

# Using Corpus Results to Guide the Discourse-Based Interview: A Study of One Student's Awareness of Stance in Academic Writing in Philosophy

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**Abstract:** Discourse-based interviews (or DBIs) have long been used in writing research to investigate writers' tacit genre knowledge, including their rhetorical motivations for sentence-level wordings. Meanwhile, researchers in English for Academic and Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP) have used corpus techniques to uncover patterns of such wordings, ones that index community-valued ways of knowing and meaning. This article brings together these two methods in a novel way. By offering a case study of Richard, an advanced undergraduate writer majoring in philosophy at a U.S. university, the article demonstrates how systematic analysis of Richard's writing informed and enriched DBIs with him and his professor, Maria. Specifically, corpus-based text analysis revealed that Richard regularly expressed an epistemic stance in his course essays in ways that are conventional and valued in philosophical argumentation, while the DBIs revealed that neither Richard nor Maria were consciously aware of these stance patterns, despite regular appearance in both their writing. Taken together, these findings point to the value of using corpus techniques prior to the DBI to identify meaningful choices in language that likely otherwise would be missed. The findings also raise important questions about the acquisition of disciplinary discourses and the sources of knowledge that foster that acquisition..

**Keywords:** discourse-based interviews, corpus linguistics, epistemic stance, hedging, writing in the disciplines (WID)



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Tacit Genre Knowledge and DBIs

Composition research has long shown that writers can experience difficulty articulating their rhetorical strategies. This difficulty has been examined in genre-focused writing research in terms of writers' tacit genre knowledge. Since writers' knowledge of how to respond effectively to recurring rhetorical situations is acquired largely organically, i.e., through immersion in community practices, it is challenging, if not impossible, for writers to articulate the full range of their discursive goals and judgments (see, e.g., Giltrow and Valiquette, 1994; Wilder, 2012). This situation creates a problem for writing instruction. While faculty in the disciplines may "know it when they see it" with regard to successful student writing in their fields, many have trouble explaining what it is they're seeing. This is because their genre-informed expectations and judgments lie within what the social theorist Anthony Giddens (1984) termed their *practical consciousness*, which he defined explicitly as "what actors know (believe) about social conditions, including the conditions of their own actions, but cannot express discursively" (p. 375). Faculty expectations and judgments lie less within their immediate *discursive consciousness*, which is "what actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own actions" (p. 374). Applying Giddens' theory to writing research, Giltrow and Valiquette (1994) showed how teachers' attempts to translate their practical consciousness into discursive consciousness when offering students feedback on course papers, specifically in regard to what information does or does not need to be included, resulted in insufficient, seemingly contradictory talk about writing. Understandably, this situation can cause frustration for students, many of whom have not had writing experiences that have enabled them to "read between the lines" of their instructors' limited talk about writing (Schlepppegrell, 2013).

A powerful research method used to intervene into this problem, i.e., of tacit judgments and performances of writing, is the discourse-based interview (DBI). Developed by Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983), DBIs have provided researchers with a productive method for tapping into participants' practical consciousness by querying them about their writing choices and judgments. As Olinger (2014) demonstrated, DBIs enable researchers to compare participants' stated perspectives and beliefs about writing with actual discursive strategies evident in texts. In this way, DBIs can serve important pedagogical functions. Research by Jarratt et al. (2009), among others, has shown that, by encouraging students to take stock of their writing choices, experiences, and motivations, DBIs can help foster the kinds of meta-reflective capacities needed to call forth prior writing experiences and strategies and identify points of similarity and difference across writing contexts. DBIs can also be used to investigate the genre-based sources of instructors' judgments of students' writing, as

seen in Giltrow and Valiquette's (1994) study, as well as in Lancaster (2014), Soliday (2004), and Wilder (2012). In general, by encouraging participants to account for textual details, DBIs can assist researchers and participants to probe the rhetorical bases of writing performances and judgments.

Use of DBIs, however, raises a methodological question that has motivated the present study. Namely, how does the researcher decide which textual details or discursive strategies to prompt for discussion in the DBI? Which bits of discourse from the interviewee's writing should guide the interview?

## 1.2 Preparing for the DBI: Identifying Patterns of Discourse

One option for identifying important bits of discourse is deductive. The researcher designs the study around a specific area of language use she or he deems important. Harwood and Petrić (2012), for example, used DBIs to investigate how two postgraduate students in business management used citations in their writing to perform certain "roles," for example that of "attentive student" (p. 69) or "critical writer" (p. 77). This focus was apparently motivated by the researchers' knowledge of Goffman's (1959) theory of enacted performances and of students' persistent difficulties making appropriate and effective citations. If, however, the researcher's aim is to inductively *discover* language features that are important for meaning-making in the target genre, an approach Barton (2002) referred to as "rich feature analysis," then preparing for the DBI becomes more complex.

In Odell et al.'s inductive approach, the researcher collects samples of a genre from one writer and notes ways in which the writer has made different choices across those samples. The researcher then develops alternatives to several of the writer's language choices and asks questions such as, "Here you do X. In other pieces of writing, you do Y or Z. In this passage, would you be willing to do Y or Z rather than X? (p. 223). Their point is to elicit participants' rhetorical considerations by presenting them with concrete textual options, ones that represent differences across genre samples. But the researcher may also choose to identify patterns of *similar* choices that run across many instances of the interviewee's writing. In these cases, systematic means of text analysis are needed, as patterns of language choices can be "hidden," easily escaping both the writer's and researcher's observations (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Hyland, 2005a).

Researchers in English for Academic and Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP) have used tools from corpus linguistics to uncover hidden, "rich" patterns of language choices. Hyland (2005b), for example, used corpus techniques to investigate disciplinary differences in how writers expressed epistemic stance and engagement with readers in research articles. In another study (Hyland, 2010), he examined how two "celebrity" writers in the field of applied linguistics, Deborah Cameron and John M. Swales, used language throughout their writing to construct distinct and recognizable discursive identities. Corpus approaches such as these are used increasingly in writing research and instruction to pinpoint how writers make selections in language in ways that, while meaningful, are often inaccessible to their intuitions (see, e.g., Cortes, 2007; Simpson-

Vlach & Ellis, 2010). Thus, while the DBI is a crucial method for prompting participants' attention to rhetorical strategies, systematic methods of text analysis are needed to unearth rhetorical strategies in the first place, especially ones that are accomplished at very fine-grained levels of discourse and likely run below writers' discursive consciousness.

One such fine-grained strand of discourse that has gained increasing recognition in recent years, one characterized by Wingate (2012) as a "hidden feature" of academic writing with potentially "much impact on the success of writing" (p. 147), concerns writers' expression of stance. *Stance* is understood here from a linguistic perspective, after Biber et al. (1999), Hyland (2005b), and White (2003), as encompassing expression of attitudes, epistemic commitments, and intersubjective positioning, all three of which research has shown are infused throughout academic prose (see e.g., Hyland, 2005b). MacDonald (1994) offered an early, ground-breaking study of epistemic stance in the fields of psychology, literary studies, and history, probing in detail how writers used language to position their claims in ways that reflected (and likely reinforced) different disciplinary epistemologies. There has since been growing interest in the linguistic details of stance expression, including hedging wordings (*perhaps, likely, may*; Hyland, 2005b), modal expressions (White, 2003), concession and contrast markers (Lancaster, 2014), and evaluative-*that* clauses (Charles, 2007), among others. It is unlikely that these linguistic details (or associated rhetorical motives) are within writers' or readers' capacities to articulate or even notice. But examinations of academic prose have shown them to be consequential nonetheless. Some studies, for instance, have revealed differential patterns of stance expression between high- and lower-graded students' writing, suggesting possible connections between the quality of stance students project and readers' judgment of writing quality (Barton, 1993; Coffin, 2002; Lancaster, 2014; Soliday, 2004; Wu, 2007).

