



# Conditional Language in Teaching

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A Practical Guide

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# 1. Conditional language and its influence on creativity

As lecturers, we are constantly learning new things about our field of study — and we add each new piece of information to a rich network of prior knowledge that we have built up over the years. For students, on the other hand, much of the information we present to them is completely new. They have much less prior knowledge to relate it to. That is why the way in which we present information to students plays a big role – even small differences can lead to certain interpretations.

An example from the culinary arts can illustrate this phenomenon: On a sunny day in July, two different people who we'll call Selma and Thomas each want to bake muffins at home. By chance, they find the same recipe online. The recipe contains the instruction to bake the muffins for 20 minutes.

Selma doesn't have a lot of experience with baking. She sets a timer for exactly 20 minutes, then takes the muffins out — and is annoyed because they're too dark. In contrast, Thomas has been baking for a long time; he checks in on the muffins after just 15 minutes and takes them out because they are the perfect shade of golden brown.

Why did the muffins turn out well for Thomas, but not for Selma? Selma followed the recipe to the letter. Thomas knew, however, that his oven tends to bake too hot and that he has to shorten the baking time even further on hot summer days. By creatively diverting from the recipe, he successfully implemented it in his everyday life.

For inexperienced Selma, on the other hand, the instructions in the recipe created a so-called *premature cognitive commitment*: "*I will bake the muffins for exactly 20 minutes*". How could this have been prevented?



If you like, briefly consider how you would rewrite the recipe so that inexperienced readers like Selma would avoid this mistake.

Perhaps you have ideas about what else could be added, for example a hint to pay attention to oven type and the weather when choosing baking times? Such hints would indeed have been helpful. But there would have been an even simpler way to get Selma to pay more attention while baking: If the recipe said to bake the muffins for *about* 20 minutes, that may have been enough to prevent her mishap.

The word 'about' would have (subconsciously) made Selma pay more attention. Instead of the premature cognitive commitment "*I will bake the muffins for exactly 20 minutes*", she may have had the attitude of: "*I am not quite sure exactly how long I should bake the muffins and will therefore pay attention while baking*".

Using an 'about' or writing 'sometimes' instead of 'always' is called *conditional language*, and it's a simple tool — and yet it successfully nudges people to think more creatively. In this guide, you will learn how to harness the power of conditional language to stimulate creativity within your students.

## 2. What makes language absolute?

Certain words can emphasize information. For example, compare these two sentences:

- In adults, REM sleep usually takes 20% to 25% of sleep time.
- In adults, REM sleep consistently takes 20% to 25% of sleep time.

The second sentence describes a stronger pattern in terms of content. The word "consistently" alone makes the sentence seem strong and confident. It belongs to the so-called *intensifiers* that emphasise information - making it louder, like a loudspeaker being turned up (Kail, 2015). This way, readers are less likely to miss the point.

Intensifiers usually work by presenting the veracity of the information as *absolute* - there are no conditions in which the information is not true. By using the word 'consistently', it becomes clear that there were no measurements in which REM sleep took up less than 20% or more than 25% of sleep in adults. Speech that uses many intensifiers is also called *absolute speech*.

No wonder that politicians, who want to convince the opposition, the population, and the press of their points, often use absolute language. Let's take a look at this excerpt from a speech by Wolfgang Schäuble<sup>1</sup> which he held in his role as President of the Bundestag in 2021:

The consequence is clear: Europe must become more involved out of its own most basic self-interest. Above all in the regions that surround us - in the Middle East and Africa. Only when living conditions improve at home, only when people see real prospects in their home countries, will they stop making the life-threatening journey to Europe. A start has been made with the Marshall Plan with Africa and the Compact with Africa investment initiative. We need to step up these efforts significantly.

(Schäuble, 2021)

To illustrate what characterizes absolute language, we can try to insert even more and clearer intensifiers into this excerpt.



If you like, rewrite the text yourself now to make it even more absolute.

Here's my suggestion. What do you think, have I succeeded? Does the text affect you differently now?

