

Style Guidelines for Writing Academic Papers in Psychology

Paul David
Antioch University Seattle

Writing involves two general components: content and style. Content is what the author says; style is how the author says it. This document is concerned with the writing style most commonly used for writing academic papers in psychology. Style guidelines are established to promote clear written communication. By setting explicit rules governing composition and format, style guidelines minimize problems of inconsistent expression and enable readers to give their full attention to the actual content of a manuscript. This document sets forth the basic style guidelines of the American Psychological Association's (2001) *Publication Manual* and discusses the most common style errors students make in writing academic papers.

APA Style

The style guidelines provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) are drawn from an extensive body of psychological literature, from editors and authors experienced in psychological writing, and from recognized authorities in publication practices in the social sciences. Writing in the APA style, then, puts a document in a format that is both accepted by and familiar to a broad readership in psychology as well as the social sciences. In this sense, writing in the APA style is very much a part of what it means to be a professional in the field of psychology as well as other disciplines in the social sciences.

The style guidelines presented here only address the very basics of writing academic papers in psychology. The many other style considerations not addressed in this document can be readily found in the APA's *Publication Manual*. In fact, unless otherwise noted, it should be the *Publication Manual* that serves as the chief reference for these matters. The intent of this document is simply to provide an initial introduction to some of the established style guidelines for format, citations, quotations, and references in academic papers.

Format. Papers should be typed using standard typefaces such as Times Roman, Courier, and Palatino. The size of the type should be one of the main typewriter sizes (pica or elite) or, if produced from a word processor, it should be 12 points. Each line for the entire document, including the reference section, should be double-spaced. This means leaving one full-size line blank between each line of type on the page. Also leave uniform margins of at least one inch at the top, bottom, right, and left of every page. Given these parameters, no more than 27 lines of text should be on any single standardized (8.5 x 11 inch) page.

All papers should have a separate title page. On papers for Antioch courses this page designates the title, author, class, instructor, and date; all of these items are placed in consecutive order and in double-spaced format in the center portion of the paper. In addition, all pages beginning with the title page should be numbered and should have a page header. A page header is composed of the first two or three words from the title of the paper. A page header is placed

in the upper right-hand corner of the page and the page number is placed five spaces to the immediate right of the page header (see an example of this formatting in this document).

The main text of an academic paper begins on the page following the title page. The beginning of the text opens with an introduction that presents the specific topic or topics to be discussed. An introduction does not carry a heading labeling it as an introduction (the first part of the paper is assumed to be the introduction). After the introduction appropriate headings should then be used throughout the paper to distinguish the different topic areas being discussed. Typically, headings consist of one to three key words that define the topic areas; they are never designated with numbers or letters.

As far as the text itself is concerned, all paragraphs should be indented; that is, the first line of every paragraph should be set in five to seven spaces from the margin. After that the remaining lines of the paragraph should be typed to a uniform left-hand margin with the right-hand margin left uneven. Avoid single sentence paragraphs because they are too abrupt. However, also stay away from long paragraphs that might tend to lose the reader's attention. If a paragraph runs longer than one double-spaced page, it is probably too long.

Academic papers typically end with a separate reference page. The reference page lists all of the sources cited in the paper in alphabetical order. Note that a reference list cites only those works that are mentioned in the paper and should not be confused with a bibliography which cites works for background or for further reading. Guidelines on how to format the reference page are provided in the last section of this document.

Citations. When directly quoting from another work, cite the source in the text by indicating the name(s) of the author(s), the publication year of the source, and the location reference (e.g., the page or paragraph number) from the source. When paraphrasing or referring to an idea contained in another work, the same citation rule applies with the exception that identification of location references is optional. However, in those cases where it would be helpful in finding references in long or complex texts, specification of location is recommended. Here are several examples of how these different types of citations are written:

- **If the citation involves a direct quote, list the author, put the year of publication in parentheses, and list the page number in parentheses after the quotation marks:**

According to Forisha (1999), "People who know APA style live overall happier lives" (p. 2).

Note that a period goes after the "p" and after the parentheses of the page number at the end of the sentence. Also note that the abbreviation for page is "p." and not "pg." The plural abbreviation for pages is "pp."

- **If there are no page numbers available for the citation, as is often the case in electronic sources, then use paragraph numbers in their place:**

"The current system of managed care needs major revision." (Jones, 2000, ¶3)

Note that the ¶ symbol or the abbreviation para is used to designate paragraph.

- **If the author's name is used in the text, just put the year of the publication involved in parentheses:**

David (2001) claimed that writing papers without APA guidelines creates problems for both the instructor and the student.

