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An
EasyGuide to
APA
Style

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APA Style Versus Format 1

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*Why It Matters to Your Audience
and Why It Should Matter to You*

If you are in college, congratulations—we think you made a good choice! That means you have many papers to write in your future. This book is about helping you become a better writer and helping build your confidence in your writing ability. In particular, this book is about helping you learn how to write a scientific paper with precision and objectivity, one in which you are able to communicate accurately your ideas, findings, and interpretations using the type of writing style and format published by the American Psychological Association (APA). This is a writing style very different from what you likely learned in a high school English class, where you might have learned about narrative, expository, or descriptive styles of writing. Here, we are all about writing in APA style. To help you become APA-style compliant, we use plenty of examples, clever subtitles, and any trick we can think of to get your attention so you can learn from this book. In fact, the book is purposely spiral bound so it can lie flat on your desk next to your computer or in your lap as you work on your APA papers.

Regardless of whether you are writing a paper as a psychology, sociology, or nursing student, if a professor asks you to write in APA style, you are asked to do so to help communicate your ideas in writing in a way that will be more easily understood by others in your field. APA style reflects the scientific method in that its goals are precision and objectivity in writing, as well as standardization of style and format. Using APA style helps keep our personal style and eccentricities from affecting our writing and reporting of research. It helps maintain the goal of objectivity in science. Specific content is placed within specific sections and in a particular order, allowing the reader to know exactly where to find particular

pieces of information about your research. Following APA style and format, you will be able to provide the reader with a convincing argument that features clear and concise statements and logical development of your ideas. You will find a greater appreciation for the *APA Publication Manual* once you start reading articles for your assignments. Then you will start to notice how helpful it is to have a particular type of writing style and format from one paper to the next, expediting your reading and understanding of the material.

Let us introduce two of the more common terms applied when using the *APA Publication Manual* to write your papers: *APA style* and *APA format*. For some assignments, you might be told to “write in APA style”; others might say to “use APA format,” or you might just hear, “Follow the *Publication Manual*.” You may be confused by these different instructions. What does it all mean?

What Is the Difference Between APA Style and APA Format?

These terms can be confusing because they have no clear, set definitions. For instance, APA style has been characterized by these writing elements: clarity, literal writing, and brevity (Vipond, 1993). But other types of writing could share these characteristics; for example, would you not want an owner’s manual to be clear, literal, and brief? Sure, but owners’ manuals are not written in APA style (at least not the manuals we have read). For clarity *here* (and for our purposes), we define APA style as *a writing approach that embodies objectivity, credibility of sources, and an evidence-based approach*. For instance, objectivity implies a certain level of detachment and formality; APA style does not typically involve passionate stories written to resemble the dialogue between characters in a play or sitcom. Objectivity also implies distance and balance in approach. Scientists writing in APA style address variables, hypotheses, and theories (which could involve studying emotion and passion) and how they affect behavior generally. Scientists do not typically write about specific individuals (with the exception of descriptions of case studies). Objectivity in APA style also obligates the writer to avoid biased language and to respect the power of language and labels.

APA style necessitates an approach that respects and preserves the chain of evidence and how science builds on previous findings and refines theoretical explanations over time. An example is the citations an author uses to support claims made in scientific writing. When you see the flow of a sentence or paragraph interrupted by names and years in parentheses, this is the author giving credit for ideas—exemplified by someone writing about how to optimize teaching and learning (Gurung & Schwartz, 2009). Listing the last name of the author (or authors) and the year when the work was published provides evidence for the writer’s claim and makes readers aware of the continued refinement of theories from one scientist’s work to the next. Giving credit where credit is due also helps avoid plagiarism (see Chapter 5 for details on avoiding plagiarism). Taken as a whole, APA style is one important component of what helps the author

of a journal article—and, correspondingly, the research presented in it—reflect scientific objectivity.

For our purposes, APA format is what makes a journal article “look” scientific. APA format refers to the precise method of generating your article, manuscript, or term paper by using the rules set forth in the *Publication Manual*. When we refer to “APA format,” we mean the nitty-gritty details of how your written work will appear on paper: the margins, the font, when to use an ampersand (&) and when to use the word *and*, inserting the correct information in the top 1-inch margin of your paper, when to use numerals (12) and when to spell out numbers (*twelve*), how to format tables with only horizontal lines, and how citation styles in the text vary with the number of authors. These details address the appearance of an APA-formatted paper.

