Writing in American Psychological Association Style

A Descriptive and Illustrative Sample

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Location of Professional Affiliation

Abstract

The American Psychological Association (APA) released its newest guide to scientific writing in

2010; the sixth edition supersedes previous editions (APA, 2010). APA style prescribes writing

and typing conventions for psychology and other disciplines. After the title page, the manuscript

begins with an abstract that presents research findings in a comprehensive and substantive

summary. The abstract does not function as an introduction or outline. The abstract should be

accurate, coherent, concise, nonevaluative, and specific. Word limits for abstracts vary journal

to journal; generally the limit is 150-250 words. Readers of journals consult abstracts to

determine if the entire article is worth reading. Therefore the abstract should be descriptive,

detailed, and contain significant content.

Writing in American Psychological Association Style:

A Descriptive and Illustrative Sample

The American Psychological Association (APA) prescribes the reporting standards for APA journals. APA codified this writing style in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual* (APA, 2010). Many provisions of APA style exist for one purpose: to make the job of APA journal editors easier. Other provisions derive their significance from the expense of journal space (in paper and typesetting terms). The author who wishes to publish a journal article should consult the instructions to the author on the journal's website which details how to submit copies to the journal editor. The editor will send the submission to several reviewers who review the paper and make recommendations to the editor about the article's publication. If the author would like their piece to be reviewed blindly they may request masked review in their cover letter to the journal editor. If the editorial team determines the article to be worthy of publication, the editor sends instruction back to the author about revisions. The author submits the final copy electronically, often via e-mail or a submission portal, to the editor. The typesetting software reads the electronic version without the necessity of manual retyping or manual typesetting.

Many college and university faculty require APA style as the normative form for term papers and other assignments. APA style promotes writing that is clear, concise, and precise; however, faculty may use alternate type of writing if the instructional pedagogy warrants it (Gorman, Gorman, & Young, 1986), or they may alter specific conventions for their own purposes (APA, 2001). This manuscript summarizes major APA style conventions and presents the form visually to the readers. As such, this manuscript serves as a summary, but not a comprehensive substitution for the *Publication Manual*.

The title and abstract pages precede the body and are numbered; the body begins on the third page. The initial segment of the body constitutes an unlabeled introduction. The introduction presents the problem and develops the background by reviewing relevant literature. In empirical research, the introduction also states the purpose and rationale for the research, the hypotheses and their derivation.

Implicit Outline

APA style employs a system of headings to outline, organize and structure the manuscript, and to make transition from one section to another easier for the reader. Most manuscripts (like this one and most undergraduate papers) employ a maximum of three levels of organization. (a) Major points are typed boldface in the center of the line in upper and lower case letters. (b) The second level is left-justified, boldface, and typed in upper and lower case letters. (c) The third level (paragraph headings) is indented, boldface, follows the conventional casing for a sentence and ends with a period. In the first two levels, the text following a heading is typed on a new line. On the third level headings, the text directly follows the heading. In empirical reports, the major headings are fixed: Method, Results, and Discussion. In review or theoretical reports the author provides appropriate descriptive headings. If a heading level is used once, a second heading of the same type must be used as in standard outline form.

Writing Style

Verbs

Tense. Since the author writes the manuscript after the research is conducted, verb usage (e.g., tense and voice) is to be consistent. If an action has been completed, the author should use the simple past tense; if it is a report of what someone wrote, the simple past tense is used (e.g., "Freud wrote", instead of "Freud says"). If the implications are current, the present tense is

appropriate. Present tense is acceptable for defining terms. The effective writer reserves future

tense for future events and predictions yet to be tested. Contractions are inappropriate in formal

writing. APA style uses the present perfect tense, past perfect tense, and subjunctive moods only

in unusual situations.

      Voice. In past years, scientists used the passive voice to describe action performed by the

investigator because it carried an air of objectivity. However, according to the current

Publication Manual (APA, 2010), careful writers employ the active voice, so that the action's

doer is the sentence's subject. Writing is clearer and crisper in the latter approach (Bates, 1985).

"However, the passive voice is often useful to avoid the gender traps of singular masculine

pronouns when you actually mean to refer to both sexes" (Rosnow & Rosnow, 1986, p. 30).