- **If an author's idea or research is referred to in the text without directly identifying the author, put the author's name and the date of the source in parentheses:**

Dance movement and horticultural therapy have been effective with some older Japanese American clients (Itai & McCrae, 1998, pp. 233-248).

Note that although there is no direct quote involved in this reference, a location reference in the form of page numbers is provided here to assist interested readers in finding this information. Also note that the period for the sentence comes after the citation. Finally, for articles with more than one author, use the "&" sign within parentheses instead of the word "and."

- **If the same idea comes from several sources, cite them this way:**

Multicultural and feminist therapists have challenged family therapy's narrow definition of the family (Boyd-Franklin, 1990; Ho, 1988; Hong, 1997).

Note that the sources are listed in alphabetical order. Use semicolons between different sources.

- **If the author has written more than one publication in the same year, and both are cited in the text, label the first one "a" and the second one "b." This notation would be applied as follows:**

Psychologists need to be sensitized to symptoms of depression and alcohol abuse (Blazer, 1994a, 1994b).

- **If the author or research cited is contained in a secondary source, designate the source as follows:**

According to Bowen (as cited in Kerr, 1989), avoiding triangulation in family relationships is critical aspect of achieving greater differentiation as a separate person.

Quotations. Source material quoted from an author's work should be reproduced word for word. To incorporate a short quotation (fewer than 40 words) in the text of the paper, enclose the statement with quotation marks and indicate the page number in parentheses as shown in the first example given above. To use a longer quotation (40 or more words) in the text, place the statement in a free-standing block of double-spaced lines and omit the quotation marks. Then put the page number or numbers in parentheses after the period ending the quotation. Here is an example:

Collis (1999) found the following:

The “placebo effect,” which had been verified in previous studies, disappeared when behaviors were studied in this manner. Furthermore, the behaviors were never exhibited again, even when actual medications were administered. Earlier studies (e.g., Hoshino, 1996; Forisha, 1995) were clearly premature in attributing the results to the placebo effect. (p. 275)

Note that the comma after the words “placebo effect” in the first sentence goes inside the quotations marks. Commas always go inside the quotations marks; there are no exceptions. Also note that the page number for a longer quotation goes after the period at the end of the last sentence. Finally, remember that longer quotations are double-spaced just like the rest of the text in the document.

References. All sources cited in the text must be included in a separate section labeled “References.” These sources should be listed in alphabetical order. If there is more than one source by the same author, the article should be ordered by their year of publication. To format the references section, place the first line of each reference flush left and then indent the second and succeeding lines five spaces in a so-called hanging indent. Here are some different examples:

- **If the source is a journal article with one author:**

Steiner, J. L. (1989). Psychotherapy with older women: Ageism and sexism in traditional practice. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 19, 429-436.

Note that only the author's first and middle initials are used. Also italicize the title of the reference making sure to only capitalize the first word in the title and the first word in the subtitle of the article. The number "19" refers to the volume number and is also italicized. The numbers “429-436” refer to the page numbers of the article and are not italicized.

- **If the source is a journal article with more than one author:**

Russo, N. F., Olmedo, E. L., Stapp, J. S., & Fulcher, R. (1991). Women and minorities in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 11, 1315-1363.

Note that the first words in the title of a journal are capitalized.

- **If the source is a book:**

Comas-Diaz, L., & Greene, B. (Eds.). (1997). *Women of color: Integrating ethnic and gender identities in psychotherapy*. New York: Guilford Press.

Note that for edited books, the abbreviation for editor (Ed.) or editors (Eds.) is placed after the author's name with a period placed after the right parenthesis. The only capitalized words in a book title are the first word, proper nouns, and the first word after a colon.

- **If the source is a chapter in a book:**

Garcia-Preto, N. (1996). Latino families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & J. Pearce (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (pp. 141-154). New York: Guilford Press.

Note that the last names of the book's editors are placed after their initials in this case.

- **If the source is from electronic media (such as the internet):**

American Psychological Association (2001, January 10). *Electronic reference formats recommended by the American Psychological Association*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved February 28, 2001, from <http://www.apa.org/journals/webref.html>

Note that electronic media references begin with the same information that would be provided for a printed source (or as much of that information as is available). However, electronic references differ from printed ones in that a retrieval statement is provided at the end of the reference. This protocol is followed because documents from electronic media may change in content, move, or be removed from a site altogether. Also note that a period is not placed at the end of a retrieval statement.

- **If the source is from an unpublished class handout provided by an instructor in an AUS class:**

David, P. (2002, Spring Quarter). *Bowen's natural systems theory*. Class handout from Family of Origin Systems Theory. Antioch University Seattle.

