

The Craft of Research

SECOND EDITION

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Making Good Arguments

AN OVERVIEW

In this chapter we discuss the five elements of research arguments, showing how they respond to readers' predictable questions and how you can organize them into a genuinely coherent argument.

When you know enough to start planning your research report, you should have a tentative but clear understanding of your question and why it might matter to your readers, and a tentative but reasonably specific answer. You should have a list of reasons that support your claim and evidence to support those reasons, and some idea about the kinds of questions and objections your readers would be likely to raise, were they there in front of you. You won't be able to imagine all of their questions, nor will they expect you to. But you must anticipate at least the questions that generate the five elements of an argument and answer them before they're asked.

7.1 ARGUMENT AND CONVERSATION

In a research report, you make a **claim**, back it with **reasons** based on **evidence**, **acknowledge** and **respond** to other views, and sometimes explain your **principles** of reasoning. There's nothing arcane in any of this, because you use those elements in every conversation that inquires thoughtfully into an unsettled issue:

A: I hear you had a rocky time last semester. How do you think this term will go? [A poses a problem that interests her, put in the form of a question.]

B: Better, I hope. [B makes a claim that answers the question.]

A: Why is that? [A asks for a reason to believe B's claim.]

B: I'll finally be taking courses in my major. [B offers a reason.]

A: Why do you think that'll make a difference? [A doesn't see how B's reason is relevant to his claim that he will do better.]

B: When I take courses I'm interested in, I work harder. [B offers a general principle that relates his reason to his claim.]

A: What courses? [A asks for evidence to back up B's reason.]

B: History of architecture, introduction to design.

A: But what about that calculus course you have to take again? [A offers a point that contradicts B's reason.]

B: I know I had to drop it last time, but I found a really good tutor. [B acknowledges A's objection and responds to it.]

A: But won't you be taking five courses? [A raises another reservation.]

B: I know. It won't be easy. [B concedes a point he cannot refute.]

A: Will you pull up your GPA? [A asks about the limits of B's claim.]

B: I should. I'm shooting for at least a 3.0, as long as I don't have to get a part-time job. [B limits the scope of his claim and adds a condition.]

If you can imagine playing the roles of *both* A and B, you will find nothing strange about assembling a research report, because every written argument, research or not, is built out of the answers to those same five questions that you must ask on your readers' behalf:

1. What do you **claim**?
2. What **reasons** support that claim?
3. What **evidence** supports those reasons?
4. Do you **acknowledge** this alternative/complication/objection, and how do you **respond**?
5. What **principle (warrant)** justifies connecting your reasons to your claim?

7.2 BASING CLAIMS ON REASONS

At the core of every research report is your claim, the answer to your research question, along with two kinds of support for it. The first support is at least one **reason**, a sentence or two explaining why your readers should accept your claim. We can usually join a claim and a reason with *because*:

The emancipation of Russian peasants was an empty gesture_{claim} **because** it did not improve the material quality of their daily lives._{reason}

TV violence can have harmful psychological effects on children_{claim} **because** those exposed to lots of it tend to adopt the values of what they see._{reason}

At this point, we have to pause to clarify some terms. We must distinguish *claims* in general from *main claims*, and both from *reasons*:

- As we will use the term, a *claim* is any sentence that asserts something that may be true or false and so needs support: *The world's temperature is rising.*
- A *main claim* is the sentence (or more) that your whole report supports (some call this its *thesis*). If you wrote a report to prove that the world's temperature is rising, the sentence stating that would be its main claim.
- A *reason* is a sentence supporting a claim, main or not.

These terms can get confusing, because a reason is often supported by more reasons, which makes that first reason a claim in its own right. In fact, a sentence can be *both* a reason *and* a claim at the same time, if what it states (1) supports a claim and (2) is in turn supported by another reason: For example,

TV violence can have harmful psychological effects on children_{claim 1} because **those exposed to large amounts of it tend to adopt the values of what they see**_{reason 1 supporting claim 1/claim 2 supported by reason 2} Their constant exposure to violent images makes

them unable to distinguish fantasy from reality._{reason 2 supporting reason 1/claim 2}

Reasons can be based on reasons, but ultimately a reason has to be grounded on *evidence*.

7.3 BASING REASONS ON EVIDENCE

In casual conversation, we usually support a claim with just a reason:

We should leave_{claim} because it looks like rain._{reason}

We don't ask, *What evidence do you have that it looks like rain?* (unless someone thinks he's a meteorologist: *Those aren't rain clouds; they're just . . .*).

