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RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY – 2ND CANADIAN EDITION

CONTENTS

American Psychological Association (APA) Style

Learning Objectives

1. Define APA style and list several of its most important characteristics.

2. Identify three levels of APA style and give examples of each.

3. Identify multiple sources of information about APA style.

What Is APA Style?

APA style is a set of guidelines for writing in psychology and related fields. These guidelines are set down in the **Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association** (APA, 2006)[1]. The *Publication Manual* originated in 1929 as a short journal article that provided basic standards for preparing manuscripts to be submitted for publication (Bentley et al., 1929)[2]. It was later expanded and published as a book by the association and is now in its seventh edition (view the APA Style website online). The primary purpose of APA style is to facilitate scientific communication by promoting clarity of expression and by standardizing the organization and content of research articles and book chapters. It is easier to write about research when you know what information to present, the order in which to present it, and even the style in which to present it. Likewise, it is easier to read about research when it is presented in familiar and expected ways.

APA style is best thought of as a "genre" of writing that is appropriate for presenting the results of psychological research—especially in academic and professional contexts. It is not synonymous with "good writing" in general. You would not write a literary analysis for an English class, even if it were based on psychoanalytic concepts, in APA style. You would write it in Modern Language Association (MLA) style instead. And you would not write a newspa-

style, in AP style, or in the style of a romance novel, an e-mail to a friend, or a shopping list. You would write it in APA style. Part of being a good writer in general is adopting a style that is appropriate to the writing task at hand, and for writing about psychological research, this is APA style.

The Levels of APA Style

Because APA style consists of a large number and variety of guidelines—the *Publication Manual* is nearly 300 pages long—it can be useful to think about it in terms of three basic levels. The first is the overall **organization** of an article (which is covered in Chapter 2 "Manuscript Structure and Content" of the *Publication Manual*). Empirical research reports, in particular, have several distinct sections that always appear in the same order:

- **Title page.** Presents the article title and author names and affiliations.

- **Abstract.** Summarizes the research.

- **Introduction.** Describes previous research and the rationale for the current study.

- **Method.** Describes how the study was conducted.

- **Results.** Describes the results of the study.

- **Discussion.** Summarizes the study and discusses its implications.

- **References.** Lists the references cited throughout the article.

The second level of APA style can be referred to as **high-level style** (covered in Chapter 3 "Writing Clearly and Concisely" of the *Publication Manual*), which includes guidelines for the clear expression of ideas. There are two important themes here. One is that APA-style writing is formal rather than informal. It adopts a tone that is appropriate for communicating with professional colleagues—other researchers and practitioners—who share an interest in the topic. Beyond this shared interest, however, these colleagues are not necessarily similar to the writer or to each other. A graduate student in British Columbia might be writing an article that will be read by a young psychotherapist in Toronto and a respected professor of psychology in Tokyo. Thus formal writing avoids slang, contractions, pop culture references, humour, and other elements that would be acceptable in talking with a friend or in writing informally.

The second theme of high-level APA style is that it is straightforward. This means that it communicates ideas as simply and clearly as possible, putting the focus on the ideas themselves and not on how they are communicated. Thus APA-style writing minimizes literary devices such as metaphor, imagery, irony, suspense, and so on. Again, humour is kept to a minimum. Sentences are short and direct. Technical terms must be used, but they are used to improve communication, not simply to make the writing sound more "scientific." For example, if participants immersed their hands in a bucket of ice water, it is better just to write this than to write that they "were subjected to a pain-inducement apparatus." At the same time, however, there is no better way to communicate that a between-subjects design was used than to use the term "between-subjects design."

APA Style and the Values of Psychology

Robert Madigan and his colleagues have argued that APA style has a purpose that often goes unrecognized (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995)[3]. Specifically, it promotes psychologists' scientific values

make good sense. Following are several features of APA-style writing and the scientific values or assumptions they reflect.

APA style feature	Scientific value or assumption
There are very few direct quotations of other researchers.	The phenomena and theories of psychology are objective and do not depend on the specific words a particular researcher used to describe them.
Criticisms are directed at other researchers' work but not at them personally.	The focus of scientific research is on drawing general conclusions about the world, not on the personalities of particular researchers.
There are many references and reference citations.	Scientific research is a large-scale collaboration among many researchers.
Empirical research reports are organized with specific sections in a fixed order.	There is an ideal approach to conducting empirical research in psychology (even if this ideal is not always achieved in actual research).
Researchers tend to "hedge" their conclusions, e.g., "The results *suggest* that…"	Scientific knowledge is tentative and always subject to revision based on new empirical results.

