/ claim/ presume

▶ See Unit 3.14 Verbs of reference

6 Practice B

- Re-write the following text in a more cautious style.

6.1

A team of American scientists have found a way to reverse the ageing process. They fed diet supplements, found in health food shops, to elderly rats, which were then tested for memory and stamina. The animals displayed more active behaviour after taking the supplements, and their memory improved. In addition, their appearance became more youthful and their appetite increased. The researchers say that this experiment is a clear indication of how the problems of old age can be overcome. They state that in a few years' time everyone will be able to look forward to a long and active retirement.

