

Weak Language¹

Weak language influences how you are heard. Strengthening how you express ideas will bring positive attention to what you say. Consider moving toward strong language in baby steps. The first two are the use of “I” as weak language and the abuse of “puny hedges.” This exercise aims to identify instances of weak language and to show ways to fix them.

1. The use of “I” as weak language:

1. It can blame you for issues that are not yours
2. It suggests you are unsure of the facts
3. It characterizes inadequate leadership
4. It can appear immature
5. It can lead to “touchy-feely” sentences such as “I think...” which we deal with next.

Start this off by writing 5 sentences using “I” where you are not the subject. Second, replace “I” with meaningful subjects. Below are some example phrases that include “I” and suggested fixes are proposed.

I have a problem with my graduate student; he never gets to his work on time.

My graduate student struggles to complete his work on time.

Your alternative: _____

I don't have enough time to serve on this committee.

The committee responsibilities are excessive.

Your alternative: _____

I like the way you organize the colloquium. Thank you.

Thank you for organizing an interesting colloquium.

Your alternative: _____

I noticed your door was left open.

The door was left open.

Your alternative: _____

I observed that the conference room wasn't cleaned up.

Who is responsible for cleaning up the conference room?

Your alternative: _____

I love this job.

This is a dream job.

Your alternative: _____

¹ adapted from *How to say it for Women* by Phyllis Mindell, Ed.D.

1. Sentence with "I" _____

Alternative _____

2. Sentence with "I" _____

Alternative _____

3. Sentence with "I" _____

Alternative _____

4. Sentence with "I" _____

Alternative _____

5. Sentence with "I" _____

Alternative _____

2. Puny hedges

A puny hedge is a short phrase used before a concrete idea that reduces the impact of the idea. We all hedge but too many of them reduces credibility of your ideas. Examples of puny hedges:

- I don't know much about this but...
- The way I see it...
- I guess....
- I would like to...
- I think...
- I feel...
- I guess my question is...
- In my opinion...
- I might not be right but...

Read first these examples and recommended remedies:

Puny hedge: I know I don't know anything about building a curriculum, but I think the seminar should come after the methods course.

Alternative: The students will be better prepared for the seminar if they have the methods course first.

Alternative: _____

Puny hedge: In my opinion, the grant proposal could use a stronger statement in "Broader Impacts" on our engagement with children.

Alternative: The "Broader Impacts" statement will be stronger if we describe our engagement with children.

Alternative: _____

There are times, however, when you want to insert uncertainty. There are alternative to "hedges" that can provide that meaning too. These examples show ways to express strong ideas and strong ideas with uncertainty. Example:

Puny hedge: Basically, research brings more recognition to the department than teaching does.

Alternative: Research brings more recognition to the department than teaching does.

Alternative (with uncertainty): Research appears to bring more recognition to the department than teaching does.

Alternative: _____

The simplest solution is to remove the hedge and just go with the concrete idea. However, the stronger approach is to include more details.

Puny hedge: I'd like to get promotion to full professor.

Simple alternative: My promotion will be a benefit.

Stronger alternative: My promotion will benefit the department through more women at the full professor rank.

Alternative: _____

Second: Write and then share at least one alternative to the above hedges. Which style suited you better?

At home: review emails you've written and identify any puny hedges you've written in emails. Revise on your own how these could have been interpreted and how you could have written them with more power.