These linguistic examinations offer insight into students' emerging rhetorical awareness that complements research using primarily interviews or think-aloud protocols. For example, in her longitudinal study of Eliza, an undergraduate writer in biology, Haas (1994) found through interviews and think-aloud protocols that this student learned increasingly to see the texts she was citing less as decontextualized bodies of "facts" and more as the result of specific authors making claims. Correspondingly, Haas concludes, Eliza began to see "her own role" as a writer as one of "negotiating meaning ... amidst the many voices of her disciplines" (p. 74). Similar insights have been reached through linguistic analyses of students' texts. Studies using Appraisal theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics (e.g., Derewianka, 2007), for instance, have documented how students learn to use language in their writing in ways that open up and close down discursive space for alternative views—via choices in modality, attribution, evidentiality, concession, and negation—and thus produce texts that are increasingly heteroglossically diverse and dialogically engaged. Such studies are invaluable, then, for identifying linguistic traces that writers leave behind in their texts that suggest how they have conceptualized their roles, or "stances," as writers.

And importantly, these linguistic traces may be so buried within their practical consciousness that they do not emerge in interviews, remaining unavailable to discursive consciousness and going unnoticed during more casual forms of reading. To probe these potential gaps between one writer's practical and discursive consciousness of stance expression, this study combines systematic text analysis of the student's writing with discourse-based interviews.

### 1.3 Study Background and Purpose

Specifically, the exploratory case study I present here examined how one undergraduate writer in philosophy, Richard, expressed stance in his argumentative essays, as well as how he accounted retrospectively for his stance-related choices. It also examined how one of his professors, Maria, responded to these choices in stance. (All participants' names are pseudonyms.) Using corpus methods, the article examines whether the quality of stance Richard expressed is congruent with qualities of argumentation valued in the field. It then explores how corpus results were used to shape the design of my DBIs with both participants. These methods, I show, allowed me to probe the degree to which both participants were aware of recurring expressions of stance in philosophy and whether they saw this area of language use as valuable.

Richard presents an interesting case for writing research. At the time of the DBI, he was a fourth-year student majoring in Philosophy and Ancient Greek at a midsized private university in the United States. He struck me in our conversations as an unusually engaged and intellectually curious student, eager to develop his writing in all his courses. At the same time, he had experienced considerably more success writing in philosophy than in any other courses. He regularly received As on his philosophy course papers, along with comments like "very sophisticated," "impressive paper," "highly nuanced point," and "excellent." In contrast, he regularly received Cs and B-s on his essays in English literature, along with comments like "This isn't well developed" and "Why does this matter?" As revealed through my corpus analysis, he commands a style of stance-taking that is distinctive in philosophical argumentation but appears to do so to a lesser extent in his essays in English literature. This raises the question of whether Richard is consciously aware of the stances his essays project and whether he understands how he used language to create them. In this article, I focus primarily on Richard's writing in philosophy because his essay corpus was considerably larger in this field (and thus more easily comparable to a reference corpus) and because, unlike with English, I was able to incorporate one of his philosophy instructor's explanations. My examination is guided specifically by these questions.

1. What qualities of stance did Richard create in his philosophy and English essays, and how proximate are these to successful, upper-level students' writing in the same fields?
2. To what degree are the stance qualities that Richard projected in philosophy noticed, understood, and valued by one of his professor-readers?

3. To what degree is Richard consciously aware of the stance qualities his essays project, and how does he articulate these and other discipline-specific features of his writing?
4. Finally, what does the corpus analysis bring to the DBI, and what would be lost without this analytic step?

In taking up these questions, this article demonstrates how results of systematic text analysis may be used to guide and enrich DBIs with academic writers, revealing important uses of language that likely otherwise would be missed.

## 2. Study Overview

### 2.1 Context and Participants

Richard was one of thirty upper-level undergraduate students I have interviewed over the past year as a part of a larger study on undergraduate students' perceptions of writing in the disciplines. He responded to my initial call for interviews, which was distributed to students via email by 27 professors (including Maria) who were participating in a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) seminar at my institution. After an initial 30-minute interview, Richard agreed to a follow-up DBI lasting two hours. In our first interview, Richard explained his experiences with and beliefs about academic writing. He was articulate and understated in his self-assessments. For example, he explained that he'd always felt "just fine" writing in philosophy but struggled more in his writing in English literature courses.

RICHARD: I'm not good at writing about literature. I don't know what it is, something about the process of thinking like a literary analyst, it just doesn't suit me well. In philosophy it's more like conceptual analysis of terms and stuff like that and I can do that just fine. [...] In my literature essays I feel like I'm just grasping for something to say. I don't understand the parameters of what's fair game when giving my interpretation.

Richard's assessment as "just fine" in philosophy turned out to be an understatement. Maria told me in our interview that his writing is "sophisticated" and "approaching graduate-level work."

Maria is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and was a participant in the aforementioned WAC seminar. She participated in two interviews. In the first, we discussed her views of writing in philosophy, including the stance qualities that she values in experts' and students' writing. In the follow-up DBI, she commented specifically on Richard's essays, as I learned that she had been one of Richard's instructors after reading his papers, discussed below. This second interview took place after Maria had read about the concept of *stance* in disciplinary writing, including Hyland (2005b) and Soliday (2011). Both participants read and approved interview

transcripts and drafts of the corpus results and answered my follow-up questions via email.

## **2.2 Analytic Approach and Essay Corpora**

Before my DBI with Richard, I asked him to send me electronically all his coursework papers that he felt comfortable sharing. Of the 17 papers he submitted, ten are from philosophy courses, five from English literature, one from history, and one from a “humanities” course. Excluding these last two papers due to insufficient sample size, I read all 15 of Richard’s philosophy and English essays to familiarize myself with the content of his work and writing style. I then converted these to plain-text files and used corpus methods (detailed below) to compare patterns in his expressions of stance with patterns in comparable essays on the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers, or MICUSP. MICUSP is an online corpus of 829 successful (A-graded) papers written by senior undergraduate students and early graduate students across 16 fields, totaling 2.2 million words. Papers in this corpus were classified by the research team at Michigan’s English Language Institute into seven paper types (see Ädel & Römer, 2012, for details). For comparison with Richard’s writing, I pulled from MICUSP three specific groupings of papers: the 186 argumentative essays, which were defined as papers that offer a thesis supported by the author’s own reasoning and evidence, thus corresponding to the structure of Richard’s essays; the 20 philosophy essays; and the 65 English essays.

After identifying patterns in the ways Richard expressed stance in his papers, I asked him during the DBI to complete a short survey on three questions (see Appendix A): his goals for expressing stance in philosophy, the extent to which he tries to engage with others’ views, and the relationship he seeks to establish with his reader. In part 3 of the survey, I asked him to examine passages I had selected from his philosophy essays (based on the corpus analysis), prompting him to select choices in wording, either the original selections he’d made or an alternative version I had constructed. We then discussed his survey responses.

## **2.3 Specific Procedures Prior to the DBI**

My corpus analysis of Richard’s writing was a comparative analysis, a technique that enabled me to identify not just frequent stance wordings in his writing but also the degree to which these are proximate to successful upper-level student writing in the same fields. In total, I examined five corpora, as presented in Table 1: the 186 argumentative essays on MICUSP, the 20 philosophy essays, the 65 English essays, and Richard’s 15 essays in these two fields.