An EasyGuide to APA Style (3rd edition) is written for students who are learning to write in APA style using APA format. Why not just rely on the “official” book, the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (hereafter known as the *PM*; APA, 2010a)? The *PM* is not evil. And if your instructor thinks you should purchase it, then you probably should. But you should know that the *PM* was not written primarily as a guide to help students learn to write better (that is the purpose of *this* book). The *PM* was originally written to provide guidance to researchers on how to submit journal article manuscripts for consideration to be published in the scientific literature. However, it is clear that the *PM* has evolved into much more than an instruction set and is now a prescriptive collection of rules (format) and writing advice (style) aimed at facilitating and fostering scientific research. Could you actually use our *EasyGuide* as a replacement for the *PM*? We think so, but be sure to follow the advice of your instructors. After all, they are the ones who are reading, grading, and providing feedback. That said, beware the itty-bitty style guides that are often required for English composition or first-year writing classes. It may be nice to have one book with all the major styles in it, but books such as these often do not provide all the key information needed and, therefore, are rarely ever a good substitute for the real thing—or better yet, for a resource such as the one you now hold in your hands.

Here is an analogy to consider when thinking about the *PM*: The 2015 rule-book for Major League Baseball is 282 pages long; knowing the rules to baseball may be important, but just knowing the rules will not make you a better baseball player. However, if you add tons of baseball practice with feedback from knowledgeable sources (such as coaches, older players, books, and videos), you can become a better ballplayer over time. We want this book to be one of those knowledgeable sources you consult on a regular basis to improve your scientific writing throughout your undergraduate career. Combined, the three of us have taught for a long time and have read and graded more than 10,001 pages of student papers. We take you behind the scenes of writing and point out major common errors so you can avoid them. We have organized this book to make it easy to find the information students typically need to know when learning APA style to write papers, which is sometimes not the case with the *PM*.

Why APA Style Anyway? Wasn't MLA Good Enough?

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Odds are you have already learned some of the rules of at least one other style guide, which may have been MLA (Modern Language Association). It might have been in high school or even in a college-level English composition class, but you may have used MLA style if you wrote your papers with footnotes, if you had a bibliography or works-cited page at the end of your paper, or if you used *op. cit.* or *ibid.* in your referencing. The typical MLA method of citing involves listing the author followed by the page number where the information came from (compared with APA style, which uses author followed by year published). So why APA format? Wasn't MLA good enough?

It is hard to know with certainty why MLA style was not adopted for psychological writing. The Modern Language Association was founded in 1883 (MLA, 2009); the American Psychological Association was founded in 1892. However, the first “Instructions” to APA authors were not published until 1929, and the *MLA Handbook* is now in its seventh edition—formally known as the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (MLA, 2009). So, for whatever reason, separate style guides emerged—and there are many more (e.g., Chicago style; American Sociological Association [ASA] style; Turabian style; Modern Humanities Research Association [MHRA] style; and for newspapers, Associated Press [AP] style).

So where did APA style and format come from? In the very first “Instructions in Regard to Preparation of Manuscript” (1929), a six-member panel recommended “a standard of procedure, to which exceptions would doubtless be necessary, but to which reference might be made in cases of doubt” (p. 57). On a less positive (but believable) note, the 1929 “Instructions” noted that “a badly prepared manuscript always suggests uncritical research and slovenly thinking” (p. 58). Whether fair or not, the quality of our writing reflects the quality of our thinking! Good science requires communication, and if we do not communicate well, even the best ideas in the world will not be understood by others (think about the professor who you know is brilliant but has a hard time communicating on a level any student can understand).

Even though APA format may seem cumbersome to learn, once you are familiar with it, you will feel more comfortable with its conventions. If you have started to read journal articles and papers, you may notice that most, if not all, follow the same organization. The more articles you read, the more thankful you will be that each article is written in the same format and style. It really does make reviewing the literature much easier. We cannot imagine reading a journal article in which the Results section appears before the Method section (and that is not because we lack imagination or are geeks). By following (and relying on) APA style and format, we provide readers scaffolding to process the complex ideas and information being presented. Ever watch a movie in which the sequence of events is shown out of order (e.g., multiple flashbacks)? Can you tell if something is foreshadowing or background information? Then the movie jumps again. Are we back to the present, or is this a peek into the future? Only

once in a while does it work well (check out the movies *Memento* [Todd, Todd, & Nolan, 2000], *Inception* [Nolan, Thomas, & Nolan, 2010], and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* [Edelstein et al., 2001] for real mind-bending experiences). Following a sequence and order provides a framework for understanding what happened, what is happening, and what will happen.

In the Long Run, Attention to Detail Matters (Including APA Style and Format)

As you become familiar with the details of writing in APA style and format, either through using this book alone or with the *PM*, you should keep two important points in mind. First, there will be times when you are frustrated by having to learn a “new” format, when MLA, Chicago, or another style was working just fine before. Although it may be frustrating to learn something new, this is a task you will repeat hundreds if not thousands of times throughout your work career. This task is part of being an educated person. New procedures will be implemented, a new type of software will be installed, a new gadget will be invented—and your task will be to figure it all out. An inherent love of learning and taking on new challenges is an attitude that will serve you well with your future employers, whoever they may be. So the ability to learn how to write capably in APA style demonstrates a competence you have that others may not share; in fact, you might know fellow students who pick classes with the least amount of writing. If you develop a skill in an area others systematically avoid, you inevitably make yourself more marketable.