Style Errors

Using APA style standards, as well as the more generally applied style guidelines in Hodges et al.'s (1998) *Harbrace College Handbook*, this section discusses the most common errors students make in writing academic papers in psychology. There are many types of errors, but they can be generally classified into four categories: (1) format, (2) grammar, (3) punctuation, and (4) citations. Of course, there are many other important aspects of writing style, like the organization and flow of the text, that also can be highly problematic. However, this section will limit the discussion of style problems to the above four categories which comprise the more technical and operational aspects of writing academic papers in psychology.

Format. Errors in formatting the paper typically involve spacing the lines in the narrative too close together, placing too much text on each page, failing to put the header and page number in the upper right hand corner of the page, labeling the introduction as an introduction, and providing no headings for the different parts of the paper.

As the APA standards indicate, each line of the paper should be double-spaced. This means leaving one full-size line (not a half or three-quarters line) blank between each line of type on the page. Assuming uniform margins of at least one inch at the top, bottom, right, and left of every page, no more than 27 lines of text should be on any single standardized page. Furthermore, the page header is placed in the upper right-hand corner of the page and the page number is placed five spaces to the immediate right of the page header. No other places on the page are considered appropriate locations for these items.

Because the first part of the paper is assumed to be an introduction, it is never labeled as such. After the introduction appropriate headings should then be used throughout the paper to distinguish the different topic areas being discussed. Typically, headings consist of one to three

key words that define the topic areas. Without these headings the paper can be difficult to read and hard to evaluate.

Grammar. Grammar specifies the rules by which words are employed and arranged in sentences. The most typical grammatical errors include the improper use of verb tense, the lack of noun-pronoun and subject-verb agreement, incorrect placement of adjectives and adverbial clauses, and the lack of parallel construction in sentences.

Many problems with verb tense involve confusing present and past tense. The past tense should be used when referring to those actions or conditions that occurred at a specific time in the past. For example, the past--not the present--tense should be used when discussing an author's work or when reporting results from a study.

INCORRECT: Collis (1999) finds that violence is far more prevalent in the workplace than previously had been reported.

CORRECT: Collis (1999) found that violence is far more prevalent in the workplace than previously had been reported.

In addition, when using the past tense, stay with the active rather than the passive voice as much as possible.

PROBLEMATIC: The experiment was designed by Tien (2000).

PREFERRED: Tien (2000) designed the experiment.

In those cases where an action or condition did not occur at a specific time in the past, the present perfect verb tense should be used.

INCORRECT: As a result of the research conducted at Antioch Seattle, a number of other institutions decided to get involved in similar types of investigations.

CORRECT: As a result of the research conducted at Antioch Seattle, a number of other institutions have decided to get involved in similar types of investigations.

Beyond the problems of proper use of tense, the verb must also be in agreement with its subject despite intervening phrases that begin with such words as *together with*, *including*, *plus*, and *as well as*.

INCORRECT: The percentage of correct responses as well as the speed of the responses decrease with the amount of alcohol consumed.

CORRECT: The percentage of correct responses as well as the speed of the responses decreases with the amount of alcohol consumed.

Furthermore, the plural form of some nouns, particularly those that end in the letter *a*, may appear to be singular and often cause confusion in selecting the appropriate verb form. Two nouns often confused in this manner are *data* and *phenomena*. They are both plural and should be accompanied by verbs in the plural form.

Not only is noun-verb agreement a common problem, but noun-pronoun consistency is also often confused. The grammatical rule here is that each pronoun should agree in number to its antecedent noun.

INCORRECT: The group of students using the computer assisted program improved their diagnostic accuracy by 20%.

CORRECT: The group of students in the computer assisted program improved its diagnostic accuracy by 20%.

Another area of grammatical difficulty involves the proper placement of adjectives and adverbial clauses so that they actually refer to the word they are supposed to modify.

INCORRECT: The data from the most recent survey study (Farley, 2000) only suggest a partial answer to the question of which institution provides the most comprehensive clinical training program.

CORRECT: The data from the most recent survey study (Farley, 2000) suggest only a partial answer to the question of which institution provides the most comprehensive clinical training program.

INCORRECT: Based on the assumption that two heads are better than one, the two instructors decided to work together on the new curriculum. [This construction says, “the two instructors are based on an assumption.”]

CORRECT: On the basis of the assumption that two heads are better than one, the two instructors decided to work together on the new curriculum. [This construction says, “the two instructors’ decision is based on an assumption.”]

Finally, the lack of parallel phrasing before and after coordinating conjunctions and among phrases in a series creates awkward sentences that are difficult to follow. The grammatical rule in this instance is to remain consistent in the construction of the phrases in these contexts.