**Table 1:** Corpus Details

Corpora	n	Words total	Avg. essay length
MICUSP argumentative essays	186	465,432	3,562
Philosophy essays-MICUSP	20	59,106	3,353
English essays-MICUSP	65	140,787	2,956
Richard's philosophy essays	10	25,157	2,520
Richard's English essays	5	11,232	2,152

To examine these corpora, I used *Antconc* (v. 3.2.4, Anthony, 2011), a commonly used text analysis and concordance program. I began with keyword analysis in the MICUSP philosophy essays. The “keyword” tool produces a list of words from the corpus that, based on log-likelihood calculations, are unusually frequent relative to a comparable, reference corpus. Using the 186-essay corpus as the reference, I identified stance-related words that are distinctive to philosophy because they occur with unusual frequencies. On the basis of these results, I then conducted targeted searches of related language functions.

In particular, the modal verbs *seems* and *might* were among the top keywords in philosophy. I therefore conducted an exhaustive examination of “hedging” and “boosting” expressions (e.g., Hyland, 2005b) in the four non-reference corpora listed in Table 1. Realized through a variety of grammatical forms, hedging refers to writers’ efforts to reduce epistemic commitment to a proposition (*seems, might, perhaps*) or limit its scope (*in general, often, usually*). Boosting refers to writers’ efforts to increase epistemic commitment (*clearly, obviously, demonstrate*), steering the reader toward the views they are advancing. I conducted targeted searches for hedges and boosters using lists of words and phrases that are frequently used to accomplish these functions. The list comprised 138 search items (see Appendix B) that I compiled from previous studies of academic prose, including Aull (2015), Biber et al. (1999), and Hyland (2005a), as well as from the corpora themselves, as revealed through analysis of word and phrase lists. Finally, on the basis of the corpus results, I developed questions for my DBIs with Richard and Maria that were designed to probe whether the frequent patterns of stance I had identified were within their discursive consciousness. Below, I first present results of my corpus analyses and then turn to interview results.

### 3. Corpus Results

#### 3.1 “My position is as follows ...”: Keywords in Philosophy

As mentioned, the keyword tool in AntConc produces a list of words from the corpus that are unusually frequent relative to a comparable, reference corpus. Results of this analysis underscore Hyland’s (2005b) finding that writers in philosophy mark the presence of reader and writer in their texts more frequently than those in most other



academic disciplines. The top 20 keywords in the philosophy essays include the first-person pronouns *I*, *we*, *us*, *my*, and *our*, along with the nouns *belief(s)*, *idea(s)*, *theory*, and *meaning*. None of these nine words were in the top 20 keywords in the MICUSP English essays. What these results indicate is that the philosophy essays are uniquely concerned with beliefs, ideas, and theories and with direct moves to express stance and engage the reader. Every one of the 30 philosophy essays I examined, including Richard's, use self-mentions and reader-oriented pronouns to announce aims or stake out positions, as seen in the italicized wordings in example 1. (Note that examples from MICUSP are offered with their unique identifiers. These show the discipline, e.g., "PHI" for philosophy; the student's year, e.g., "G1" for first-year graduate student; and the paper number.)

(1) *My position is as follows. ...* (PHI.G1.01.1)

Thus, when we use the term "body", we can know perfectly well what we are talking about and pick out a unique idea that we genuinely have.  
(PHI.G3.01.1)

The keyword analysis revealed two further trends. First, the philosophy students engage in unusually frequent counter-argumentation, or anticipating and responding to objections. The top 100 keywords include the nouns *objection*, *argument*, *explanation*, *response*, *claim*, *proposal*, *evidence*, and *account* and the verbs *[to]object* and *claim*. These nouns and verbs point to explicit focus on argumentation and especially counter-argumentation, in line with previous studies of academic writing in philosophy (e.g. Bloor, 1996; Geisler, 1994). The English essays also contain instances of counter-argumentation, but these were not indicated by the keyword analysis because they are used less frequently and overtly. Examples 2a and 2b show the difference between the more and less overt realization of counter-argumentation in the two fields.

(2) (a) *One may object to my proposal in at least two ways. ... But it seems implausible to say that ...* (PHI.G3.01.1)

b) *At first glance, these treatises seem to represent opposing poles in early modern thought ... My reading, however, resists such characterization ...* (ENG.G1.02.1).

Example 2a from philosophy illustrates how the keywords *[to]object* and *proposal* are used to directly entertain an objection. In contrast, 2b from English invokes an "apparent" interpretation without explicitly marking it as an objection or counter view.<sup>1</sup> Second, keyword results showed that the philosophy students engage in unusually frequent hedging, or reducing epistemic commitment. The verbs *believe*, *think*, *seems*, and *might* and the conditional *if* are in the top 100 keywords in philosophy. The majority instances of *believe* and *think*, furthermore, occur in the formulations *I think* and *I believe*, which often function to hedge, along with *might*, *seems*, and some cases of *if*. These wordings, again, are not in the top 100 keywords in English, suggesting

these essays do not use hedges with unusual frequency. While example 2b does use a self-mention (*my reading*) and hedge (*seems*), neither were in the top keywords in the English corpus.

These results raise an important question pursued below. Given that both corpora are comprised of student argumentative essays in the humanities, why do the philosophy students use hedges and overt counter-argument strategies so frequently? Of course, the keyword analysis also warrants a thorough examination of self-mentions (*I argue, in my view*) and reader engagement devices (*as you know, consider the following*). I focus my examination on hedging for two reasons. First, there is close interplay between hedging and counter-argumentation, with both operating to expand discursive space for others' views (Martin & White, 2005; White, 2003). Second, my examinations revealed a striking disconnect between both Richard's and Maria's practical and discursive consciousness with regard to hedges.

### 3.2 Projecting Confident Uncertainty: Patterns of Hedging and Boosting

Hedging and boosting are extraordinarily complex areas of language use (see, e.g., Lewin, 2005), but previous studies have revealed that experienced academic writers hedge more often than they boost claims (e.g., Aull, 2015; Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Hyland, 2005b). It turns out that expressing stance in what Skelton (1988) refers to as a "confidently uncertain" manner, or being "imprecise without fear" (p.39), is needed in many academic contexts to position the propositional content accurately and with nuance and to project the *ethos* qualities of "honesty, politeness, caution, and deference to the opinions of others" (Hinkel, 2004, p. 327). At the same time, there are clear disciplinary differences at play in uses of hedging.

Table 2 presents the frequencies of hedging and boosting devices per 1,000 words (ptw) in Richard's corpus and in the MICUSP philosophy and English essays. It shows that the philosophy essays, including Richard's, deploy hedges more than twice as frequently as the English essays.

**Table 2:** Frequency of Hedging and Boosting (per 1,000 words) in Philosophy and English Essays

Corpus	Hedges	Boosters
MICUSP-PHIL Essays	12.2	4.7
Richard's PHIL Essays	12.7	4.3
MICUSP-ENG Essays	5.0	4.3
Richard's ENG Essays	3.4	3.0

Table 2 shows, furthermore, that Richard's use of hedging and boosting is closely proximate to the frequencies in the peer philosophy corpus but less so in English. Specifically, he hedges slightly more frequently in his philosophy essays than do the MICUSP philosophy essays (12.7 v. 12.2 ptw); in contrast, he both hedges and boosts a good deal less frequently in his English essays than do the English MICUSP essays.