The ability to pay attention to detail, particularly in regard to APA format, can help separate the good from the great. In fact, in a study by Gardner (2007) on the reasons new collegiate hires get fired, failure to pay attention to details is one of the top reasons reported. If you can handle both the big picture and the minute details simultaneously, that is a gift. These gifts can be developed with practice. Practice may not make perfect, but practice allows one to get better and closer to perfect. You have to study, you have to learn from mistakes, and you have to be willing to make the mistakes to maximize your learning ability; obviously, you need to be willing to attempt the task numerous times to gain these experiences. Paying attention to the details can make the difference between earning an A or a B in a course. You may not like the details or how picky and arbitrary they seem, but knowing the rules (and knowing those occasions when you can break the rules) is invaluable. Plus, as you will read in this book, those seemingly “picky” rules can be very helpful to practicing robust science.

Keep in mind that these rules are not just in place for students learning to write. We have some evidence to support the fact that psychologists (including your professors) must also play by the same rules. Brewer, Scherzer, Van Raalte, Petitpas, and Andersen (2001) reported that in a survey of journal editors in psychology, 39% of the editors responding indicated that they had rejected an article submitted for publication solely because the writing did not adhere to APA style

and format. These rules are the same rules scientists play by, and, clearly, the penalties for not following the rules can be harsh for faculty and students alike.

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Write for Your Specific Audience: Term Papers Versus Formal Research Papers

Ultimately, we all have to play by the rules. Unfortunately, the rules are often a moving target. Have you heard the variation on the Golden Rule—those who have the gold make the rules? In this case, your audience makes the rules for your writing, and your audience (your instructor) may not always be clear about expectations, which means you have to be. Although there are many excellent, skilled, caring instructors out there (we know many of them and salute them all), not all pay as much attention to the assignment design as they could. For example, an instructor may give a writing assignment, like the one in the box below, thinking the instructions are perfectly clear. But see how many questions we have after reading the “assignment.”

Before class next week, I want you to pick a topic in psychology and write a research paper about your topic. Be sure to use evidence to support your position. Make sure you complete the following:

1. Write in APA format.
2. Your paper must be 5 to 7 pages in length.
3. To save paper, use single-spacing.
4. Use reference citations in the text of your paper to support any claims you make.

The paper is due on Thursday, and here it is Wednesday night (though we do not recommend waiting until the night before); you sit down to write your paper—no problem? Take a closer look at this assignment; it is wide open and does not provide enough detail for you to be confident about what your audience (your instructor) wants. The instruction “write in APA format” is vague at best, especially because it is contradicted by the third point in the assignment; APA format uses double-spacing in the text. Does this instructor want a title page? An abstract (probably not)? A references page? Do the title page and the references page “count” toward the 5- to 7-page requirement? Are direct quotations OK? Are a minimum number of references required? Can you use all kinds of reference materials or just refereed journal articles?

First, an important point: We hope you know that it pays to start the writing process earlier. Not only would you have more time to get clarification on the assignment; you would have time to write more than one draft, something that contributes to higher quality papers (Landrum, 2012). Additionally, research shows that students who start assignments earlier do better in class (Gurung, 2009).

A basic tenet of any type of writing is this: Write for your audience. In most cases now, your audience is your instructor. So you need to know what your instructor wants, even if the instructor thinks he or she is being clear in the instructions. You need to know the questions to ask so you can get the answers you need to succeed. This book will help you identify which questions to ask, and when you get the answers, we will give you specific tips on how to do well on the major parts of your writing assignments, whether they are term papers or research papers.

So what would a research paper look like? A research paper, especially in psychology (as in an experimental paper), is typically scripted; you are likely to have specific subsections, such as a Method section and a Results section, and many other details to attend to. A research paper is likely to employ APA style and most, if not all, components of APA format. Even though APA style and format provide particulars about how to write your paper, what you will discover is that different instructors have different expectations about style and format; attention to detail will be of ultimate importance to some, and others may not care at all. You cannot use a “one-size-fits-all” approach and expect to be consistently successful in your coursework. You may need to change your writing approach to fit both the assignment and the instructor; in fact, your instructor’s expectations during a semester may change as well (we know . . . that can be frustrating). Do not be shy. Ask questions. If you are brave, point out inconsistencies, pay attention to details, and work to meet the needs of your audience. If you can conquer these lessons as an undergraduate student, these skills and abilities will serve you well beyond graduation.