INCORRECT: The students in the training group were eager to get started and develop their clinical skills.

CORRECT: The students in the training group were eager to get started and to develop their clinical skills.

INCORRECT: The trainees were told to make themselves comfortable, to read the instructions, and that they should ask about anything they did not understand.

CORRECT: The trainees were told to make themselves comfortable, to read the instructions, and to ask about anything they did not understand.

Punctuation. The most typical punctuation errors involve the use of double quotation marks and commas. One of the most common mistakes made with double quotation marks is placing them inside commas and periods when they are used to set off ironic comment, slang, or coined expression. Double quotation marks are always placed outside commas and periods in these cases. There are no exceptions.

INCORRECT: The students were “fit to be tied”.

CORRECT: The students were “fit to be tied.”

INCORRECT: Although the patient’s symptoms seemed “normal”, more diagnostic tests were nevertheless administered.

CORRECT: Although the patient’s symptoms seemed “normal.” more diagnostic tests were nevertheless administered.

Note that these types of expressions are set off by quotation marks only the first time they are employed; thereafter, quotation marks should not be used with these expressions.

Another common error in the use of double quotation marks is placing them after a page reference number when making a direct quotation. When a direct quotation is involved, the double quotation marks should always be placed at the end of the quotation and preceding the page reference number.

INCORRECT: According to Forisha (1995), “The most effective family therapists are not always the most well known family therapists (p. 10).”

CORRECT: According to Forisha (1995), “The most effective family therapists are not always the most well known family therapists” (p. 10).

The most common mistakes in the use of the comma involve errors of omission rather than commission. Most typically, these errors involve the failure to include a comma preceding a coordinating conjunction, following an introductory adverbial clause, following an introductory phrase, and separating items in a series.

A comma ordinarily precedes a coordinating conjunction that links main clauses. Coordinating conjunctions like *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet* are used to connect different main clauses in a sentence.

INCORRECT: The clinical consultant may or may not meet directly with the client but ordinarily he or she does not take actual charge of the case.

CORRECT: The clinical consultant may or may not meet directly with the client, but ordinarily he or she does not take actual charge of the case.

Note that when clauses are short (i.e., less than five words), the comma may be omitted before *and*, *but*, or *or*, but seldom before *for*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet*.

A comma usually follows introductory adverbial clauses. These clauses modify the time, place, manner, cause, or degree of the main clause.

INCORRECT: When the principal diagnosis is an Axis I disorder this is indicated by listing it first.

CORRECT: When the principal diagnosis is an Axis I disorder, this is indicated by listing it first.

Note that the comma may be omitted after an introductory adverbial clause, especially when the clause is short (i.e., less than five words), if the omission does not make for difficult reading.

A comma generally follows an introductory phrase. An introductory passage is often a prepositional or participial phrase.

INCORRECT: In determining whether the sexual dysfunction is exclusively due to a general medical condition the clinician must first establish the presence of a general medical condition.

CORRECT: In determining whether the sexual dysfunction is exclusively due to a general medical condition, the clinician must first establish the presence of a general medical condition.

A comma is always used to separate a series of three or more items, including the next to the last item.

INCORRECT: Various parts of the limbic system have been associated with emotions, sex drive, eating behavior, memory and motivation.

CORRECT: Various parts of the limbic system have been associated with emotions, sex drive, eating behavior, memory, and motivation.

Citations. A number of errors typically occur in making reference citations in the text of the paper. One of the most common errors is to omit the page number for a citation when a direct quote is involved. The page number from which the citation is taken should always be included when an author is directly quoted.

INCORRECT: According to Blake (1999), "Adult learners are more responsible learners."

CORRECT: According to Blake (1999), "Adult learners are more responsible learners." (p. 4).

Note that when the author's name is directly cited in the text, the page number is placed at the end of the quote and not in the parentheses after the year of publication.

INCORRECT: According to Forisha (1999, p. 1), "People who know APA style live overall happier lives."

CORRECT: According to Forisha (1999), "People who know APA style live overall happier lives" (p. 1).

Still another common error is to employ a specific idea or term borrowed from another author without indicating or referencing this information. The ethical and scholarly requirements are very clear in this regard. Whenever another author's ideas or concepts are used in the text, they must be referenced.

INCORRECT: It appears that the client has mastered a position of learned helplessness.

CORRECT: It appears that the client has mastered a position of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975).

References

- American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Hodges, J., Horner, W. B., Webb, S. S., & Miller, R. K. (1998). *Harbrace college handbook* (13th ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Revised 1/07/03