Finally, the table shows, quite strikingly, that Richard uses hedges nearly four times as frequently in philosophy as in English.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than relying on these whole-corpus frequencies, however, I also examined uses of hedging in every individual paper in these four corpora. Figure 1 displays the proportion of papers in each corpus that use hedges, as well as each essay's relative frequencies. What is clear is that every one of the essays I examined uses at least one hedging device. However, while 80% of the MICUSP philosophy essays (16 of 20) use ten or more hedges ptw, under 5% of the English essays (3 of 65) have such a high frequency. Richard deployed five or more hedges ptw in all ten of his philosophy essays. In eight of these essays, he deployed more than ten hedges ptw; in four essays, he deployed upwards of 15. In contrast, he used just two hedges ptw words in three of his five English essays.

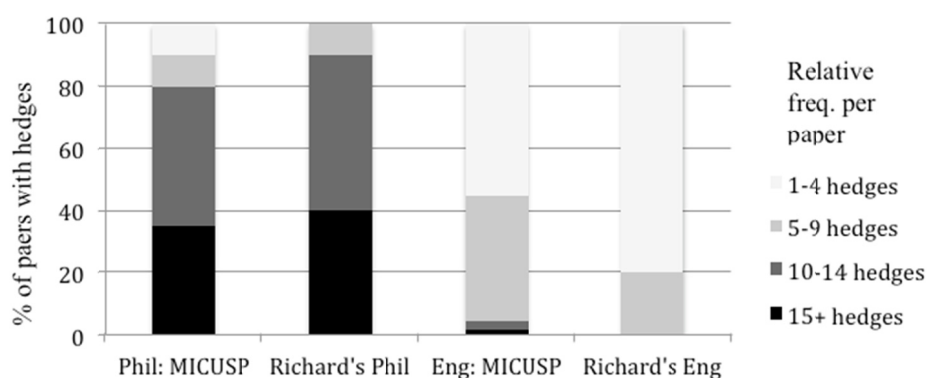


Figure 1. Proportion of Papers with Hedges.

These results indicate, in line with Hyland (2005b) and MacDonald (1994), that different disciplines deploy epistemic stance expressions with different frequencies and that these differing frequencies may reflect larger disciplinary differences in valued modes of argumentation. The results also raise two important questions. The first is whether Richard is discursively aware of these stance differences in his philosophy and English literature writing. The second is whether Richard used hedges too infrequently in his English essays. I turn to the first question momentarily and save the second for my general discussion. Responding to both questions depends first on understanding what rhetorical work is accomplished by the frequent hedging in philosophy.

### 3.3 Functions of Hedging in Philosophy

To examine this question, I used a constant-comparative method of discourse analysis (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to develop inductive categories for the hedges in the 30 philosophy essays. This involved reading every instance of hedging numerous

times, paying attention to form and function in the surrounding context. Through this process, I identified six functionally-based categories. These are listed in decreasing order of frequency in the 30 essays, with examples from Richard's essays. (Hedges are italicized.)

1. Elaborating on claims in a dialogically expansive manner  
"First, the mad man *could* be lying. If so, and if we believed him, then we ..."
2. Offering polite rejoinders to anticipated objections  
"However, this objection does not *seem* successful."
3. Entertaining objections tactfully  
"One *might* accuse me of failing to read Lewis's paper carefully."
4. Limiting the scope of propositions  
"Expediency and correspondence are, *at least in many cases*, quite closely united."
5. "Evidentializing," or expressing expansive consideration of evidence  
"Second, it *seems* that Burnyeat's interpretation of the text of De Anima is quite odd."
6. Projecting humility when guiding the reader  
"*I hope* to show that ... eliminativist materialism *might* be found plausible again."

All six functions are used in other disciplines, of course. But the distinctiveness of hedging in philosophy has mainly to do with the frequency with which writers (1) engage in conjecturing as a means to elaborate on their own claims in a dialogically expansive manner (function 1) (cf. Bloor, 1996 on hypothetical strategies in philosophy) and (2) engage in counter-argumentation tactfully (functions 2 and 3).

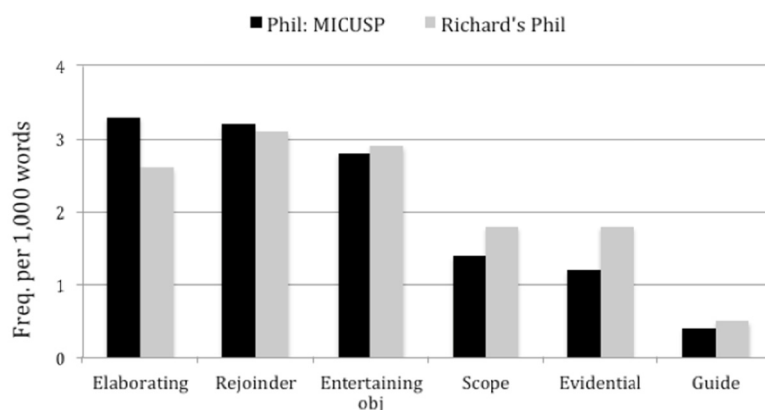


Figure 2: Distribution of Hedging Functions in Philosophy Essays.

Figure 2 shows the frequencies with which Richard and his MICUSP peers deploy these six functions. A significant portion of hedges occurs as a part of counter-argument strategies—around six times per every 1,000 words, accounting for 45% of all Richard’s hedges and 49% of MICUSP’s.

Counter-argumentation consists of two paired rhetorical elements, the alternative or objecting view and the writer’s rejoinder (Barton, 1995; Martin and White, 2005). The philosophy essays devote much space to the first element as they scrutinize, evaluate, and negotiate with possible opposing views before offering rejoinders proper (cf. Geisler’s (1994) “main path / faulty path” scheme in philosophical argumentation). This extended negotiation can be seen throughout Richard’s writing, as shown in 3. Hedges are typically infused through both elements.

(3) (a) “But,” one *might* object, “we actually can ...” [OBJECTION] /  
I agree with this objection *to an extent*. Although Lewis never makes this point explicit in his paper, he does *seem* to assume that we will take the mad man at his word. But *I would* disagree that verbal reports of pain are sufficient to justify believing the mad man for two reasons [EVALUATION + REJOINDER]. (Richard\_Phil\_5)

(b) The second objection that *might* be raised is that Socrates thought military service would help him more readily than attain the good. If so, his service would not have been in conflict with his philosophy. [OBJECTION] /

This is a bold claim, but it is *not without* textual support. ... This objection, however, *seems* also to fall flat [EVALUATION + REJOINDER]. (Richard\_Phil\_9).

In these excerpts, Richard is hedging claims to what his objectors are thinking, his own critical evaluations, and the extent of his concessions. The net effect is an epistemic stance marked by commitment to accuracy and confident uncertainty. If we take into account previous studies that identified correlations between such stance qualities and reader judgments (e.g., Barton, 1993), it is plausible to ask whether these qualities contributed to Maria’s assessment of Richard’s writing as “sophisticated” and “approaching graduate level work.” If so, is she aware (on any level) of the unusual frequency of hedging in philosophical argumentation? And is Richard?

#### 4. An Expert’s Take on Disciplinary Stance: DBI Results

In our first of two interviews, Maria discussed the stylistic qualities that she believes are valued in her field and that she values in her students’ writing. She also discussed her approach to teaching writing more generally. Maria initially invoked some of the standard adjectives used by faculty across disciplines to describe “good” writing in their

fields (see, e.g., Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006), including “concise,” “direct,” “assertive,” and “straightforward.” As illustration of directness and assertiveness, she pointed me to the opening paragraph of one student’s essay, which she said was “pretty typical in my field” because it is “like, bang, here’s my point.” Among the specific features she valued in this essay and in students’ writing more broadly, Maria mentioned pronoun use and the “objections and replies” section, both of which were revealed as salient in the keyword analysis.

