

Using cautious claims in your assignments

Remember, when writing your assignments, you are expected to present an 'argument'. An argument does not mean create a fight, quarrel or disagreement; it means showing your take on a subject or in an answer to a question. It is more like taking part in a debate and presenting your position than any kind of combat.

When you establish your position on a subject you are expected to remain cautious. Being cautious is a balanced position because it is designed to show what you think is likely and important to know, but it avoids saying this is 100% the case. This is because most knowledge remains proven and tends to need to be established beyond doubt or debate. Consequently, your job is to *persuade* the reader that your points have some strength.

Being 'cautious' is important because:

- you have not examined *all* possible evidence
- studies are rarely conclusive
- findings may be shown to be inaccurate later
- what is 'known' changes as new research is completed
- findings can be interpreted differently



Consequently, cautious language helps your argument to be convincing, especially if you show how confident you feel about what you are saying, and if consider the strength of the evidence you are using.

Notice the differences between the following two sentences:

- Stress **is** an important factor for health.
- The evidence **suggests that** stress is likely to be an important factor for health.

The first sentence leaves no room for doubt. It is absolutely certain. If you write a sentence like that, you must include indisputable evidence to support what you are claiming.

The second sentence is cautious (hedging). It suggests rather than asserts. It shows you realise there could be other interpretations.

[adapted from <https://www.monash.edu/rlo/research-writing-assignments/writing/features-of-academic-writing/tentative-language>]