When you address serious issues in writing, though, you can't expect readers to accept all your reasons at face value. Careful readers behave more like that would-be weatherman, asking for the evidence, the data, the facts on which you base those reasons:

TV violence can have harmful psychological effects on children_{claim 1} because those exposed to large amounts of it tend to adopt the values of what they see._{reason 1 supporting claim 1/claim 2 supported by reason 2} Their constant exposure to violent images makes them unable to distinguish fantasy from reality._{reason 2 supporting reason 1/claim 2} **Smith (1997) found that children ages 5–9 who watched more than three hours of violent television a day were 25 percent more likely to say that most of what they saw on television was “really happening.”**_{evidence supporting reason 2}

At least in principle, *evidence* is something you and your readers can see, touch, taste, smell, or hear (or is accepted by everyone as just plain *fact*—*the sun came up yesterday morning*). It makes no sense to ask, *Where could I go to see your reasons?* It does make sense to ask, *Where could I go to see your evidence?*

For example, we can't see children adopting values, but we could see a child answer the question *Do you think that what you see on TV is real?* That somewhat oversimplifies the idea of “evi-

dence from out there,” but it illustrates the principle. (We’ll discuss this distinction between reasons and evidence in more detail in chapter 9.)

We now have the core of a research argument:

Claim *because of* **Reason** *based on* **Evidence**

7.4 ACKNOWLEDGING AND RESPONDING TO ALTERNATIVES

A responsible researcher supports a claim with reasons based on evidence. But thoughtful readers don’t accept a claim just because you back it up with *your* reasons and *your* evidence. Unless they think exactly as you do (unlikely, given the fact that you are making an argument), they will probably think of evidence you haven’t, interpret your evidence differently, or, from the same evidence, draw a different conclusion. They may reject the truth of your reasons, or accept them as true but deny that they are relevant to your claim and so cannot support it. They may think of alternative claims you did not consider.

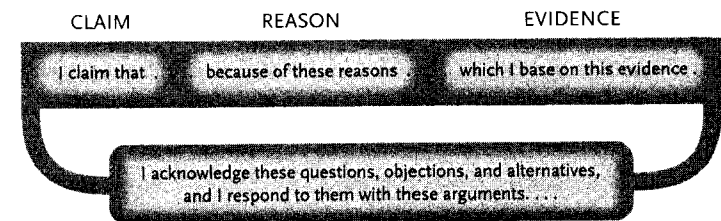
In other words, your readers are likely to question *any* part of your argument. So you have to anticipate as many of their questions as you can, and then acknowledge and respond to the most important ones. For example, as readers consider the claim that children exposed to violent TV adopt its values, some might wonder whether children are drawn to TV violence because they *already* are inclined to violence of all kinds. If you think readers might ask that question, you would be wise to acknowledge and respond to it:

TV violence can have harmful psychological effects on children *claim 1* because those exposed to large amounts of it tend to adopt the values of what they see. *reason 1 supporting claim 1/claim 2 supported by reason 2* Their constant exposure to violent images makes them unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. *reason 2 supporting reason 1/claim 2* Smith (1997) found that children ages 5–9 who watched more than three hours of violent television a day were

25 percent more likely to say that most of what they saw on television was “really happening.” *evidence supporting reason 2* **It is conceivable, of course, that children who tend to watch greater amounts of violent entertainment already have violent values,** *acknowledgment* but Jones (1989) found that children with no predisposition to violence were just as attracted to violent entertainment as those with a history of violence. *response*

The problem all researchers face is not just responding to readers’ questions, alternatives, and objections, but imagining them. (In chapter 10 we’ll review questions and objections you should expect.)

Since no research argument is complete without them, we add acknowledgment/responses to our diagram to show that they relate to all the other parts of an argument:



7.5 WARRANTING THE RELEVANCE OF REASONS

Even if readers agree that a reason is well supported by evidence, they may not see why it should lead them to accept your claim. They will ask why that reason, though factually true, is *relevant* to the claim. For example, suppose you offer this claim and its supporting reason (assume the evidence is there):

Children who are exposed to large amounts of violent entertainment tend to become adults who think violence is a legitimate component of daily life *claim* because as children they tend to adopt the violent values in what they see. *reason*

Readers might question not the truth of that reason, but its *relevance* to the claim:

Why should children who adopt violent values necessarily become adults who tend to accept violence as a legitimate component of everyday life? I don't see how your claim follows from your reason.