The consequence is **unmistakable**: Europe must become **much** more involved out of its own most basic self-interest. **Specifically** in the regions that surround us - in the Middle East and in Africa. **Only** if living conditions improve at home, **only** if people see **irrefutable** prospects in their homeland, will they stop making the life-threatening journey to Europe. A start has been

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<sup>1</sup> The political texts in this guide are not intended to represent any political opinion of the author or the university; they have been chosen merely because they serve well as examples of absolute speech.

made with the Marshall Plan with Africa and the Compact with Africa investment initiative. We must intensify these efforts **decisively and energetically**.

Hopefully, this example has shown you what makes language absolute — and that there are many different degrees of absolute language. After a certain point, it just seems exaggerated.

### **3. What makes language conditional?**

In contrast to absolute language, conditional language turns down the ‘volume’ of information. It seems more restrained, more complex, more tentative. For example, compare these two sentences:

- People who have children uniformly report higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness than people who do not. This proves the theory that having children is a basic human need.
- People who have children often report higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness than people who do not. This fits the theory that having children is a basic human need.

The second sentence presents the information in a completely different light. While ‘uniform’ and ‘prove’ belong to the intensifiers mentioned above, ‘often’ and ‘fit’, on the other hand, are so-called *hedges* (from ‘hedging’: to secure, to restrict something). Conditional language uses many hedges and therefore presents the truth of information as uncertain or complex.

Conditional language is popular in scientific writing as well as in medicine because researchers and medical professionals are usually reluctant to make promises they cannot keep. They want their target audiences to understand that there are certain risks or uncertainties.

The following excerpt from a press release is a good example of the rather cautious language that tends to be used in scientific circles. Here, the University of Tsukuba shares why their new study is relevant:

Given that reduced blood flow in the brain and decreased REM sleep are correlated with the development of Alzheimer's disease, which involves the buildup of waste products in the brain, it may be interesting to address whether increased blood flow in the brain capillaries during REM sleep is important for waste removal from the brain. This study lays preliminary groundwork for future investigations into the role of adenosine A2a receptors in this process, which could ultimately lead to the development of new treatments for conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

(University of Tsukuba, 2021)

By the way, information can be presented conditionally or absolutely in German, English or any other language: we can always choose between hedges and intensifiers. However, conditional language may be more common in English than in German, at least in academic circles - scientific texts translated into German often become more absolute (Kranich, 2009).



To explain what characterizes conditional language, we can try to insert more and clearer intensifiers into this excerpt.

If you like, rewrite the text yourself now to make it more conditional.

Here's my suggestion. What do you think, have I succeeded? Does the text affect you differently now?

Given that reduced blood flow in the brain and decreased REM sleep are usually correlated with the development of Alzheimer's disease, which seems to involve the buildup of waste products in the brain, it may be interesting to address whether increased blood flow in the brain capillaries during REM sleep plays any role in waste removal from the brain. This study seems to lay preliminary groundwork for future investigations into the role of adenosine A2a receptors in this process, which could ultimately support the development of new treatments for conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

Conditional language can also be used in various degrees, and it can be taken to ridiculous levels, just like absolute language.

In the table below, you will find some examples of typical hedges and intensifiers. There are, of course, many others, and a word's use as a hedge or intensifier can sometimes depend on the context. However, here are the very classic hedges and intensifiers.

### Expressions that typically function as hedges or intensifiers

| Intensifiers for absolute language                                | Hedges for conditional language   |
|---|---|
| in any case, certainly  | perhaps, probably, possibly, probably   |
| no doubt, no question, one must not                               | strictly speaking, objectively speaking   |
| always, never, all, each, undoubtedly, unequivocally, essentially | approximately, something, about, some, a few, sometimes, often, rarely, rather                    |
| it's quite clear..., research shows..., today we know....         | one can assume..., studies suggest..., some researchers claim..., some research results imply.... |
| prove, show, establish, must, be, know                            | seem, appear as, suggest, tend, hint, suggest, can, be, believe                                   |

Table 1: Here are some examples of expressions that make language more absolute or more conditional.

## 4. What makes language neutral?

Is there actually such a thing as neutral language? Is it possible to omit all intensifiers and hedges and find a 'golden middle' between the two extremes?