Another important element of high-level APA style is the avoidance of language that is biased against particular groups. This is not only to avoid offending people—why would you want to offend people who are interested in your work?—but also for the sake of scientific objectivity and accuracy. For example, the term *sexual orientation* should be used instead of *sexual preference* because people do not generally experience their orientation as a "preference," nor is it as easily changeable as this term suggests (APA Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force on Guidelines for Psychotherapy With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients, 2000)[4].

The general principles for avoiding biased language are fairly simple. First, be sensitive to labels by avoiding terms that are offensive or have negative connotations. This includes terms that identify people with a disorder or other problem they happen to have. For example, *patients with schizophrenia* is better than *schizophrenics*. Second, use more specific terms rather than more general ones. For example, *Chinese Canadians* is better than *Asian Canadians* if everyone in the group is, in fact, Chinese Canadian. Third, avoid objectifying research participants. Instead, acknowledge their active contribution to the research. For example, "The *students completed* the questionnaire" is better than "The *subjects were administered* the questionnaire." Note that this principle also makes for clearer, more engaging writing. Table 11.1 shows several more examples that follow these general principles.

Table 11.1 Examples of Avoiding Biased Language

Instead of…	Use…
man, men	men and women, people
firemen	firefighters
homosexuals, gays, bisexuals	lesbians, gay men, bisexual men, bisexual women
minority	specific group label (e.g., African American)
neurotics	people scoring high in neuroticism
special children	children with learning disabilities

The previous edition of the *Publication Manual* strongly discouraged the use of the term *subjects* (except for nonhumans) and strongly encouraged the use of *participants* instead. The current edition, however, acknowledges that *subjects* can still be appropriate in referring to human participants in areas in which it has traditionally been used (e.g., basic memory research). But it also encourages the use of more specific terms when possible: *university students*, *children*, *respondents*, and so on.

The third level of APA style can be referred to as **low-level style** (which is covered in Chapter 4 "The Mechanics of Style" through Chapter 7 "Reference Examples" of the *Publication Manual*.) Low-level style includes all the specific guidelines pertaining to spelling, grammar, references and reference citations, numbers and statistics, figures and tables, and so on. There are so many low-level guidelines that even experienced professionals need to consult the *Publication Manual* from time to time. Table 11.2 contains some of the most common types of APA style errors based on an analysis of manuscripts submitted to one professional journal over a 6-year period (Onwuegbuzie, Combs, Slate, & Frels, 2010)[5]. These errors were committed by professional researchers but are probably similar to those that students commit the most too. See also Note 11.8 "Online APA Style Resources" in this section and, of course, the *Publication Manual* itself.

Table 11.2 Top 10 APA Style Errors

Error type	Example
1. Use of numbers	Failing to use numerals for 10 and above
2. Hyphenation	Failing to hyphenate compound adjectives that precede a noun (e.g., "role playing technique" should be "role-playing technique")
3. Use of *et al.*	Failing to use it after a reference is cited for the first time
4. Headings	Not capitalizing headings correctly
5. Use of *since*	Using *since* to mean *because*
6. Tables and figures	Not formatting them in APA style; repeating information that is already given in the text
7. Use of commas	Failing to use a comma before *and* or *or* in a series of three or more elements
8. Use of abbreviations	Failing to spell out a term completely before introducing an abbreviation for it
9. Spacing	Not consistently double-spacing between lines
10. Use of "&" in references	Using *&* in the text or *and* in parentheses

Online APA Style Resources

The best source of information on APA style is the Publication Manual itself. However, there are also many good websites on APA style, which do an excellent job of presenting the basics for beginning researchers. Here are a few of them.

[APA Style](#)

[Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)

[Douglas Degelman's APA Style Essentials \[PDF\]](#)

[Doc Scribe's APA Style Lite \[PDF\]](#)

APA-Style References and Citations

tremely important. Their importance is reflected in the extensive and detailed set of rules for formatting and using them.

References

At the end of an APA-style article or book chapter is a list that contains **references** to all the works cited in the text (and *only* the works cited in the text). The reference list begins on its own page, with the heading "References," centred in upper and lower case. The references themselves are then listed alphabetically according to the last names of the first named author for each citation. (As in the rest of an APA-style manuscript, *everything* is double-spaced.) Many different kinds of works might be cited in APA-style articles and book chapters, including magazine articles, websites, government documents, and even television shows. Of course, you should consult the *Publication Manual* or Online APA Style Resources for details on how to format them. Here we will focus on formatting references for the three most common kinds of works cited in APA style: journal articles, books, and book chapters.