To answer, you must offer a general principle that shows why you believe your *particular* reason is relevant to your *particular* claim so that you are justified in connecting them:

Whenever children adopt particular values, as adults they tend to accept as "normal" any behavior that reflects those values.

That statement—sometimes called a *warrant*—expresses a general principle of reasoning that covers more than violent TV. It covers all values acquired as a child and all adult behaviors.

Think of a warrant as a principle claiming that a general set of circumstances predictably allows us to draw a general consequence. You can then use that warrant to justify concluding that a *specific* instance of that general consequence (your claim) follows from a *specific* instance of that general circumstance (your reason). But for that warrant to apply, readers must first agree that the specific circumstance (or reason) qualifies as a sound instance of the general circumstance in the warrant and that the specific consequence (or claim) qualifies as a sound instance of the general consequence.

As you'll see, it is not easy to decide where to put warrants in the sequence of an argument, or even whether you need them at all. In fact, writers state warrants rarely, only when they think readers might question the relevance of a reason to their claim. For example, suppose you said:

Watch out going down the stairs, because the light is out.

You wouldn't need to add the warrant

When it's dark, you have to be careful not to misstep.^{warrant} So watch out going down the stairs,^{claim} because the light is out.^{reason}

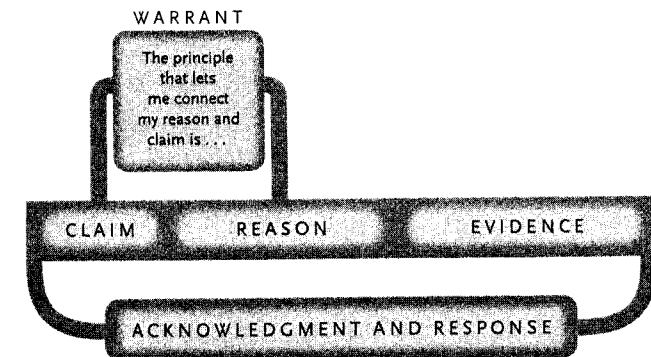
That would seem condescending.

But if you think readers won't immediately see how a reason is relevant to your claim, then you have to justify the connection with a warrant, usually before you make it:

Violence on television and in video games can have harmful psychological effects.^{main claim} **Few of us question that when children are repeatedly exposed to particular values in graphic and attractive form, they use those values to structure their understanding of their world.**^{warrant} In the same way, children constantly exposed to violent entertainment tend to adopt the values of what they see. . . .

(As you can see, no aspect of argument is as abstract and difficult to grasp as warrants.)

We add warrants to our diagram to show that they connect a claim and its supporting reason:



Those five elements constitute a "basic" argument. But many also include *explanations* of issues that readers might not understand. If, for example, you were making an argument about the relationship between inflation and various forms of money supply to readers not familiar with economic theory, you would have to explain the different ways that economists define "money."

7.6 BUILDING COMPLEX ARGUMENTS OUT OF SIMPLE ONES

The arguments in research reports are, of course, more complex than these simple ones. First, researchers almost always support

a claim with more than one reason, each of which is supported by its own evidence and may be justified by its own warrant. Second, since readers can be expected to see many alternatives to any complex argument, careful researchers typically respond to a number of them.

But most important, each element of a substantial argument is itself likely to be treated as a claim, supported by its own argument. Each reason will typically be treated as a claim supported by other reasons, often reasons that are themselves claims. A warrant may be supported by its own argument, with reasons and evidence, perhaps even with its own warrant and acknowledgments and responses. Each response might itself be a mini-argument, sometimes a full one. Only the evidence “stands alone,” but you may have to explain where you got it and why you think it’s sound.

7.7 ARGUMENTS AND YOUR ETHOS

This process of “thickening” an argument with other arguments is one way that writers gain the confidence of readers. Readers will judge you by how well you manage the elements of an argument so that you anticipate their concerns. In so doing, they are in effect judging the quality of your mind, even of your implied character—an image of yourself that you project through your argument, traditionally called your *ethos*. When you seem to be the sort of person who supports your claims thoroughly and who thoughtfully considers other points of view, you give readers reason to trust what you say and not to question what you don’t. By acknowledging their views and differences, you foster their desire to work with you in developing and testing new ideas.

In the long run, the ethos you project in individual arguments settles into your reputation, something every researcher must care deeply about, because your reputation will be an invisible sixth element in every argument you write. It answers the unspoken question *Can I trust this person?* If your readers don’t know you, you have to earn that trust in each argument. But if

they do know you, you want the answer to their question to be *Yes*.