Let's give it a try by rewriting the examples we've used so far.

The first example employed more absolute language:

The consequence is clear: Europe must become more involved out of its own most basic self-interest. Above all in the regions that surround us - in the Middle East and Africa. Only when living conditions improve at home, only when people see real prospects in their home countries,



will they stop making the life-threatening journey to Europe. A start has been made with the Marshall Plan with Africa and the Compact with Africa investment initiative. We need to step up these efforts significantly.

(Schäuble, 2021)

We can now make the text more neutral by taking out the intensifiers.



If you like, rewrite the text yourself now to make it more neutral.

Here is my suggestion. Do you find the text more neutral now? And how does my text compare to yours?

The consequence **is**: Europe must become more involved out of **its own** interest. Above all in the regions that surround us - in the Middle East and Africa. **When** living conditions improve at home, **when** people **see prospects** in their home countries, they will not continue to make the **journey** to Europe. A start has been made with the Marshall Plan with Africa and the Compact with Africa investment initiative. We need to step up **these efforts**.

As you can see, making the text more neutral often involved just removing an intensifier.

The second example employed more conditional language:

Given that reduced blood flow in the brain and decreased REM sleep are correlated with the development of Alzheimer's disease, which involves the buildup of waste products in the brain, it may be interesting to address whether increased blood flow in the brain capillaries during REM sleep is important for waste removal from the brain. This study lays preliminary groundwork for future investigations into the role of adenosine A2a receptors in this process, which could ultimately lead to the development of new treatments for conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

(University of Tsukuba, 2021)

We can now make the text more neutral by taking out the hedges.



If you like, rewrite the text yourself now to make it more neutral.

Here is my suggestion. Do you find the text more neutral now? And how does my text compare to yours?

Given that reduced blood flow in the brain and decreased REM sleep are correlated with the development of Alzheimer's disease, which involves the buildup of waste products in the brain, it **would be** interesting to address whether increased blood flow in the brain capillaries during REM sleep is important for waste removal from the brain. This study lays **groundwork** for future investigations into the role of adenosine A2a receptors in this process, which **will** ultimately lead to the development of new treatments for **Alzheimer's disease**.

What do you think of the two final results? Do they sound neutral to you?

If you actually find the rewritten texts neither truly neutral nor especially legible, then you are not alone. I'm not satisfied with the results either. True neutrality is difficult in language; when you try to remain neutral, texts often become boring or vague.

And sometimes there is no neutral option, just a choice between a hedge and an intensifier - as in the last example, where 'could ultimately lead to' was changed to 'will ultimately lead to.' 'Will' seems like an intensifier to me. Would everyone see it that way? Is there anything in between? Would 'should' have been more neutral? There are no laws of nature here, meaning you have to use your instincts — language is subjective.

It would be a misconception to assume that language in its natural state is neutral and we make it conditional or absolute by adding intensifiers and hedges. That's not the case at all. It's usually very hard to employ a neutral style. What does this mean for our speaking and writing, especially when we're teaching?

## **5. What type of language should we use and when?**

Here are some rules for using absolute and conditional language:

- Always be aware of the extent to which your speech is conditional or absolute.
- Always use conditional language in teaching as well as in science, but always use absolute language in negotiations (e.g., with colleagues, family, when buying a car).
- When writing and speaking, always stick to the type of language that is appropriate for the situation.

How do these rules sound to you?

Hopefully not very good. They were intentionally written in a very absolute and restrictive way. In this case, I actually find it more appropriate to make recommendations in conditional language rather than prescribing the absolute rules above.

For real this time...

### **5.1. Recommendations for the choice of language in everyday life**

- Practice being aware of the ways in which your current language is conditional or absolute.
- Through reflection, discover in which situations you prefer to speak or write in absolute language, and in which you prefer to speak or write in conditional language.
- Also get into the habit of examining not only the situation, but the content: does it even make sense to present the information in absolute/conditional language? ("Two plus two is usually four" would be nonsense, for example).



- If you want to practice a different language style, for example, more conditional language, then start with writing, where you'll have more time to choose how you say things.