MARIA: There are some weird disciplinary conventions, like we encourage students to write in the first person, and they're not accustomed to that. [...] And at least in a good philosophy paper, there's always an objections and replies section. [...] The idea is that your reader always has to know the strength of the opponent's position, what you think is wrong with it, and how they're going to reply and you're going to respond.

As suggested here, Maria does regard writing in philosophy as unique (or “weird”). She is also keen to make disciplinary conventions explicit. For example, she showed me a handout she developed that breaks down the five “parts” of a philosophy essay: “thesis statement,” “necessary background information,” “arguments in support of the thesis,” “serious objections to the thesis,” and “reasonable replies to objections.” She added that these last two sections are obligatory, usually formalized features of “any good philosophy paper” and ones with which many students struggle.

What is noteworthy about Maria’s explicit approach is that it underscores the value of this corpus analysis. In terms of expressing stance in philosophy, Maria spoke to the need to be direct, assertive, and straightforward, qualities within her discursive consciousness. She did not speak to being measured, cautious, polite, or any other quality related to hedging. The frequent patterns of hedging appeared to run below her discursive consciousness but are of potential pedagogical value.

Our second interview took place after Maria had read about *stance* in Soliday (2011) and Hyland (2005b) and familiarized herself with the corpus patterns presented above. She immediately remarked that she did not previously think of herself and fellow philosophers as hedging all that much.

MARIA: I had this idea that because there was a focused argument and you were supposed to argue in support of it, that philosophers didn't hedge. ... Philosophers pride themselves on not being weak or mealy-mouthed, so I was surprised by how often they manifest some humility in their writing.

Maria’s surprise was made even clearer when we turned to her own writing, which frequently “manifest[s] some humility,” as seen in the excerpts in 4. While the discourse insider and linguist “outsider” may not always share the same perspective of hedging (see, e.g., Lewin, 2005), Maria came to agree that this practice is pervasive and important in her field and that her wording selections in 4a and 4b work to reduce epistemic commitment. She did not, in contrast, consider the instances of *might* in 4c

as “proper hedges” for reasons explained below. (Hedges and related wordings are italicized.)

(4) (a) The text, *it seems*, does not require that human affairs entirely lack value. A very natural reading *suggests* that one should simply not go overboard or over-estimate the value of human affairs.

(b) Given that *my most modest intention* is simply to call into question the ‘Stoic Reading,’ I am not keen to divide the opposition. The ‘Harmonious Grief Reading’ *might* even fit squarely with Socrates’ claim about the importance of everyone in the city grieving together in politically orchestrated ways. In light of the city-soul analogy, *perhaps* every part of the soul should grieve together as well. ... I *want only* to draw attention to two related worries about this alternate reading.

(c) I should close by considering an alternate strategy for preserving harmony in the philosopher’s soul, which *one might call* the ‘Harmonious Grief Reading’. *Someone might argue* that ... *She might believe* that ...

4a is an instance of “evidentializing,” or expressing expansive consideration of evidence. For Maria, it is a “classic hedge in philosophy.” Its purpose, as she put it, is to “let your reader know you’re not insane,” meaning that it projects the writer’s awareness that her line of argumentation is unorthodox. Maria explained that the hedges in 4b are “concessions to the opposition, to the effect of, ‘That objector’s view has something going for it, sure, okay, but still my position is cooler’”. In contrast to these two functions, Maria regarded the low-probability modal expressions in 4c as “not proper hedging” because they do not work to reduce commitment to the view she is advancing. They are conventional in philosophical discourse (and not strategic) when projecting an imaginary objector. She “could have called out a real live philosopher who I know holds this position,” she said, but “that is not how we tend to write up these objection sections.”

Maria’s explanations are important. From a linguistic perspective, wordings like *someone might argue* or *it could be argued* do adhere to formal politeness conventions by not imposing views onto others (Thompson, 2001). However, they are not a part of Maria’s intention to project humility into her text, as in the first two instances. If we therefore exclude these from the corpus frequencies presented above, the philosophy essays would still use hedges nearly twice as frequently as the writers in English. This is something Maria would not have assumed. This is also something Richard would not have assumed, as I discuss momentarily. In sum, the notion that philosophers strategically weaken their claims with unusual frequency was not initially within Maria’s discursive consciousness. Her explicit view of language regarded wordings like *it seems that* and *it may be* as symptomatic of being “mealy-mouthed,” not as rhetorical

strategies for expanding discursive space or projecting confident uncertainty. She therefore had not incorporated these devices into her explicit teaching approach.

In the second part of our second interview, Maria pointed out strong examples of hedges in her students' writing. She explained there are three instances where students "need to hedge." First, hedges "can't be dispensed with," in her words, when students are advancing views that are not reflected in the secondary literature. Hedging in such contexts marks the writer's awareness that the position she's forwarding is unusual, letting the reader know she's "not insane." As illustration, Maria pointed to example (5) from a student's paper on Socrates' conception of true pleasure. She surmised that she "more than likely would have noticed on some level" if this student had not used these hedges: "The claim would just be too startling without them."

- (5) Pure pleasure is unworthy because one cannot recognize or appreciate one's pleasure without the ability for memory or knowledge. It then *seems* reasonable to conclude that the good life requires the conscious appreciation and enjoyment of one's sustained happiness. On this model *it seems* happiness is equated with sustained pleasure. This is reinforced by Socrates' assertion that ...

Second, students need to hedge when they are making very broad (and not just unusual) claims. Maria pointed to (6) from a student's paper on Aristotle's definition of courage. Since this student tends to engage in too much generalization, Maria explained, she "definitely would have picked up on it" if he had not hedged his claim about fully realized courage being an extraordinary quality "by nature." "He really needed this hedge here."

- (6) Exceptional and fully realized courage, then, *seems* to be an extraordinary quality to have by nature, as it only arises in similarly exceptional situations that require it, such as the burning building.

Third, students need to hedge, in Maria's view, when they are expressing bold attitudinal stances. As examples, Maria pointed to Richard's paper, which she explained was "easily the best paper in the class." Richard's critique in (7) is "really rather 'boosty' [...] which we tend to see a lot of in philosophy." Both hedges and bold evaluative markers are italicized.

- (7) Given Socrates' *confusion* about pleasure and his *apparent* use of a *poor* argument *out of self-motivation*, we must ask whether he *failed adequately* to distinguish pleasure and the good in this passage. *It might be* the case that pleasure and pain are both psychophysical states and that pain and pleasure do not stop at the same time.

Through the use of intensified evaluations like *poor* and *failed*, which Maria regarded as "boosters",<sup>3</sup> Richard is offering bold challenges to Socrates' reasoning. The hedges are thus needed to temper these bold evaluations. As Maria put it,



MARIA: I would definitely have stopped if he'd not hedged. It's funny, though, because I do know professional philosophers who write this way [without hedges]. I read a lot of "he failed to consider this" or "failed to support that." Maybe we need to hedge more.

For Maria, hedging is not just for undergraduates to display caution when writing to their professors. It is a valuable rhetorical strategy for communicating effectively in the field, "as long as we don't go overboard with it."

Extrapolating from these points, Maria discussed hedging in terms of striking a "balanced" rhetorical stance, echoing Booth's (1963) argument that "our main goal as teachers of rhetoric" is to help students learn to strike a balance between "the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker" (p.141). For Maria more specifically, "one of the challenges for students is finding a balance in stance between the extremes of over-confidence and timidity." While displays of over-confidence risk brashness, naiveté, or question-begging, displays of timidity risk losing the reader. Maria also discussed students' essays that demonstrate an ineffectively balanced stance. In our interview, she pointed to a first-year student's essay that did not hedge enough, which she believed was symptomatic of the writer's not knowing how to effectively entertain and reply to objections. In contrast, she pointed to an upper-level student's essay that "goes overboard" with hedges, which she believed resulted from the writer's not projecting enough of an assertive stance.

