Writing up Research: The Discussion Section

The discussion section of a document deserves special attention for several reasons. First, this section is where you give meaning to your results and argue the significance of your work. You do this by examining and explaining your methods and results, and by comparing them to those in the literature of your field. This is where you discuss the accuracy of your results, and draw conclusions from them that can lead to generalizations and to recommendations. Moreover, the complexity of this section makes it the most complicated to write and the most critical to read by those engaged in your specific field.

Organization: There are no rigid guidelines for writing data analyses. A common approach is to start with a summary statement of the results and move through the key details to the major claims about the reported results:

1. Location & summary
2. Highlight #1 (usually strongest results)
   a. Illustration(s) of highlight #1
3. Highlight #2 (etc.)
   b. Illustration(s) of highlight #2
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4. Explanations/deductions
5. (Recommendations)

Task #1: Analyze the data analysis of your model journal article. How does organization structure conform to, or differ from, the approach described above?

Language: The complexity of this section requires control of expressions that indicate subtle distinctions in precision and certainty. Called "hedges," these qualifiers are less common in other sections of a research document.

Some examples of "hedging expressions" follow:

Adverbs: roughly, generally, approximately, almost, around, nearly, probably, likely, possibly

Adjectives: certain, (im)probable, (un)likely, (im)possible, slight, remote, strong, definite, good, weak

Verbs: note, suggest, seem, tend, appear, speculate, indicate, contribute, question, assume

Modal verbs: can, could, may, might.

Task #2: Identify the "hedging" adverbs and verbs used in the data analysis section of yoru model journal article. What expressions are most common?

Do you see any that should be added to our list of examples?

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