While the passive voice may be a compromise to avoid sexist writing, an effective writer can

avoid both passive voice and sexist pronouns.

Nouns and Pronouns

      In general, the writer should use a singular noun form when referring to the person, since

psychology focuses on the individual. If the reference to individuals is collective or group

oriented (i.e., applies to the group as a whole), then plural forms are acceptable. Pronoun use is

discouraged unless the pronoun's referent is exceptionally clear and unambiguous. APA (1983)

developed specific guidelines concerning the sexist use of nouns and pronouns to facilitate

clarity and avoid inappropriate evaluation, even before political correctness was in vogue.

             Avoid ambiguity in sex identify or sex role by choosing nouns, pronouns, and

          adjectives that specifically describe your participants. Sexist bias can occur when

          pronouns are used carelessly, as when the masculine pronoun *he* is used to refer to both

          sexes or when the masculine or feminine pronoun is used exclusively to define roles by

sex (e.g., "the nurse…*she*). The use of *man* as a generic noun or as an ending for an

occupational title (e.g., *policeman* instead of *police officer*) can be ambiguous and may

imply incorrectly that all persons in the group are male. (APA, 2010, p. 73)

"He" and "man" must refer to a specific male and are not acceptable generic forms for

humans where the sex of the individual is unknown, or if sex is irrelevant. Writers must avoid

most pronouns and all pronouns with sexist implications (Moulton, Robinson, & Elias, 1978).

Writers should write in the third person singular (i.e., he, she or it) and avoid using most first

person (e.g., I, we and our) and all second person pronouns (i.e., implied or stated "you"). As a

general rule, the first person emphasizes the writer, instead of the content; APA style allows the

author to write "I administered the test to 16 students." rather than to write in the longer, more

cumbersome passive voice (e.g. "The tests were administered to 16 students."). The second

person is too reminiscent of informal conversation and is therefore inappropriate for formal

discourse. Using the second person sounds preachy, provocative, or pejorative.

Citing Reference Works

Academic integrity demands that authors acknowledge the source of ideas and

quotations. A functional rule of thumb is: if information is common to the reader (e.g., ideas the

average psychology student should know), the source needs no documentation. Writers should

cite the source if it is not common knowledge. Reference citations for ideas are inserted within

the sentence, and are denoted by parenthetical insertions of the author and date of publication.

All direct quotations require reference citations with the additional element of page number.

Formats for bibliographic citations in the reference section can be found in the *Publication*

Manual (APA, 2010). Every work cited in the body of the manuscript must be included in the

reference section; only those works cited in the manuscript body comprise the reference section. That is, the reference list is a works-cited bibliography, not a work-consulted one.

The author's affiliation (e.g., Johns Hopkins University) and degrees (e.g., Dr., PhD, MD, etc.) are not germane to the force of the argument, therefore neither affiliation nor degree are found in the manuscript body, nor are they included in the reference section. Within the reference section, first and middle names are not used, but they are replaced by initials. The reader should note common capitalization rules for title when presented within the manuscript. However, in the reference list only the first word, the first word following a colon or dash, or proper names are capitalized. APA style utilizes the two-letter U.S. Postal Service abbreviations for states, which do not include periods (e.g., PA for Pennsylvania).

Quality of Resources

The writer produces a manuscript to communicate essential information and to persuade the reader with cogent arguments and accurately interpreted facts. Sources of fact and information are not created equal. If possible, the author should consult primary sources (i.e., the actual journal report of the original investigator). Preferable secondary sources are review articles in journals, and chapters in professional books or graduate textbooks. Undergraduate textbooks are acceptable as citable sources only in the absence of higher quality works. Articles in magazines (e.g., *Time* or *Newsweek*), digests (e.g., *Reader's Digest*), or encyclopedias carry little credibility or persuasive power, since the authors are seldom disciplinary specialists, and cine they condense and simplify materials. Condensation and simplification inevitably distort.