Hopefully, over time, you will find that you are increasingly aware of whether you are using conditional or absolute language, and find that you can consciously control your language style and adapt it to the current situation and information at hand.

## **6. What role can conditional language play in teaching?**

If you've read the recommendations above, then you know that conditional language...

(a) must match the presented information, and

b) should also fit your personal communication style as well as the situation.

Therefore, I cannot and will not dictate that you always use conditional language in your teaching - in every email, in every conversation with students. However, if you use conditional language more often than you do now, you are likely to foster higher mindfulness and creativity in your students.

I would like to show you how this can work using four case studies. They are intentionally kept very simple - only one word has been inserted or added in each case. This should demonstrate that even the smallest changes in language can have an effect.

### **6.1. Example: Conditional language in the syllabus**

Anya is planning a course on animal ethics for the second time. The students are supposed to write regular learning journals, which will then be discussed in small groups; this is explained in the syllabus.

Now Anya changes the phrasing in the syllabus...

**Before**      Your learning journal should be submitted as a text of 1-2 pages.

**After**        Your learning journal should typically be submitted as a text of 1-2 pages.

During the semester, a student asks her if she can also submit the learning journal in the form of a mind map. Since Anya wanted to encourage exactly this kind of creativity, she allows the student to do so. Throughout the following weeks, other students submit videos or infographics.

Anya really enjoys looking at the various creative learning journal formats; they also make the small group discussions more exciting. That was not the case last semester, when the syllabus contained the 'Before' phrasing and students only submitted texts.

## 6.2. Example: Conditional language on PowerPoint slides

Nikola is planning a lecture for his geology course, which he has been teaching for years. The lecture is intended to give students information which they should be able to correctly reproduce in the exam, but also transfer to new contexts.

Now Nikola changes the phrasing on one of his slides...

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <b>Before</b> | Coal seam fires occur naturally when the coal seam rises to the surface and comes into contact with oxygen.     |
| <b>After</b>  | Coal seam fires can occur naturally when the coal seam rises to the surface and comes into contact with oxygen. |

In the exam at the end of the semester, he asks students to name as many causes of coal seam fires as possible. Compared to last year's exam, significantly more students are able to come up with more than one cause.

## 6.3. Example: Conditional language in a task

Ingrid is looking at a worksheet that she's used before in her psychology seminar. In this seminar, she has students write their first academic papers; the worksheet guides them through the process.

Now Ingrid changes the phrasing in the worksheet...

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <b>Before</b> | If you don't know how to cite something, you can find instructions on the Purdue Owl website.         |
| <b>After</b>  | If you don't know how to cite something, you can usually find instructions on the Purdue Owl website. |

Last year, several students had complained that they hadn't been able to find suitable instructions on the aforementioned website. This year, Ingrid gives students the worksheet with the new phrasing; in the next class, she asks if students were able to find all the instructions they needed. One group reports back to her that they were initially unable to find instructions for their source at Purdue Owl, but then googled and found another site with the appropriate instructions.

## 6.4. Example: Conditional language when moderating a discussion

Amir is teaching a workshop in nursing science for the second time. He wants to show the students a video of a real-life nursing situation in which some mistakes are being made. The students are supposed to find and discuss the mistakes in small groups.

Now Amir changes the phrasing when he starts the discussion...

|               |                                 |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Before</b> | What's the problem here?        |
| <b>After</b>  | What might be the problem here? |

Compared to the previous time he taught this workshop, the discussions in small groups are immediately louder and more active. Amir has the impression that students feel less afraid of making mistakes and are confidently collecting all the ideas they can come up with. In the end, the class does find more problems with the nursing situation than last time. Some of their ideas are, in fact, incorrect – but that's just another reason why the final discussion of their results is more interesting than ever before.

## **7. Takeaway: Are you ready to use more conditional language?**

Hopefully the case studies in Section 7 have shown you how minimal changes in language can have an effect on your students. By removing intensifiers and adding hedges, you can expect to see more creativity and mindful attention from your students.

Go about this with a lot of reflection, as recommended in Section 6. Discover what matches your needs and the information you are presenting. Over time, you will form new habits that will help your students become more mindful and creative.

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