What emerged from our discussions is that Maria now sees hedging as intricately connected to broader argumentative moves she wants her students to make in their writing. Bringing results of the corpus analysis to my DBI, then, enabled her to gain a subtle insight about effective stance-taking. It also enabled her to expand her metalanguage (Schleppegrell, 2013) for talking about the details of language in rhetorical terms rather than formally prescriptive ones. To what degree is Richard aware of his sophisticated uses of hedging?

## 5. Richard's Take on Disciplinary Stance

As demonstrated above, Richard hedged frequently in his philosophy essays and, according to Maria, in a sophisticated manner. While reader engagement is not the focus of this paper, he also frequently used reader-based pronouns and directives, e.g., *we might take this*; *consider the following*. In light of these overtly dialogic moves, of which hedging is a part, we might expect that he would believe he aimed to "engage [his] reader actively" and express his stance "in a measured (or, carefully qualified) manner," as stated in Part 2 of the DBI questionnaire (see Appendix A). However, Richard ticked the apparently opposite choices. He believed that he aimed to express his stance in "an assertive (or, highly committed) manner" and "maintain an impersonal, distant relationship with [his] reader." He elaborated on the first question in this way: "In philosophy papers generally, I do express my stance in an assertive

way, but in more literary disciplines like English and Classics, I think I'm more measured or reserved." His uses of hedging in these two fields offer evidence to the contrary.

Why was being "measured" or "expansive," then, not within Richard's discursive consciousness? Results of the DBI point to three interrelated reasons, and these affirm that Richard was not "wrong." He did project a direct and assertive stance in his philosophy writing, but he overlooked the fact that his assertiveness is often tempered by expressions of *uncertainty*.

First, Richard's sense that he was more assertive in philosophy is supported by some aspects of his language use. When I prompted him to point to areas in his writing where he accomplished a direct and assertive stance, he immediately pointed to two different introductions. Example (8), for instance, is an introduction he wrote for an essay in Ancient Greek Philosophy. (I comment on italicized wordings below.)

- (8) In this paper, *I argue* that Socrates in the Gorgias (496a-497e) *failed to distinguish* pleasure from goodness adequately. My argument consists of *three steps*. *First*, I aim to show that Socrates' understanding of pleasure is *confused* in *two ways*. [...] As the *second step* in my argument, *I argue* that Socrates' conception of pleasure is ultimately *self-serving*, since his claim that pleasure and pain stop at the same time (497d) is only true on his *odd and unintuitive* conception of pleasure. His entire argument, that goodness and pleasure are distinct, hinges on this *strange* point. *Third*, *I argue* that. ... *We must conclude* with Callicles that we do not know what Socrates' "clever remarks" amount to. *I continue* with an *attempt* to strengthen Socrates' argument with a different understanding of pleasure *before closing* by responding to *two potential counterarguments*.

As shown in the italicized wordings, this introduction is direct, assertive, and mostly free of hedges (except for *an attempt to*). Richard commented specifically on two kinds of wordings, those that signpost the structure of his paper (*I argue, First, two ways, second step, I continue*) and those that express his judgments (*failed to distinguish, confused, etc.*). He explained that, "Here I'm being as direct and assertive as I can."

Importantly, these high-force evaluations recur throughout Richard's philosophy corpus, contributing toward a highly assertive stance. They also appear to be characteristic of successful student writing in the field (perhaps also expert writing). To verify this, I used AntConc to run a comparative search for all adjectives in the MICUSP philosophy and English essays and found that the philosophers regularly assess others' arguments as *dubious, easily refuted, false, faulty, flawed, invalid, not correct, presumptuous, and unsupported*. Such blunt and intensified assessments are highly unusual in the MICUSP English essays. Based on this criterion, Richard's practical consciousness corresponds to his discursive consciousness. He believes he's more assertive in philosophy because he is.

However, the pattern that ran below Richard's discursive consciousness is that, apart from his introductions, he normally cushions his high-force evaluations with hedges, as Maria praised him for doing in example (7). In fact, following the introduction in (8), Richard cushions the same or similar evaluations throughout the body of the essay, as seen in (9).

(9) (a) Since the argument hinges on these three ideas, and Socrates *could be wrong* about each of them, *I think* it is safe to conclude that he did *fail to distinguish* pleasure and the good.

(b) We must, however, admit that the argument Socrates gave to differentiate the two was *faulty*, given his *apparent confusion and self-interest*, which *might* have caused him to *make a poor argument* out of haste even if he intended to do the just thing.

That Richard pointed to his introductions (and not bodies of his essays) during the interview reflects a potential second factor shaping his discursive consciousness of stance. He told me that he views the introduction as the most difficult section to write and that he spends the majority of his writing time "laboring over" them. He added that he typically starts with the introduction and then "scrap[s] it and rewrite[s] the whole thing" toward the end of his process. Considering this degree of effort and time, it may be that these sections left a lasting impression on his discursive consciousness of stance.

The third factor shaping Richard's discursive consciousness comes from the ways his professors talk, both *about* writing in philosophy and when *doing* philosophy, i.e., when facilitating discussions in class. Elaborating on what he means by "assertive" and "direct," he referred to interactions with his professors. In particular, he characterized classroom discourse in terms of impersonally "ripping apart" arguments.

RICHARD: My teachers especially don't hesitate to criticize our arguments. They'll say things like, 'Well, there are three problems with your argument'. Then they sort of tick them off. [...] Class discussions, too, these can get heated, but we try to leave our feelings in check. The idea is to detach ourselves from our views before ripping them apart.

Richard's experience of his instructors "ripping apart" arguments in class by "ticking off" problems in students' arguments is reflected in much of his own written language, e.g., "My argument consists of *three steps*. *First*, I aim to show that Socrates' understanding of pleasure is confused in *two ways*." In such instances, Richard appears to be echoing discursive qualities of his professors' spoken language.

Regarding direct teaching advice, Richard recalled this lesson from his professor of introductory philosophy, who characterized philosophical argumentation as a "battle":

RICHARD: He was like, "So, your personal view, that's just out the window. I don't care about your personal opinion." He said, "You have to think

about what the other side's going to say," and so that's like the opposing team. "What strategies would they use to shoot you down and what are you going to do to retaliate?"

This advice, as Richard recalls it, corresponds to Bloor's (1996, p. 34) characterization of philosophical discourse as "mind-to-mind combat with co-professionals": "What are you going to do to retaliate?" Richard explained that subsequent feedback he's received in philosophy has not contradicted this metaphor, "though [the combat] is controlled, more like chess than guerilla warfare." Explaining what he means by "more like chess," Richard spoke to the need to build an argument in careful and deliberate stages, and he was able to identify stages in one of his essays, e.g., "Here I'm giving arguments that support my thesis [...] Here I'm laying out all the objections." Echoing Maria's instruction, Richard regarded such stages as "pretty formulaic, which I actually like."

In sum, it appears that Richard's frequent use of hedging in philosophy was not within his immediate discursive consciousness. Like Maria initially, he did not talk about stance expression in terms of being "measured," "cautious," or "polite." Instead, he volunteered descriptors like "assertive" and "direct," and he talked about the need to entertain and reply to objections. It would appear Richard developed this explicit metalanguage about writing in philosophy from at least two sources: (1) from his professors' own explicit talk *about* writing in the field, for example the stages of argumentation explicated in Maria's handout or in passing comments like, "You have to think about what the other side's going to say"; and (2) from his close listening to their talk when *doing* philosophy (e.g., "There are three problems with your argument"). In other words, Richard's discursive consciousness of some stance qualities like assertiveness may have been shaped by his instructors' explicit talk about these qualities as well as their use of these qualities in discourse. In contrast, Richard appears to have picked up other stance qualities and devices like hedging more implicitly, likely using his professors' and others' *doing* of philosophy as models. Without an accompanying metalanguage for discussing and pointing to these qualities in texts, however, they were not elevated into his immediate discursive consciousness.

