

Lesson Plan: Precision Under Cross-Examination

Academic hedging and viva-defence skills for C1+ students

Level: C1-C2

Time: 50-60 minutes

Focus: Academic register, live defence

Best for: Postgraduate students, thesis defence, board presentations

Learning objective

By the end of the lesson, students can use calibrated academic hedging under live questioning, and hold a precise position when challenged, without either collapsing into agreement or becoming visibly defensive.

1. Warmer (5 minutes)

Present two versions of the same claim: *"This proves the policy failed"* and *"This might possibly suggest the policy had some issues."* Ask: which sounds more credible to an academic panel? Neither, discuss why both fail, one overclaims, the other underclaims to the point of saying nothing.

2. Presentation: calibrated hedging (10 minutes)

Present a scale from overclaiming to underclaiming, and identify the strong middle ground:

- *Overclaim: "This proves..."*
- *Strong, defensible: "The evidence strongly suggests..."*
- *Balanced: "This indicates...", "The data points toward..."*
- *Underclaim: "This might possibly indicate..."*

The goal is committing clearly to an argument while leaving appropriate room around claims the evidence doesn't fully support, not vague uncertainty everywhere.

3. Controlled practice: rewrite the claim (10 minutes)

Students rewrite each overclaimed or underclaimed sentence to the calibrated middle ground. Answer key on the last page.

1. "This proves the regulation had no effect on outcomes."
2. "It could maybe possibly be argued that there might be some connection here."
3. "This definitely means the original hypothesis was completely wrong."

4. Freer practice: the challenge-and-hold roleplay (15 minutes)

In pairs: Student A presents a short (60-90 second) argument or finding using calibrated hedging. Student B, playing an examiner, interrupts with a sceptical challenge ("But surely that's just correlation, not causation?"). Student A must acknowledge the challenge as fair, then hold their position, calmly and precisely, without either collapsing or becoming defensive. Swap roles.

5. Application: the acknowledge-and-hold phrase bank (10 minutes)

Build a shared list of phrases for responding to a sharp challenge without capitulating or getting defensive:

- *"That's a fair challenge to the methodology, and here's why I still think the conclusion holds..."*
- *"You're right to raise that, the limitation is real, but it doesn't undermine the core finding because..."*
- *"That's a reasonable alternative reading. I'd push back slightly, because..."*

6. Wrap-up (5 minutes)

Discuss: this skill extends well beyond academic vivas, any board presentation, client pushback, or strategic proposal defended under genuine scrutiny draws on the same combination of calibrated precision and composure under challenge.

Answer key (controlled practice, sample calibrated rewrites)

1. *"The evidence suggests the regulation had limited effect on outcomes."*
 2. *"This may indicate a connection, though further evidence would be needed to confirm it."*
 3. *"This strongly challenges the original hypothesis and points toward an alternative explanation."*
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