

Email Vocabulary – Lesson 1: Hedging and Stance in Professional Emails

Level: C1 | Business English | Student Worksheet

Vocabulary

purport (verb/noun)	To claim or appear to be something, often with implied doubt. As a noun: intended meaning.	<i>The document purports to be legally binding, though our counsel has reservations.</i>
ostensibly (adverb)	Apparently or seemingly, but possibly not actually so.	<i>The meeting was ostensibly about budget, but the underlying agenda concerned restructuring.</i>
contingent (adjective)	Dependent on something uncertain or conditional.	<i>Our decision is contingent on receiving satisfactory due diligence reports.</i>
provisional (adjective)	Arranged for now only, subject to later confirmation or revision.	<i>This is a provisional agreement, subject to board ratification.</i>
reservation (noun)	A doubt or concern; a qualification attached to a statement.	<i>We have significant reservations about the proposed timeline.</i>
equivocal (adjective)	Open to more than one interpretation; often deliberately ambiguous.	<i>His response was equivocal — it could be read as agreement or refusal.</i>
tenuous (adjective)	Very weak or lacking in substance; unlikely to withstand scrutiny.	<i>The connection between the two clauses is tenuous.</i>
predicated on (phrase)	Based on or dependent on a particular assumption being true.	<i>The entire proposal is predicated on the assumption that demand will remain stable.</i>
caveat (v) (verb)	To add a warning or qualification to a statement.	<i>I would caveat this recommendation by noting that the data set is limited.</i>
without prejudice to (phrase)	Without adversely affecting a right or claim.	<i>We make this offer without prejudice to our right to pursue the matter further.</i>
notwithstanding (prep/adj)	Despite; in spite of.	<i>Notwithstanding our earlier concerns, we are prepared to proceed.</i>
predisposition (noun)	A tendency to respond or behave in a particular way; an inclination.	<i>There appears to be a predisposition within the committee to favour the conservative option.</i>

HEDGING PHRASES

It would appear that	[distancing]	Used to present a conclusion tentatively, avoiding direct assertion.
It is our understanding that	[qualifying]	Presents what the writer believes to be true while acknowledging possible incompleteness.
We are not in a position to	[declining formally]	A formal, distanced way of saying something is not possible.
Subject to further review,	[provisional]	Signals that a statement or decision may change once additional information is considered.
This remains to be determined.	[deferring]	A formal way of stating that a matter has not yet been resolved.

Exercise 1: Sentence Transformation

Rewrite each sentence as instructed. There are no structural hints at C1 level.

1. The entire business case relies on the assumption that interest rates will remain stable.

Instruction: **PREDICATED ON**

2. Despite our reservations about the proposal, we are prepared to proceed.

Instruction: **NOTWITHSTANDING**

3. He appeared to agree, though it was not entirely clear from his response.

Instruction: **EQUIVOCAL**

4. This arrangement may change depending on the outcome of the audit.

Instruction: **CONTINGENT**

5. I would add a note of caution to this recommendation given the limited data available.

Instruction: **CAVEAT (as a verb)**

6. We believe the deadline can be met, but this may change as we receive more information.

Instruction: **SUBJECT TO FURTHER REVIEW,**

Exercise 2: Error Identification

Each sentence may contain one error (register, precision, or collocation) or no error. Underline the error and write the correction. If correct, write "Correct".

1. The document purports to establish legal liability, though our counsel has expressed significant reservations.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

2. His response was ambiguous — it could be read as either agreement or a polite refusal.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

3. Our offer remains conditional upon receipt of satisfactory references from two independent sources.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

4. It would appear that the original terms were not communicated clearly to all parties involved.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

5. The legal basis for this claim appears to be very thin and would not withstand scrutiny.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

6. We make this concession without prejudice to our right to pursue the matter through the courts if necessary.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

7. It is our understanding that the payment was dispatched last Tuesday, though we are yet to receive confirmation.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

8. The proposal is ostensibly about cost savings, but the real motive appears to be a reduction in workforce.

Error: _____ Correction: _____

Exercise 3: Matching

Match each word or phrase (A) to its definition (B). Several definitions are deliberately close in meaning.