The next portion of the DBI confirmed that hedging was not a part of Richard's discursive consciousness. What emerged from Part 3 of the questionnaire (Appendix A), however, is that Richard did believe hedging was important and that, once he began to talk about this rhetorical device, his views aligned closely with Maria's. Table 3 shows Richard's responses to six passages where he used hedges. To be clear, Richard was presented with two options for each sentence. The "a" options were Richard's original sentences with his hedges included; the "b" options were my revisions, where I deleted the hedges. Due to space constraints, Table 3 presents only the "b" options, but it does show the hedges crossed through. (These crossed-through versions were not presented to Richard.) In all six cases Richard chose option "a" (with hedges). The left-hand column shows Richard's explanations.

**Table 3:** Richard's Explanations of Select Hedges

Revised wordings presented to Richard	Richard's explanations
1b) <del>In my view</del> , This route is least promising because ...	"B is too certain. This is my judgment call. The opposing view is still reasonable."
2b) Thus, <del>it seems that</del> we should take one of the first two interpretations on board.	"This is still my judgment. I could also have written, 'It therefore strikes me'."
3b) So, then, on the first interpretation it is <del>possible that</del> Aristotle's theory could accommodate an emergentist theory.	"My claim is about the possibility re: Aristotle's theory, so that phrase is a must."
4b) <del>I think</del> , However, <del>that</del> Burnyeat and Sisko's interpretations do not prove as much as Burnyeat and Sisko think.	"Sounds too certain or pompous."
5b) <del>I find</del> Burnyeat's arguments in support of the claim <del>to be</del> are faulty.	"Same"
6b) But it <del>seems to me</del> that Burnyeat's favored view is impossible.	"Same"

Richard's responses to sentences 1 and 2 reveal his (previously implicit) aim to expand discursive space for readers. He acknowledged that, "the opposing view is still reasonable." His response to 3 corresponds to Maria's point that some hedges "can't be dispensed with." Richard's claim here is about *possibility* and, while the modal *could* also conveys possibility, Richard wanted his sentence to highlight the claim. His responses to 4-6 show his concern for the *ethos* he is projecting (i.e. not sounding "pompous").

Richard had not heard the term *hedge*, but after I introduced it in our conversation he began using it to explain some of his writing choices. It turns out that it is not always *actual* uncertainty that drove Richard's hedges. He hedged at least sometimes "in the interest of being collegial," as he put it, even when he was strongly committed to his position.

RICHARD: I think I do hedge out of a sense of politeness because I don't really see how someone can interpret the text in a different way but I know that they do. So in the interest of being collegial I want to say *it appears that* or *it seems that* even though I actually am thinking, "it is the case that."

Richard's effort to be collegial in his expression of stance, then, was driven by his rhetorical goal of giving space to readers who "interpret the text in a different way." Such collegiality expressions work to project the writer's awareness of dialogic alternatives, and they therefore may index "a potential colleague and more-than-provisional discourse community member," as Wilder (2012, p. 102) found was valued tacitly among professor-readers of students' essays in English literature.

Richard also connected his hedging to his role as an undergraduate writer, a point of view that emerged when I asked if he could delete *it seems that* from sentence 2.

- ZL            Here, though, wouldn't deleting *it seems that* make your sentence more direct and assertive?
- RICHARD    Yes, that's what I was thinking. I mean, this third interpretation is really absurd, and that's what I still think. [...] I just worry about coming across as sort of bombastic and like I think I'm a graduate student. Maybe what I'm saying is silly. I don't know what I'm talking about really at the end of the day yet.
- ZL            You think you don't know what you're taking about yet?
- RICHARD    It just comes across as too strong because I don't have all the tools and knowledge to bring the bear on the topic like my professor. And she might know this perfect counter example to my claim and opposing dialog I've never read, and then if that's true, I want to be reserved because I don't have an omnipotent knowledge of the platonic corpus. In the meantime I'll just say I have a really strong case here but I recognize it's not completely solid.

Richard is expressing here concern about the authorial role he is projecting through his writing. He wanted his essays to communicate that he's aware he's an undergraduate student and that "what I'm saying" may be "silly." While there is tension between whether Richard was actually uncertain in his claims or whether he was constructing a discursive persona marked by uncertainty, such tension is perhaps not uncharacteristic of experts' writing. Experts, too, may express actual uncertainty through wordings like *at least to my knowledge*, and, at the same time, such wordings contribute to a cautious and honest persona.

Like Maria, Richard had thought about the stance or discursive persona he wanted to project, though without using these terms. He wanted to "come across" in a certain way in his writing, repeatedly making selections in language that expressed certain interpersonal qualities. Within his *discursive consciousness* were his goals of making claims assertively and directly and of entertaining and responding to objections. But only within his *practical consciousness* were his goals of expressing politeness, collegiality, and confident uncertainty. These more "gentle" qualities of stance only

became articulable for Richard once he was made aware of his frequent uses of hedging and given a metalanguage for reflecting on their rhetorical functions.

## 6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In the opening section, I posed four questions.

1. What qualities of stance did Richard create in his philosophy and English essays, and how proximate are these to successful, upper-level students' writing in the same fields?
2. To what degree are the stance qualities that Richard projected in philosophy noticed, understood, and valued by one of his professor-readers?
3. To what degree is Richard consciously aware of the stance qualities his essays project, and how does he articulate these and other discipline-specific features of his writing?
4. Finally, what does the corpus analysis bring to the DBI, and what would be lost without this analytic step?

My corpus examinations revealed that Richard achieved an authoritative stance in his writing by projecting confident *uncertainty* and not just confidence. It revealed also that he used hedges (*seems, might, I think*) to reduce epistemic commitment far more frequently in philosophy than in his English essays, directly counter to what he expected. Furthermore, the qualities of Richard's epistemic stance (assertive/direct, on the one hand, and discursively expansive/collegial, on the other) were closely proximate to qualities in a comparable corpus of successful student writing in philosophy, suggesting that Richard had acquired a valued and conventional style of expressing stance, particularly with regard to anticipating and responding to objections. This study offers some evidence, then, that successful, advanced student writers in philosophy learn not just to position their claims vis-à-vis others' arguments by citing (or anticipating) objections and then replying to them, as Geisler (1994) found in advanced writing in the field; it appears they also learn to carry out this counter-argumentation work tactfully or "collegially," deploying hedges to reduce the strength of their claims. In contrast, while it was beyond the scope of this paper to probe deeply into Richard's style of stance-taking in his English essays, corpus results showed that his rates of hedging and boosting were lower than the MICUSP English essays. Considering that his English essays were regularly less successful, it may be that Richard missed opportunities to use stance-taking strategies that worked for him in philosophy. I return to this possibility momentarily.

In response to questions 2 and 3, the DBIs revealed that neither Richard nor Maria were discursively conscious of their frequent hedging or accompanying rhetorical qualities. Both participants were discursively conscious of other qualities like stating claims directly and assertively. Nevertheless, Maria did praise Richard for his strategic use of hedging once she was made aware of this rhetorical device, and she later stated that she would have "noticed on some level" if he had not hedged many of his claims.

In response to the final question, therefore, the corpus investigations proved valuable for identifying recurring qualities of stance that both I as the researcher and the participants would very likely have missed otherwise.

