

DEGREES OF CERTAINTY

This unit looks at the ways writers express how certain they are about the facts or opinions they are presenting. This unit deals with some vocabulary which will help you to handle certainty in academic writing appropriately.

A Being tentative

It is a common mistake for students to present something as a proven fact when it is actually an opinion. In a serious piece of academic writing you should not, for example, write *Girls are better at learning languages than boys*; you could write, instead, *There is some evidence to suggest that girls may be better at learning languages than boys* or *It can be argued that girls are better at learning languages than boys*.

Here are some other expressions that are useful when presenting ideas that may be true but are not proven facts.

It may not be the case that girls are naturally better at foreign languages.

It would seem/appear that girls are more interested in languages than boys.

We can presume that all humans have the ability to learn a second language. [believe something to be true because it seems very likely]

There appears/seems to be some evidence linking diet with language ability.

There is some evidence that previous studies are unreliable.

We can draw the tentative conclusion that early language skills determine how successful a child will be at school. [possible, not yet certain]

B It is true or almost certainly true

It is **undoubtedly** true that language ability is not simply a matter of intelligence. [without doubt, certainly]

It is, of course, essential to check data carefully. [shows the writer sees this as obvious]

It is **evident** that girls and boys develop at slightly different rates. [obvious, clear]

The best age for language learning is, **apparently**, the teenage years.

Pronunciation of unfamiliar sounds **presumably** comes more easily to young children.

The research is **likely** to lead to some interesting results. = The research **will probably** lead to some interesting results.

Boys **tend** to have better practical skills than girls. [are likely to]

There is a **tendency** for boys to be more enthusiastic about team sports than girls. [it is often the case that]

There is every **likelihood** that the research will be completed by June. [it is probable]

The situation is **liable** to change. [may change, is likely to change]

C The writer is unsure

The research has **allegedly** come to some very significant conclusions. [it is claimed; the use of this adverb suggests that the writer does not believe the claims are true]

Boys are **considered to be** more inclined to take risks than girls. [people think that – the implication is that the writer may not agree]

The **perception** of boys as poor language learners can be shown to be false. [common view, often one which the writer feels is inappropriate in some way]

The article is **reportedly** an excellent piece of work [it is reported that; the use of the adverb makes it clear the writer has not seen the article]

In the absence of evidence to the contrary we can assume that Laing is correct. [as there is no evidence to suggest the opposite]

Exercises

37.1 Match the beginning of each sentence with the most appropriate ending.

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1 We may | assume that the exchange rate will continue to fluctuate. |
| 2 It would seem | not to be the case that all the questions were answered honestly. |
| 3 Of course it | to appear from all the findings that the test is reliable. |
| 4 We can certainly | well discover that the problem was caused by overheating. |
| 5 It may well turn out | argued that conflict was inevitable after the events of recent years. |
| 6 It could be | is true that not all factories cause huge amounts of pollution. |

37.2 Insert adverbs based on the words in *italics* into suitable places in the sentences.

- Russo was a member of a terrorist organisation, but it was never proved. *allege*
- At that time, the population of tigers was widespread in the region. *report*
- The collapse of the roof caused a sprinkler system pipe to burst. *appear*
- To get a better job is a main motivation for going on to higher education. *presume*
- We may conclude that water shortages are likely to increase rather than decrease. *tentative*
- The students were guessing some of the answers instead of using their knowledge of the context. *evidence*

37.3 Complete the missing forms in the table. Use a dictionary if necessary. Do not fill the shaded boxes.



<i>noun</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>adjective</i>	<i>adverb</i>
	tend		
evidence			
	seem		
		likely	
	perceive		

37.4 Change these sentences. Use different forms of the words in **bold**, as instructed.

- There is little **likelihood** that everyone will fail the test. (use the adjective)
- Students **tend** to leave preparation for exams till the last minute. (use the noun)
- We saw **evidence** that some students had copied each other's answers. (use the adjective)
- People commonly **perceive** that older people cannot learn musical instruments to a professional standard. (use the noun)
- The melting of the polar ice caps **seems** to be inevitable. (use the adverb)

37.5 Make the sentences more formal by replacing the **underlined** words or phrases.

- People generally think that rats are carriers of diseases.
- There isn't much evidence to support the opinion that diesel cars cause more pollution than petrol cars.
- It is extremely likely that rail passenger numbers will continue to decline.
- In the absence of other evidence, we must conclude that right-handedness is not linked to intelligence in any way.
- Of course, it is true that engineering graduates are in increasing demand.
- The area near the river often floods in winter.

FOLLOW UP

Look at a recent article reporting on some research in your own discipline. Can you find any examples of the kind of language discussed in this unit in it? Note down any examples that you find.