

Advanced Guide to Tentative Language for IELTS

Tentative language (also called hedging) is crucial for IELTS to demonstrate nuanced thinking, avoid over-generalisations, and sound academically appropriate — especially in Writing Task 2 and Speaking Part 3.

Why Tentative Language Matters in IELTS

- Shows critical thinking: you acknowledge complexity and avoid absolute claims.
- Boosts coherence: softens assertions to link ideas more naturally.
- Enhances lexical resource: displays a sophisticated range of phrases.
- Matches academic style: mirrors scholarly writing where certainty is often provisional.

Key Structures & Phrases (Advanced Level)

1. Modal Verbs for Tentativeness

Use modals to tone down certainty:

- could/might/may (possibility):
This approach could yield positive results, though long-term effects remain unclear.
- would (hypothetical):
If funding increased, outcomes would likely improve.
- can/could (ability/permission):
Could this policy address the root causes?
- should (recommendation, not command):
Governments should consider revising regulations.

2. Intensifiers & Mitigators

Soften adjectives/adverbs to avoid absolutes:

- fairly/rather/somewhat:
The data are rather inconclusive.
- relatively/moderately:
A relatively modest investment might suffice.
- potentially/possibly:
This potentially harms local ecosystems.
- to some extent/in part:
To some extent, remote work enhances productivity.

3. Verbs of Provisional Assertion

Replace *think/believe* with nuanced alternatives:

- suggest/indicate:
Research suggests a correlation, though causation is unproven.
- propose/hypothesise:
One might hypothesise that cultural factors play a role.
- argue/maintain (with caution):
Some scholars argue for reform, yet counter-evidence exists.
- appear/seem:
Solutions appear promising, but require testing.

4. Noun Phrases for Caution

Frame claims as tentative propositions:

- There is a possibility that...
There is a possibility that automation may displace certain jobs.
- It is plausible that...
It is plausible that urban green spaces could enhance well-being.
- One cannot rule out the possibility that...
One cannot rule out the possibility that policies might backfire.
- It seems likely/unlikely that...
It seems unlikely that a single solution will resolve the issue.

5. Discourse Markers for Hedging

Signal caution in reasoning:

- Admittedly...
Admittedly, short-term costs are high, but benefits may outweigh them.
- That said...
That said, the evidence is not conclusive.
- Having said that...
Having said that, further research is needed.
- On the other hand...
On the other hand, unintended consequences cannot be ignored.

6. Passive & Impersonal Constructions

Shift focus from the speaker to the idea:

- It is often claimed that...
It is often claimed that technology solves problems, yet it also creates them.
- One might contend that...
One might contend that education holds the key, though resources are limited.
- It has been suggested that...
It has been suggested that incentives could motivate behaviour change.

7. Quantifiers to Avoid Over-Generalisation

Replace *all/every/always* with measured alternatives:

- many/most (not *all*):
Most studies indicate a trend, but exceptions exist.
- some/a number of (not *all*):
Some experts warn of risks.
- in most cases/typically (not *always*):
Typically, collaboration improves outcomes.
- on occasion/occasionally (not *never*):
On occasion, policies fail to achieve goals.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

1. **Over-hedging:** Too many tentative phrases weaken your argument. Balance caution with clarity.
2. **Inconsistent modality:** Don't mix *must* (certain) with *might* (uncertain) in the same claim.
3. **Vague hedging:** *Maybe* or *perhaps* are too informal. Use *it is possible that...* instead.
4. **Hedging key claims:** Reserve tentativeness for supporting points; your thesis should be asserted clearly (but not dogmatically).

Practice Exercises

Task 1: Rewrite with Tentative Language

Transform the following assertions into tentative statements. Use at least two different hedging techniques per sentence.

1. Technology always improves education.
2. Governments must ban single-use plastics.
3. Remote work destroys team cohesion.
4. Renewable energy will solve the climate crisis.
5. Schools should eliminate homework.

Task 2: Fill in the Blanks

Choose the most appropriate hedging phrase from the list below. Each phrase is used once.

Phrases: *it is plausible that, could potentially, to some extent, one cannot rule out, appears to be, should consider, might suggest, in most cases*

1. _____, online learning increases accessibility, though digital divides persist.
2. Policymakers _____ investing in public transport to reduce emissions.
3. The data _____ indicating a positive trend, but more analysis is needed.
4. _____ that cultural attitudes influence policy adoption.
5. Automation _____ displace low-skilled jobs, necessitating retraining.
6. _____ the benefits of green spaces are underestimated.
7. _____, collaborative projects enhance creativity.
8. _____ the role of luck in entrepreneurial success.

Task 3: Identify & Improve

The following paragraph lacks tentative language. Highlight over-confident claims and rewrite the paragraph with appropriate hedging.

Social media destroys mental health. Everyone who uses it becomes anxious. Governments need to regulate platforms immediately. There is no doubt that algorithms manipulate users. This must stop.

Task 4: Speaking Simulation

Respond to these IELTS Speaking Part 3 questions using tentative language. Record yourself (or write responses) with at least 4 hedging devices per answer.

1. *Do you think artificial intelligence will replace human teachers?*
2. *Should governments fund space exploration instead of social programs?*
3. *Is it inevitable that urbanisation will harm the environment?*

Task 5: Essay Sentence Construction

Write 5 topic sentences for an IELTS Writing Task 2 essay (topic: *Should universities be free?*). Each sentence must:

- State a position.
- Include at least one modal verb and one mitigating phrase.
- Avoid absolute terms (*all, always, never*).

Example:

While free tuition might alleviate financial barriers, it is uncertain whether governments could sustain such a model long-term.