



# Degrees of Certainty

## Overview

It is a common mistake to present something as a proven fact when it is actually an opinion. In a serious piece of academic writing you should not, for example, write **Girls are better at learning language than boys**. You could write, instead, **there is some evidence to suggest that girls may be better at learning languages than boys** OR **it can be argued that girls are better at learning languages than boys**.

Some other **expressions** that are useful when presenting ideas that may be true but not proven facts:

- **It may not be the case that** girls are naturally better at foreign languages.
- **It would seem / appear that** girls are more interested in languages than boys.
- **We can presume that** all humans have the ability to learn a second language. [believe something to be true because it seems very likely]
- We can draw the **tentative** conclusion that early language skills determine how successful a child will be at school. [possible, not certain]

### It is true or almost certainly true

- It is **undoubtedly** true that language ability is not simply a matter of intelligence. [without doubt]
- It is, **of course**, essential to check data carefully. [shows the writer sees this as obvious]
- It is **evident** that girls and boys develop at slightly different rates. [obvious, clear]
- The best age for language learning is, **apparently**, the teenage years

### The writer is unsure

- The research has **allegedly** come to some very significant conclusions. [it is claimed, use of this adverb suggests that the writer does not believe the claims are true]
- Boys **are considered to be** more inclined to take risks than girls. [people think that – the implication is that the write may not agree]
- The **perception** of boys as poor language learners can be shown to be false. [common view, often one which the writer feels is inappropriate in some way]

- **In the absence of evidence to the contrary** we can assume that Liang (2008) is correct. [as there is no evidence to suggest the opposite].

## Practice Exercises

### Exercise 1

Complete the table a-h. Do not fill the shaded boxes.

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
a) <i>Tendency</i>	Tend		
Evidence		b)	c)
	Seem		d)
e)		Likely	
f)	Perceive	g)	h)

### Exercise 2

Change these sentences. Use different forms of the words in bold.

- 1) There is little **likelihood** that everyone will fail the test. (adjective)
- 2) Students **tend** to leave preparation for exams till the last minute. (noun)
- 3) We saw **evidence** that some students had copied each other's answers. (adjective)
- 4) The melting of the polar ice caps **seems** to be inevitable. (adverb)

## Answers

### Exercise 1

evident; evidently; seemingly; likelihood; perception; perceptible; perceptibly

### Exercise 2

it is not very likely/highly unlikely; have a tendency; it was evident

Source: McCarthy, M. & O'Dell F. (2008). *Academic Vocabulary in Use*. Cambridge Press.