Journal Articles

For journal articles, the generic format for a reference is as follows:

Author, A. A., Author, B. B., & Author, C. C. (year). Title of article. *Title of Journal, xx*(yy), pp–pp. doi:xx.xxxxxxxxxx

Here is a concrete example:

Adair, J. G., & Vohra, N. (2003). The explosion of knowledge, references, and citations: Psychology's unique response to a crisis. *American Psychologist, 58*(1), 15–23. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.15

There are several things to notice here. The reference includes a hanging indent. That is, the first line of the reference is not indented but all subsequent lines are. The authors' names appear in the same order as on the article, which reflects the authors' relative contributions to the research. Only the authors' last names and initials appear, and the names are separated by commas with an ampersand (&) between the last two. This is true even when there are only two authors. Only the first word of the article title is capitalized. The only exceptions are for words that are proper nouns or adjectives (e.g., "Freudian") or if there is a subtitle, in which case the first word of the subtitle is also capitalized. In the journal title, however, all the important words are capitalized. The journal title and volume number are italicized; however, the issue number (listed within parentheses) is not. At the very end of the reference is the digital object identifier (DOI), which provides a permanent link to the location of the article on the Internet. Include this if it is available. It can generally be found in the record for the item on an electronic database (e.g., PsycINFO) and is usually displayed on the first page of the published article.

Books

For a book, the generic format and a concrete example are as follows:

Author, A. A. (year). *Title of book*. Location: Publisher.

Kashdan, T., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2014). The upside of your dark side. New York, NY: Hudson Street Press.

For a chapter in an edited book, the generic format and a concrete example are as follows:

Author, A. A., Author, B. B., & Author, C. C. (year). Title of chapter. In A. A. Editor, B. B. Editor, & C. C. Editor (Eds.), *Title of book* (pp. xxx–xxx). Location: Publisher.

Lilienfeld, S. O., & Lynn, S. J. (2003). Dissociative identity disorder: Multiple personalities, multiple controversies. In S. O. Lilienfeld, S. J. Lynn, & J. M. Lohr (Eds.), Science and pseudoscience in clinical psychology (pp. 109–142). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Notice that references for books and book chapters are similar to those for journal articles, but there are several differences too. For an edited book, the names of the editors appear with their first and middle initials followed by their last names (not the other way around)—with the abbreviation "Eds." (or "Ed.," if there is only one) appearing in parentheses immediately after the final editor's name. Only the first word of a book title is capitalized (with the exceptions noted for article titles), and the entire title is italicized. For a chapter in an edited book, the page numbers of the chapter appear in parentheses after the book title with the abbreviation "pp." Finally, both formats end with the location of publication and the publisher, separated by a colon.

Reference Citations

When you refer to another researcher's idea, you must include a **reference citation** (in the text) to the work in which that idea originally appeared and a full reference to that work in the reference list. What counts as an idea that must be cited? In general, this includes phenomena discovered by other researchers, theories they have developed, hypotheses they have derived, and specific methods they have used (e.g., specific questionnaires or stimulus materials). Citations should also appear for factual information that is not common knowledge so that other researchers can check that information for themselves. For example, in an article on the effect of cell phone usage on driving ability, the writer might cite official statistics on the number of cell phone–related accidents that occur each year. Among the ideas that do not need citations are widely shared methodological and statistical concepts (e.g., between-subjects design, *t* test) and statements that are so broad that they would be difficult for anyone to argue with (e.g., "Working memory plays a role in many daily activities."). Be careful, though, because "common knowledge" about human behaviour is often incorrect. Therefore, when in doubt, find an appropriate reference to cite or remove the questionable assertion.

When you cite a work in the text of your manuscript, there are two ways to do it. Both include only the last names of the authors and the year of publication. The first method is to use the authors' last names in the sentence (with no first names or initials) followed immediately by the year of publication in parentheses. Here are some examples:

Burger (2008) conducted a replication of Milgram's (1963) original obedience study.

Although many people believe that women are more talkative than men, Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Slatcher, and Pennebaker (2007) found essentially no difference in the number of words spoken by male and female college students.