A – Word / Phrase	B – Definition
1. purport ____	7. Based on or logically dependent on a particular assumption or condition
2. ostensibly ____	2. Apparently or seemingly, but possibly not actually the case — suggesting a hidden reality
3. contingent ____	5. Open to more than one interpretation, often deliberately so
4. provisional ____	3. Dependent on a particular uncertain condition being fulfilled
5. equivocal ____	8. A doubt or qualification attached to an agreement or position
6. tenuous ____	1. To claim or appear to be something, often with implied doubt about the claim
7. predicated on ____	6. Very weak or lacking in substance; unlikely to withstand serious examination
8. reservation ____	4. Arranged for now only, subject to confirmation or revision later

Exercise 4: Register Analysis

Study each pair of versions and answer the question about the register difference.

Version A — Formal

It is our understanding that the revised schedule has not yet received formal sign-off from all stakeholders.

Version B — Less formal

We don't think everyone has agreed to the new schedule yet.

1. Which word or phrase in Version A signals that the writer is hedging?

Answer: _____

Version A — Formal

Notwithstanding the concerns raised in your previous correspondence, we remain committed to honouring the terms of the original agreement.

Version B — Less formal

Even though you've raised some worries, we still plan to stick to what we agreed.

2. What function does "notwithstanding" serve in Version A that is absent in Version B?

Answer: _____

Exercise 5: Contextual Rewriting

Each sentence is grammatically correct but strategically inappropriate. Rewrite it to suit the context. There is no single correct answer — model answers are provided in the key.

1. Context: You are responding to a client who made a complaint. Acknowledge a possible error without admitting legal liability.

Inappropriate version: "We got it wrong and we're sorry."

Your version:

2. Context: You need to inform a colleague that a decision has not yet been made and you do not know when it will be.

Inappropriate version: "Nobody knows yet. We'll tell you when we decide."

Your version:

3. Context: You are recommending a course of action to a senior partner but your data is incomplete.

Inappropriate version: "You should do X, even though we don't have all the information yet."

Your version:

4. Context: You need to tell a client their request cannot be fulfilled without using the word "no".

Inappropriate version: "We can't do that for you."

Your version:

Exercise 6: Paragraph Gap Fill

Complete the email extract with the correct word or phrase. Choose the option that best fits the register, stance, and communicative purpose.

Word Bank: It is our understanding that | contingent | reservations | ostensibly | We are not in a position to | notwithstanding

1. ____ the agreement stipulated a delivery date of 28 April.
2. ...this was ____ on your team providing access to the relevant systems.
3. While we take your ____ seriously and acknowledge the delay...
4. ...which ____ relates to delivery timelines but assigns shared responsibility.
5. ____ confirm liability at this stage.
6. ____ this, we remain committed to resolving the matter expeditiously.

TEACHER ANSWER KEY

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Exercise 1: Sentence Transformation

1. The entire business case relies on the assumption that interest rates will remain stable.

Answer: The entire business case is predicated on the assumption that interest rates will remain stable.

2. Despite our reservations about the proposal, we are prepared to proceed.

Answer: Notwithstanding our reservations about the proposal, we are prepared to proceed.

3. He appeared to agree, though it was not entirely clear from his response.

Answer: His response was equivocal — it was not entirely clear whether he agreed.

4. This arrangement may change depending on the outcome of the audit.

Answer: This arrangement is contingent on the outcome of the audit.

5. I would add a note of caution to this recommendation given the limited data available.

Answer: I would caveat this recommendation given the limited data available.

6. We believe the deadline can be met, but this may change as we receive more information.

Answer: Subject to further review, we believe the deadline can be met.