These results have both methodological and pedagogical implications for writing studies. In terms of pedagogy, the focus on hedging in the DBIs led to consciousness-raising for both participants about disciplinary stance. Maria explained that she now planned to emphasize in her teaching the importance of achieving a “balanced” stance in philosophical argumentation: “What I’m thinking is my students would really benefit from seeing the more and less measured expressions of stance side-by-side. Many seem to come away thinking of philosophy as kind of hostile, and I think these [pointing to uses of hedging] can help dissuade them from that view.” Maria’s point is one that may be applicable to the teaching of academic writing in other contexts, as students learn to position their claims with interpersonal tact. Richard meanwhile appeared pleased to learn that his uses of hedging were so closely proximate to the patterns on MICUSP, particularly because the majority of these writers were graduate students. He was also intrigued to learn that he both hedged and boosted much less frequently in his English essays. As he remarked, “I really wouldn’t have thought that. I have to figure out what I’m doing in those [English] essays.”

Richard’s comment here returns us to the question of why he used hedges so infrequently in his English literature essays—specifically, why he used them significantly less frequently than the MICUSP English students. This is a pertinent question given that, one, previous studies of academic prose have identified hedging as a valuable strategy for positioning claims with nuance and tact (e.g., Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Hyland, 2005b) and, two, Richard regularly received lower grades on his English essays than philosophy essays. One possibility is that Richard was not offered sufficient guidance in the literary interpretative-analytic essay genre, and thus he was left without a clear sense of how to develop and position his interpretative claims. As he remarked in the DBI, “in my literature essays I feel like I’m just grasping for something to say.” Recall that Richard received explicit guidance on certain conventions of philosophical writing, such as the five argument stages in Maria’s handout and the advice from a professor in an earlier course to “think about what the other side’s going to say.” Because Richard was directed both explicitly and implicitly to engage in counter-argumentation, he may have been attuned on some level to the fact that hedges are frequently deployed when carrying out this maneuver. Based on our conversations about his writing in English, on the other hand, I did not get the sense that Richard received similarly explicit advice about how to construct interpretative claims when writing about literature. This may be unsurprising in light of Wilder’s (2012) study of students’ and instructors’ experiences with an explicit genre-based approach to writing about literature. Wilder’s study offered evidence that English literature faculty may be especially uncomfortable offering students explicit writing instruction, due to concerns about constraining their creativity or reducing their pleasure in reading and writing about literature (among other reasons). In short, Richard may have lacked guidance in



his English courses in how to *position* his claims and, as one consequence, did not draw on rhetorical devices like hedging and boosting to negotiate meanings with the putative reader.

To continue with this possibility briefly, one positioning strategy that Wilder (2012) identified in successful student essays in English literature is the “appearance/reality” *topos*, whereby the writer first invokes the “apparent” meaning of a text before arguing for the “real” meaning. This strategy, also treated as the *hypothetical/real* pattern in discourse linguistics (e.g., Thompson, 2001), is often signaled by hedging devices, e.g., *at first glance, these treatises seem to*. Wilder found that high-rated student essays in English used this *topos* more frequently and effectively than lower-rated essays. It is important to note therefore that I could find no instances of this rhetorical strategy in any of Richard’s five English essays. This may indicate Richard’s insufficient use of positioning strategies (and accompanying hedges) in his English literature essays. It appears, in contrast, that Richard’s acquisition of conventional features of philosophical argumentation was more solidly enabled by his professors’ explicit and implicit advice and modeling.

In terms of methodological implications, this article has demonstrated how systematic, linguistically-informed text analysis of participants’ writing can guide and enrich the DBI. The corpus analysis offered inductively-derived data about frequent uses of language in Richard’s writing, and these data were used to seed prompts for the DBIs. These steps added a degree of objectivity to the procedure of eliciting retrospective accounts of verbal data, a method which has been critiqued for its subjective thrust, whereby “rapport and interactional patterns between interviewer and interviewee can affect the discourse in unpredictable ways” (Harwood & Petrić, 2012, p. 84). One specific concern about DBIs is that they end up creating the knowledge they appear to be unearthing, with participants “performing” roles and personalities they think are expected of them (see, e.g., Tomlinson, 1984). According to this view, Richard may have selected certain statements in Part 2 of the DBI tasks that he believed I (an English professor) wanted to hear, for example that he aimed to argue in “an assertive (or, highly committed) manner.” However, Richard’s responses to the proposed edits (Part 3) suggest this possibility is unlikely. In all six cases, Richard selected the options that contained his original hedges rather than accepting my revised alternatives. The fact that Richard completed this part *before* we turned to the topic of hedging shows that, rather than accepting revisions offered by an “expert,” he defended wordings, i.e., his hedges, that many people might associate with writing that is “fluffy,” “wordy,” or “wishy-washy.” This evidence suggests, in short, that Richard was thinking independently about the questions rather than performing to an expected set of “correct” responses.

More generally, the results of this study offer further evidence that corpus-based text analysis of academic writing can uncover patterns of choices in writers’ wordings that illuminate community-based ways of reasoning and arguing. They also offer evidence that bringing corpus findings to the DBI can equip participants with a robust

metalinguage for reflecting explicitly on the details of their language choices and ultimately for better understanding how these details work rhetorically to create valued disciplinary meanings.

## Notes

1. This specific counter-argument strategy was identified by Fahnestock and Secor (1991) as the “appearance/reality” topos, whereby the writer first invokes the “apparent” meaning of a text before arguing for the “real” meaning. The same strategy has been termed the “hypothetical/real” pattern in written discourse analysis (e.g., Thompson, 2001).
2. Richard’s greater use of hedging in philosophy, combined with his less frequent use of hedging in English compared to the MICUSP English essays, raises the possibility that he did not hedge enough in English. This is a possibility considering that he was considerably more successful in his philosophy essays. It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer this question definitely, but I discuss possible explanations in the general discussion section.
3. Boosters are treated in applied linguistics in terms of intensified epistemic commitment rather than attitudinal, as Maria has interpreted. According to Hyland (2005b) boosters allow writers “to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience” (p. 179).

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire for Discourse-based Interview with Richard

Note: Richard's responses are marked with an arrow (→)

### PART 1

Do you find that the criteria for good papers in your major area of study differ in any way from the criteria in other academic fields? → Yes      No

Please explain how papers in philosophy do or do not differ from papers in other fields:

**PART 2:** The following questions ask for your perceptions of **taking a stance** in academic writing—that is, how you express your perspective or viewpoint.

1. Which of these statements best describes the tone or manner with which you try to express your stance?  
→ a. I try to express my stance in an assertive (or, highly committed) manner.  
b. I try to express my stance in a measured (or, carefully qualified) manner.  
c. Some other manner? Please explain:
2. Which of these statements best describes the way you try to handle **other people's views** on the topic you are writing about?  
→ a. I try to engage with others' views thoroughly—ideally, both those that support and oppose my view.  
b. I try to stay focused on developing my own view—without getting too distracted considering others' views.  
c. Other? Please explain.
3. Which of these statements best describes the relationship you try to establish with your reader (that is, the real or imagined person who is reading your essay)?  
a. I try to engage my reader actively —e.g., by asking questions, acknowledging a reader's doubts or objections, making concessions, and so on.  
→ b. I try to maintain an impersonal, distant relationship with my reader—e.g., occasionally guiding the reader along to the parts of my paper but not actively engaging her.

**PART 3:** Please read over each passage for context, then select the wording option below that works best in your view. Please explain your choice in a brief phrase or sentence. (**NOTE:** *The passages have been cut due to space constraints. Richard was offered the full context of his essays before each option.*)