Electronic Sources

The growth of the World Wide Web and Internet provides challenges for researchers and writers. The challenges focus on the quality and location of information. Much of the

information available on-line has not been reviewed by scholars to determine its accuracy or

completeness; therefore, unless the information has clearly been reviewed, it must be treated as

hearsay or rumor in the court of argument. That is, much Internet information is good for

illustration, but inadequate as proof.

Information secured from national databases (e.g., U.S. Department of Labor statistics)

should be considered as primary sources with quality as high as can be obtained.   Some

scholars have developed a rule of thumb about Internet information: if it is not clearly identified

with an institution, if the author is unknown, and if no date is given, the information fails in

quality control. For that reason, one academician noted, "Like postmodernism, the Internet does

not distinguish between the true and the false, the important and the trivial, the enduring and the

ephemeral" (Himmelfarb, 1996, p. A56).

Himmelfarb (1996) anticipated the second issue that concerns the availability and fluidity

of web information. Unlike material occurring in print which is relatively enduring, information

on the Internet may be present today and gone tomorrow, or located in one place now and at

another in the future. As information, unless it can be retrieved reliably, it fulfills no persuasive

role in objective persuasion.

Electronic forms of professional journals now predominate. The quality of these works

should be considered as primary sources.   Previously, when citing journals in electronic form

APA style required a cumbersome addition to the citation, including retrieval dates. Now the

DOI (digital object identifiers) system provides a means of persistent identification of

information on digital networks. The DOI, a unique alphanumeric string assigned by a

registration agency, is added to the end of a standard journal citation to indicate a persistent link

to the article's location on the internet. A DOI should be used for citation whenever available,

even if the information was gathered from the paper journal. On a journal article a DOI is typically found in the upper right corner of the first page.

On-line information about APA style exists for individuals with Internet connectivity. APA (2010) developed a web site with supplemental material about the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual* (APA, 2010). This website includes chapter by chapter changes from the fifth to the sixth edition and tutorials on APA style.

Typing Instructions

The good title describes the manuscript's content, usually in 10 to 12 words. The journal editor uses the running head (an abbreviated title appearing near the top of the title page) as a header when the article is published. The running head is typed as a header on every page on the left-hand side; if the article becomes disassembled on the editor's desk, the editor can correctly assemble the pages by using the running head.

Spacing and Hyphenation

APA style double spaces everything. The typist should set the word processor on "2." Lines are 6 ½ inches long with 1 inch margins on all sides. When the margins are set correctly, 25 or 26 lines of text and the short title appear on the page. Indentations are ½ inch, for consistency use the tab key on your word processor.

> Do not justify lines; that is, do not use the word-processing feature that adjusts spacing between words to make all lines the same length (flush with the margins). Instead, use the flush-left style, and leave the right margin uneven, or ragged. Do not divide words at the end of a line, and do not use the hyphenation function to break words at the ends of lines. Let a line run short rather than break a word at the end of a line (APA, 2010, p. 229).

One (1) space follows commas, semi-colons, periods, and colons. Seriation within sentences or within a paragraph is indicated by a lowercase alphabetic letter enclosed in parentheses. Paragraphs linked in a series are marked by Arabic numerals followed by a period. In all cases, items within series must take parallel form. Seriation identified by bullets is acceptable if you wish to avoid implying your comments are specifically ordered.

Fonts and Typefaces

Times New Roman is the preferred typeface for APA publications. Courier is also an acceptable typeface. Font size should be 12 point. "The type on paper must be dark, clear, and readable. It must also photocopy well" (APA, 2001, p. 285). "In a manuscript intended for publication, use the functions of your word-processing program to create italic, bold, or other special fonts or styles of type following the style guidelines specified in this *Publication Manual*" (APA, 2001, p. 286).

Quotations

Long quotations (40 words or more) are indented ½ inches on the left side; if the original material began at a new paragraph, an additional indentation is made. Quotation marks and single spacing are redundant with the left indentation, and therefore unnecessary. APA form differs at this point from other standard term paper forms like Modern Language Association (MLA). Citations for short quotations are inserted within sentences; for long quotations, the citation follows outside the sentence. Unless the quotation is exceptional in form and cogency, the author should present the ideas in his or her own words. A string of quotations does not a scholarly article make!

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