Exercise 2: Error Identification

1. The document purports to establish legal liability, though our counsel has expressed significant reservations.

Answer: Correct — no error.

2. His response was ambiguous — it could be read as either agreement or a polite refusal.

Error: "ambiguous" → Correction: "equivocal"

Reason: Precision error — "equivocal" specifically implies deliberate strategic vagueness; "ambiguous" is the less precise term in a professional analytical context.

3. Our offer remains conditional upon receipt of satisfactory references from two independent sources.

Answer: Correct — no error.

4. It would appear that the original terms were not communicated clearly to all parties involved.

Answer: Correct — no error.

5. The legal basis for this claim appears to be very thin and would not withstand scrutiny.

Error: "very thin" → Correction: "tenuous"

Reason: Register error — "very thin" is informal; "tenuous" is the formal term for a claim lacking substance or credibility.

6. We make this concession without prejudice to our right to pursue the matter through the courts if necessary.

Answer: Correct — no error.

7. It is our understanding that the payment was dispatched last Tuesday, though we are yet to receive confirmation.

Answer: Correct — no error.

8. The proposal is ostensibly about cost savings, but the real motive appears to be a reduction in workforce.

Answer: Correct — no error.

Exercise 3: Matching

1. purport → 1

To claim or appear to be something, often with implied doubt about the claim

2. ostensibly → 2

Apparently or seemingly, but possibly not actually the case — suggesting a hidden reality

3. contingent → 3

Dependent on a particular uncertain condition being fulfilled

4. provisional → 4

Arranged for now only, subject to confirmation or revision later

5. equivocal → 5

Open to more than one interpretation, often deliberately so

6. tenuous → 6

Very weak or lacking in substance; unlikely to withstand serious examination

7. predicated on → 7

Based on or logically dependent on a particular assumption or condition

8. reservation → 8

A doubt or qualification attached to an agreement or position

Exercise 4: Register Analysis

1. Which word or phrase in Version A signals that the writer is hedging?

Answer: It is our understanding that

Explanation: "It is our understanding that" is the hedging phrase — it qualifies the claim as the writer's current belief, leaving room for correction without asserting the fact directly.

2. What function does "notwithstanding" serve in Version A that is absent in Version B?

Answer: It acknowledges the concerns while signalling that they do not change the writer's position

Explanation: "Notwithstanding" is a concessive device — it concedes a point while maintaining a contrary stance. Version B sounds more dismissive than diplomatic.

Exercise 5: Contextual Rewriting — Model Answers

Note: Many acceptable answers exist. The model answers below demonstrate one appropriate approach.

1. "We got it wrong and we're sorry."

Model answer: It would appear that there may have been a miscommunication on our part, and we sincerely regret any inconvenience this has caused. We are reviewing the matter and will respond fully once our investigation is complete.

2. "Nobody knows yet. We'll tell you when we decide."

Model answer: The matter remains under consideration. This remains to be determined, and we will communicate a decision to all relevant parties as soon as one has been reached.

3. "You should do X, even though we don't have all the information yet."

Model answer: Subject to further review, and notwithstanding the limitations of the data currently available, it is our provisional recommendation that X would represent the most viable course of action

at this stage.

4. "We can't do that for you."

Model answer: We are not in a position to accommodate this request at the present time. However, we would be happy to explore alternative arrangements that may meet your requirements.

Exercise 6: Paragraph Gap Fill

1. ____ the agreement stipulated a delivery date of 28 April.

Answer: It is our understanding that

2. ...this was ____ on your team providing access to the relevant systems.

Answer: contingent

3. While we take your ____ seriously and acknowledge the delay...

Answer: reservations

4. ...which ____ relates to delivery timelines but assigns shared responsibility.

Answer: ostensibly

5. ____ confirm liability at this stage.

Answer: We are not in a position to

6. ____ this, we remain committed to resolving the matter expeditiously.

Answer: notwithstanding