In the next four chapters, we look at each element of an argument, to show you both how to assemble them into a complete argument and how to think about them critically. In part IV we take up the matter of arranging those elements into a coherent report.

Claims

In this chapter we discuss the point of your argument, the claim that answers your research question and serves as the main point of your report.

As we have emphasized, you need a tentative answer to your research question well before you can know exactly what the final one will be. Even if you expect to replace your working answer, you need one from the start to help you know what to look for and to sift out from what you find just those data that are relevant. You also need that tentative claim to help you assemble the kind of argument you will need to support it. So from the first, try to articulate the best, most complete claim your current understanding allows.

You can test your claim with three questions:

- What kind of claim will you make?
- Can you state it specifically?
- Will your readers think it is significant?

When you can answer those three questions, you're ready to assemble other elements of your argument to see whether you in fact can make a good case for your claim.

8.1 WHAT KIND OF CLAIM?

The kind of problem you pose determines the kind of claim you make and the kind of argument you need to support it. As we

saw in chapter 4, researchers in academic settings usually pose not a practical problem but a conceptual one, the kind whose solution asks readers not to *do* something but to *believe* something:

The recession of 2001–2002 was caused partly by excessive investment in information systems that failed to improve productivity as much as had been promised.

Some conceptual claims might imply an action:

Businesses that invest in information systems benefit only when they understand how to use them to improve productivity.

But if you want readers to act, it is wise to be explicit about what they should do: writers too often assume that readers can infer your intentions better than they actually do.

Some researchers think that by posing and answering a conceptual question, they can contribute to the solution of a practical problem: If we could simply *understand* what turns cancer cells on, we might figure out how to turn them off. But if readers think your argument is intended to support *both* a belief and an action, you risk confusing them if you in fact support only one, because conceptual and practical claims need different arguments with different kinds of support.

Before readers believe that your answer is relevant to solving a practical problem, they are likely to expect you to support *two* conceptual claims: one claim explains what causes the problem; the other explains how doing something will fix it. But *in addition*, they may also expect you to show the following about your solution:

- It is feasible; it can be implemented in a reasonable time.
- It will cost less to implement than the cost of the problem it solves.
- It will not create a bigger problem than the one it solves.
- It is cheaper or faster than alternative ones—a claim that can be extremely difficult to support.

If readers mistakenly think that you are tacitly proposing a practical claim, they may expect to see those four arguments at least acknowledged. So as you assemble the elements of your argument, be clear about the kind of claim you intend to support: conceptual or practical. If you answer a conceptual question but want to point out its practical applications, build your argument around the answer to the conceptual question and hold off discussing its application until your conclusion, where you can offer it as something worth further consideration (we'll return to this point in chapter 14).

8.2 EVALUATING YOUR CLAIM

We can't tell you how to find your claim or test its truth (other than by testing the argument that supports it). But we can help you roughly evaluate it from the point of view of your readers. They will expect your claim to be both specific and at least potentially significant.

8.2.1 Is Your Claim Specific?

Vague claims lead to vague arguments. The more detailed your claim, the more likely readers will judge it to be substantive, and the more it can help you plan a substantive argument in its support. There are two ways to make it more specific.

SPECIFIC LANGUAGE. Compare these claims:

TV inflates estimates of crime rates.

The graphic reports of violence on local TV lead regular viewers to overestimate by as much as 150 percent both the rate of crime in their neighborhood and the personal danger to themselves and their families.

The first claim uses only general terms. The second consists of richer, more specific concepts that not only give readers a more specific idea of the claim, but also give the writer a fuller set of concepts to develop in his argument.

Now, we are *not* recommending long, wordy claims for their

own sake. You will benefit if early drafts of your claim have more terms than you ultimately use, but your final claim should be only as specific as your readers need and should include only those concepts that you develop as themes in your argument. But as you assemble the elements of your argument, your first task is to articulate your claim, so at this point, make it as richly explicit as you can. You can fix it later.

SPECIFIC LOGIC. A second kind of specificity depends on how many logical elements your claim includes. Even with its specific language, this claim offers only a single unelaborated proposition:

Regular TV viewers overestimate by as much as 150 percent both the rate of crime in their neighborhood and the personal danger to themselves and their families.

