



Qualifiers

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What this handout is about

This handout will explain what qualifiers are and how you can use them wisely.

Introduction

Qualifiers and intensifiers are words or phrases that are added to another word to modify its meaning, either by limiting it (*He was **somewhat** busy*) or by enhancing it (*The dog was **very** cute*). Qualifiers can play an important role in your writing, giving your reader clues about how confident you feel about the information you're presenting. In fact, "hedging" (as it is sometimes called) is an important feature of academic writing, because academic writers need to clearly indicate whether they think claims are certain, likely, unlikely, or just false. But excessive use of qualifiers can make you sound unsure of your facts; it can also make your writing too informal.

Qualifiers can be your friends

Qualifiers are often necessary, such as when your evidence or your claim is open to doubt. In such cases, using a qualifier allows you to present your findings with what we can call "confident uncertainty," which reflects a need to be cautious and critical about the data you're presenting. Sometimes you may be required to present your ideas before you have had a chance to fully interpret your research findings. At other times, you may want to remind readers of the limitations of your particular research.

Here are some words and phrases that can help you indicate uncertainty:

Appears
Seems
Suggests
Indicates

It's also very important to distinguish between absolute or universal claims (in which you are asserting that something is true always and everywhere) and more particular claims (in which you are asserting something but recognizing that your claim has limits). Let's take a look at some absolute words and some more qualified alternatives:

ABSOLUTE

QUALIFIED

Will	May, might, could
Forms of "be" (am, is, are, was, were)	May be, might have been, may have been
All	Many, most, some, numerous, countless, a majority
Every	(Same as "all")
None/no	Few, not many, a small number, hardly any, a minority
Always	Often, frequently, commonly, for a long time, usually, sometimes, repeatedly
Never	Rarely, infrequently, sporadically, seldom
Certainly	Probably, possibly
Impossible	Unlikely, improbable, doubtful

How much doubt do you want to create?

In most academic writing, you make an argument to support a thesis. To make a strong argument, you'll need to convince readers of your points. Consider these two sentences:

*President Nixon **probably** resigned as a result of the Watergate cover-up.*
President Nixon resigned as a result of the Watergate cover-up.

The first sentence makes your reader doubt the conclusion you've arrived at; the latter sentence leaves no doubt about your argument for the causes of Nixon's resignation. How can you know which sentence to choose? You'll need to think about the impact your choices will have on your reader.

Qualifiers express doubt; they leave your reader wondering if you know what you're talking about. Constructions like *it appears that* and *it seems likely that* diminish the strength of your claims. Sometimes that's exactly what you want, when you don't want to overstate your case and cannot justify making a stronger, more direct claim. But if you are confident of your evidence, using strong qualifiers like these can lead your reader to doubt whether you know what you are talking about or to think that you are not willing to take responsibility for your ideas.

Consider the two examples below. Does the writer sound confident in her understanding of the theories of Freud and Weber?

***It appears that** Freud believed the unconscious played a significant role in behavior.*
*Max Weber **seems** to argue that capitalism arises partly out of Protestant values.*

Does Freud in fact think that the unconscious affects people's behavior? Does Weber really think capitalism arises from Protestant values? If so, the writer should probably just make those claims, without the qualifiers.

Here are some examples of words to keep an eye on (in addition to the qualifiers already listed

above):

Basically
Essentially
Generally
Kind of
Mostly
Pretty
Rather
Slightly
Somewhat
Sort of
Various
Virtually

Qualifiers and your writing style

Writing that contains too many qualifiers can sound unclear and wordy. We often rely on qualifiers—especially intensifiers—because we either don't know or don't take the time to find the appropriate word. Instead we construct our meaning by employing a not-quite-right word with a qualifier added to strengthen or to tone down a noun or verb.

*Anna Karenina is a **somewhat admirable** character.*

Better: *Anna Karenina is a **sympathetic** character.*

*December in Moscow is **really cold**.*

Better: *December in Moscow is **freezing**.*

*The theme of community is **very important** in Russian literature.*

Better: *The theme of community is **central** in Russian literature.*

In each of the above examples, the second sentence employs a word with a more precise meaning and is more concise.

"*She was very happy*" doesn't capture the nuances that can be expressed by "*overjoyed*," "*thrilled*," or "*ecstatic*."

Pay special attention to these commonly overused intensifiers:

A lot
Really
Very

The qualifier habit

Using lots of qualifiers can become a habit. Sometimes it carries over from the way you speak—

perhaps you are a dramatic storyteller who uses lots of intensifiers to express your strong feelings. Sometimes it reflects your relationship to writing, or to your readers—perhaps you feel that you are a “bad writer” and cannot write with confidence, or perhaps you are writing for an intimidating audience, and you are using qualifiers to make your claims as humble as possible in hopes of avoiding criticism or disagreement. While you can certainly compensate for a habit of overusing qualifiers by adding another stage to your editing process (as we’ll discuss in a moment), it may also be worth thinking about how to change your attitudes and practices. If you are using qualifiers to try to create interest and drama, perhaps you could explore other strategies that would be more appropriate for academic writing, like using stronger verbs and including more interesting details. If you are using qualifiers because of a lack of confidence, ask yourself: do I need to do more research to feel confident of my claims? Do I need to talk with my regular readers and let them know more about the kinds of feedback that are, and are not, helpful for me? Do I need to practice getting feedback from some “friendly” readers in order to feel more comfortable with that aspect of the writing process?

Strategies

Suppose you’ve realized that you use the words on the above lists too often and have resolved to cut back. But how? One method is to read through your paper and circle all the adverbs and adjectives. Then examine each one and see whether it accurately and concisely conveys your intended meaning.

*It proved to be **very hard** to overturn Plessy v. Ferguson*

Better: *It proved to be **difficult** to overturn Plessy v. Ferguson*

*In recent years the Electoral College has become **very** controversial*

Better: *In recent years the Electoral College has become controversial.*

*The House Ways and Means Committee is **basically** one of the most powerful Congressional committees.*

Better: *The House Ways and Means Committee is one of the most powerful Congressional committees.*

We hope that this handout will help you make confident, appropriate choices about using qualifiers in your writing!



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