Notice several things. First, the authors' names are treated grammatically as names of people, not as things. It is better to write "a replication of Milgram's (1963) study" than "a replication of Milgram (1963)." Second, when there are two authors the names are not separated by commas, but when there are three or more authors they are. Third, the word *and* (rather than an ampersand) is used to join the authors' names. Fourth, the year follows immediately after

paper in Section 11.2 "Writing a Research Report in American Psychological Association (APA) Style", is that the year only needs to be included the first time a particular work is cited in the same paragraph.

The second way to cite an article or a book chapter is parenthetically—including the authors' last names and the year of publication in parentheses following the idea that is being credited. Here are some examples:

People can be surprisingly obedient to authority figures (Burger, 2008; Milgram, 1963).

Recent evidence suggests that men and women are similarly talkative (Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007).

One thing to notice about such parenthetical citations is that they are often placed at the end of the sentence, which minimizes their disruption to the flow of that sentence. In contrast to the first way of citing a work, this way always includes the year—even when the citation is given multiple times in the same paragraph. Notice also that when there are multiple citations in the same set of parentheses, they are organized alphabetically by the name of the first author and separated by semicolons.

There are no strict rules for deciding which of the two citation styles to use. Most articles and book chapters contain a mixture of the two. In general, however, the first approach works well when you want to emphasize the person who conducted the research—for example, if you were comparing the theories of two prominent researchers. It also works well when you are describing a particular study in detail. The second approach works well when you are discussing a general idea and especially when you want to include multiple citations for the same idea.

The third most common error in Table 11.2 has to do with the use of *et al.* This is an abbreviation for the Latin term *et alia*, which means "and others." In APA style, if an article or a book chapter has *more than two authors*, you should include all their names when you first cite that work. After that, however, you should use the first author's name followed by "et al." Here are some examples:

Recall that Mehl et al. (2007) found that women and men spoke about the same number of words per day on average.

There is a strong positive correlation between the number of daily hassles and the number of symptoms people experience (Kanner et al., 1981).

Notice that there is no comma between the first author's name and "et al." Notice also that there is no period after "et" but there is one after "al." This is because "et" is a complete word and "al." is an abbreviation for the word *alia*.

Key Takeaways

- APA style is a set of guidelines for writing in psychology. It is the genre of writing that psychologists use to communicate about their research with other researchers and practitioners.
- APA style can be seen as having three levels. There is the organization of a research article, the high-level style that includes writing in a formal and straightforward way, and the low-level style that consists of many specific rules of grammar, spelling, formatting of references, and so on.
- References and reference citations are an important part of APA style. There are specific rules for formatting references and for citing them in the text of an article.

1. Practice: Find a description of a research study in a popular magazine, newspaper, blog, or website. Then identify five specific differences between how that description is written and how it would be written in APA style.

2. Practice: Find and correct the errors in the following fictional APA-style references and citations.

   - Walters, F. T., and DeLeon, M. (2010). Relationship Between Intrinsic Motivation and Accuracy of Academic Self-Evaluations Among High School Students. Educational Psychology Quarterly, 23, 234–256.

   - Moore, Lilia S. (2007). Ethics in survey research. In M. Williams & P. L. Lee (eds.), Ethical Issues in Psychology (pp. 120–156), Boston, Psychological Research Press.

   - Vang, C., Dumont, L. S., and Prescott, M. P. found that left-handed people have a stronger preference for abstract art than right-handed people (2006).

   - This result has been replicated several times (Williamson, 1998; Pentecost & Garcia, 2006; Armbruster, 2011)

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1. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.) (2010). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association. ↵

2. Bentley, M., Peerenboom, C. A., Hodge, F. W., Passano, E. B., Warren, H. C., & Washburn, M. F. (1929). Instructions in regard to preparation of manuscript. *Psychological Bulletin, 26*, 57–63. ↵

3. Madigan, R., Johnson, S., & Linton, P. (1995). The language of psychology: APA style as epistemology. *American Psychologist, 50*, 428–436. ↵

4. American Psychological Association, Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force on Guidelines for Psychotherapy With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients. (2000). *Guidelines for psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20081022063811/http://www.apa.org:80/pi/lgbc/guidelines.html ↵

5. Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Combs, J. P., Slate, J. R., & Frels, R. K. (2010). Editorial: Evidence-based guidelines for avoiding the most common APA errors in journal article submissions. *Research in the Schools, 16*, ix–xxxvi. ↵

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