In the natural and social sciences, claims like this are common, even preferred. But in the humanities, such a claim might seem to be not particularly rich in ideas. For purposes of assembling your argument, try elaborating its logic in two ways:

- Introduce it with a clause beginning with *although* or *even though*.
- Conclude it with a reason-clause beginning with *because*.

For example,

Although violent crime is actually decreasing, regular TV viewers overestimate by as much as 150 percent both the rate of crime in their neighborhood and the personal danger to themselves and their families, **because local TV evening news regularly opens with graphic reports of mayhem and murder in familiar locations, making many believe that crime happens nightly outside their front door.**

While that claim may seem overwritten, it is substantively more explicit. More importantly, it foreshadows three of the five ele-

ments that you need for a full argument: *Although I acknowledge X, I claim Y, because of reason Z.*

An introductory *although*-clause can acknowledge alternative views in one of three ways:

- It acknowledges a point of view that conflicts with yours:

Although most people think they are good judges of the security of their neighborhoods, regular TV viewers overestimate . . .
- It acknowledges a fact that your readers might believe but that your claim qualifies:

Although violent crime is actually decreasing overall, regular TV viewers overestimate . . .
- It acknowledges a condition that limits the scope or confidence of your claim:

Although it is difficult to gauge the real feelings about their personal security, regular TV viewers overestimate . . .

If those qualifications are ones that might occur to your readers when they read your claim, then by acknowledging them first, you not only imply that you understand their views, but commit yourself to responding to them in the course of your argument.

On the other hand, a final *because*-clause forecasts reasons for believing the claim—either the most important ones or a general one that encompasses several:

Although many believe that school uniforms help lower the incidence of violence in public schools, the evidence is at best weak, **because no researchers have controlled for other measures that have been instituted at the same time as uniforms**^{reason 1} **and because the data reported are statistically suspect.**^{reason 2}

Again, we do not suggest that in your final draft you offer claims as bloated as our examples. But as you assemble the elements of your argument, the more richly you can articulate a claim, the more comprehensive your argument is likely to be.

8.2.2 Is Your Claim Significant?

After its accuracy, readers will value most highly the significance of your claim, a quality they measure by the degree to which it asks them to change what they think. While you can't precisely quantify it, you can gauge significance by this rough measure: *If readers accept a claim, how many other beliefs must they change?* The most significant claims require an entire research community to change its deepest beliefs (and that community will resist them accordingly).

Although it is the weakest kind of claim, some research communities will consider a claim significant that asks readers only to accept new information about a subject already studied:

In what follows, I describe six thirteenth-century grammars of the Welsh language. These grammars have only recently been found and are the only examples of their kind. They help us better appreciate the range of grammars written in the medieval period.

(Recall those reels of newly discovered film, p. 26.)

Readers value research more highly when it offers new knowledge *but also* uses that knowledge to settle what has seemed puzzling, uncertain, inconsistent, or otherwise problematical:

The relationship between consumer confidence and the stock market has long been debated, but new statistical tools developed in the last few years have shown that there is virtually no relationship whatsoever. . . .

But they value most highly new knowledge that *upsets* what seemed long settled:

It has long been assumed that the speed of light is constant everywhere at all times, under all conditions, but there is now experimental data suggesting it might not be.

A claim like that will be hotly contested by legions of physicists, because if it is true, they will have to change their minds about lots of things other than the speed of light.

Early in your career, you won't be expected to know what researchers in a field think should be corrected, or at least modified. But you can still estimate the significance of your claim by determining whether readers think it might be worth *contesting*. You can gauge that by judging the apparent significance of its *opposite* claim. For example, consider these two claims:

Shakespeare is a great playwright.

This report summarizes recent research on the disappearance of frogs.

To assess whether either claim is worth contesting, revise it into its opposite: change an affirmative claim into a negative or vice versa:

Shakespeare is *not* a great playwright.

This report does *not* summarize recent research on the disappearance of frogs.

If the reverse of a claim seems self-evidently false (like the first one) or trivial (like the second), then most readers are unlikely to consider the original worth an argument. (It is true, however, that some great thinkers like Copernicus have successfully contradicted apparently self-evident claims such as *Obviously the sun goes around the earth.*)

Especially if you are an advanced researcher, you will measure the significance of your claim by how much it will roil the thinking of your research community. For example, big mammals like the camel and woolly mammoth died out in North America about twelve thousand years ago, either because of disease or because indigenous peoples hunted them to extinction. If you claim they were hunted to death, the many researchers who believe that the earliest Native Americans lived in harmony with nature will have to change their minds about something important to them (and so to that degree, they will resist your claim). But that can be known only by someone in the field aware of those beliefs.

If you are too new to a field to make that assessment, imagine

readers like yourself. What did *you* think before you began your own research? How much has your claim changed the way *you* now think? What do *you* understand now that you did not understand before? That's the best way to prepare for reporting research to readers who will ask the same questions. They will put that question most pointedly when they ask the most devastating question any researcher can face: not *Why should I believe that?* but *Why should I care?*


QUICK TIP:

Qualifying Claims to Enhance Your Credibility

Some inexperienced researchers think they are most credible when they are most certain. But flatfooted certainty more often undermines your ethos, and thus your argument. As paradoxical as it may seem, you make a research argument more credible when you acknowledge its limitations. You have already seen that readers expect writers to acknowledge and respond to objections and alternatives (also see chapter 10). When you do, you show that you have dealt with readers openly and honestly; by responding, you show readers why you think their objections do not undermine your argument. But readers look for another kind of limitation as well: you should qualify any claim that is less than entirely certain for all time and in all circumstances.

ACKNOWLEDGE LIMITING CONDITIONS

No claim is free of limiting conditions:

We can conclude that the epicenter of the earthquake was fifty miles south-southwest of Tokyo, **assuming the instrumentation was accurately calibrated.**

We believe that aviation manufacturing will not soon match its late-twentieth-century levels, **unless new global conflicts lead to a significant increase in military spending.**

Every claim is subject to countless conditions, so ordinarily you should mention only the ones you expect readers to bring up. Scientists rarely acknowledge that their claims depend on the accuracy of their instruments, because everyone expects them to ensure that they are. But economists often acknowledge limitations on their predictions, both because they depend on circumstances that do change and because readers want to know what conditions to watch for.

Consider mentioning important limiting conditions on your claim even if you think readers would never think of them. (Don't mention more than one or two, and avoid obvious or unlikely conditions.) For example, in this case, not only does the writer show that she was careful, but she also gives a fuller and more accurate picture of the claim:

Today Franklin D. Roosevelt is revered as one of our most admired historical figures, but toward the end of his second term, he was not popular. *claim* Newspapers, for example, attacked him for promoting socialism, a sign that a modern administration is in trouble. In 1938, 70 percent of Midwest newspapers accused him of wanting the government to manage the banking system. . . . Some have argued otherwise, including Nicholson (1983, 1992) and Wiggins (1973), both of whom offer anecdotal reports that Roosevelt was always in high regard. *acknowledgment* but these reports are supported only by the memories of those who had an interest in deifying FDR. *response* **Unless it can be shown that the newspapers critical of Roosevelt were controlled by special interests.** *limitation on claim* their attacks demonstrate significant dissatisfaction with Roosevelt's presidency. *restatement of claim*

USE HEDGES TO LIMIT CERTAINTY

Only rarely can you assert in good conscience that you are 100 percent certain that your evidence is 100 percent reliable and your claims are unqualifiedly true. Careful writers acknowledge these limitations by using modifying words and phrases known as *hedges*. For example, if anyone was ever entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson, the discoverers of the helical structure of DNA. But in the opening of their announcement (condensed), they chose diffidence (the hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest** a [note: not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.). . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey. . . . **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons:

(1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid. . . . (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick, "Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids"

Without the hedges, their claim would be more concise, but also more aggressive. Compare that cautious passage with this more unqualified version of it (most of the more aggressive tone comes from the *absence* of hedges, from the flatfooted lack of any qualification):

We **announce** here **the** structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.). . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey. . . . Their structure **is** unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) The material which gives their X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid. . . . (2) Their van der Waals distances **are** too small.

When you hedge your language, you give your argument nuance.

Of course, if you hedge too much, you will seem timid or uncertain. But in most fields, readers are not impressed by flatfooted certainty expressed in words like *all*, *no one*, *every*, *always*, *never*, and so on. Some teachers say they object to all hedging, but what most of them condemn are hedges that qualify every trivial claim. And some fields do tend to use fewer hedges than others. But most careful researchers in most fields know that to seem thoughtfully confident, they must express the limits of that confidence.

Few aspects of your argument affect your ethos more than how you handle its uncertainties and limitations. It takes a deft touch. Hedge too much and you seem mealymouthed; too little, smug. Unfortunately, the line between hedging and fudging is thin. As usual, watch how those in your field manage uncertainty, then do likewise.