Writing Guidelines for Psychology Papers

These guidelines address some of the problems that occur most frequently in psychology papers and essays. This list is not exhaustive, but it does provide a number of important precautions. It also describes some of the errors that are especially likely to detract from the quality of students' writing.

**General Issues**

1. Provide a sense of organization when writing a psychology paper. The introductory paragraph should state your major point or describe what you plan to accomplish in the paper. Sentences within each paragraph should be related to one another, and each paragraph should follow the preceding paragraph in a logical fashion. The last part of your paper should summarize the major points or provide a logical conclusion, rather than leaving the reader in search of a missing final paragraph.

2. Keep your audience in mind. In general, you do not need to define basic concepts (such as *correlation*). However, assume that your reader is not intimately familiar with the topic you are discussing.

3. Be certain to proofread the final copy of your paper. A feature such as Spell Check can locate many typographical errors, but not when you have erroneously substituted another English word. This feature will not identify grammatical problems. Be sure to print a hard copy of your paper, and proofread this copy. You will locate many more errors and awkward sentences than when relying on your computer screen for proofreading. In addition, a hard copy will help you assess whether the overall structure of your paper is well organized.

4. Check the spelling of any word that may cause a problem. In psychology, the most commonly misspelled words are the following: *questionnaire, psychology* (yes!), *environment, independent, separate, accommodate, aggression, judgment, definite, development, experimenter,* and *significant.* Several other confusions include the following: (1) *biased* (*not* bias sample *but* biased sample); (2) *prejudiced* (*not* They are prejudice, *but* They are prejudiced); (3) *led* (the past tense of the verb to lead is led, as in *The results led the researchers to the following conclusions...*); and (4) *cited* when referring to a citation (e.g., *The researchers cited several previous studies, not sighted or sited*). Professors also prefer to see their names spelled correctly.
5. Avoid awkward sentences. Read each sentence aloud to make certain that it is not clumsy or ambiguous. Also avoid sentences that are too long. If you read your paper aloud, you will be more likely to detect stylistic errors.

6. Avoid paragraphs that are one sentence in length or more than 2/3 page in length. Make certain that the sentences within each paragraph are conceptually related.

7. Avoid extensive quotations. Professors prefer to grade your writing, rather than the writing of psychologists whom you could quote. If you do chose to include a quotation, be sure to include the page number as part of your APA-style citation.

Specific Grammatical Issues

8. A hyphen is represented by a single strike of the dash key on your keyboard. (A well-known writer). A dash is represented by two strikes on that key (Freud never uttered that remark—despite rumors to the contrary.).

9. Compound adjectives require hyphens between the words that precede the noun (gender-role stereotypes and 2-year-old child). Any word that contains self- also needs a hyphen (e.g., self-respect, self-image, self-concept).

10. Use an apostrophe for possessive forms, such as Bandura's theory, the women's scores, and the boy's answer. You can check the accuracy of apostrophe placement by converting the possessive form to the of form and determining whether it makes sense. (For example, consider the phrase, “the women's scores.” the scores of the women makes sense, whereas the scores of the womens does not.) Do not use an apostrophe to make a noun plural. (Incorrect: The Martin's went on a trip; correct: The Martins.... Incorrect: The student's answered the questionnaire; correct: The students....)

11. When referring to people, use who, not that (e.g., The students who participated in the study..., not The students that participated in the study).

12. Use the word number to refer to items that can be counted (e.g., the number of correct answers). However, use the word amount only when referring to a "mass noun," something that cannot be counted (e.g., the amount of learning). Similarly, use the word fewer to refer to items that can be counted, but use less when referring to something that cannot be counted (e.g., The animals were fed a diet that contained fewer calories and less fat.).

13. In general, avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. (For example, avoid a sentence like this: Do not use a preposition to end a sentence with.)
14. Several common abbreviations used in writing include the following: *e.g.* (which means *for example*), *i.e.* (which means *that is*), and *et al.* (which means *and others*). Notice the location of periods in these abbreviations.

15. Use complete sentences, rather than sentence fragments. *Although there was no significant difference among the three conditions* is incomplete, because although requires another clause in the sentence. *To determine whether frequency influenced learning* is simply a phrase, rather than a full-fledged sentence.

16. Avoid comma splices, such as *It was an interesting article, it was also a well-conducted experiment.* A comma is not "strong" enough to link two clauses. You have three choices: (a) Insert *and* or some other conjunction after the comma; (b) Make two separate sentences from the two clauses; or (c) Replace the comma with a semicolon (:).

17. Use semicolons only between two complete clauses, rather than between a complete clause and a fragment. Incorrect: *The experimenter divided the participants into two groups; six participants per group.* You can either include the fragment in the previous clause (...two groups, with six participants per group) or complete the fragment (...two groups; each group had six participants).

18. Use a colon before a lengthy list of items (e.g., *The researchers tested three variables: age of the participants, gender of the participants, and instructional condition.*).

19. Keep the verb tenses consistent. Do not shift between the present tense (*she asks*) and the past tense (*he replied*) unless a shift is required by the nature of the situation. In general, the past tense should be used when reviewing the previous literature or when reporting your results. In general, use the present tense when you state hypotheses. Also, psychologists generally use the present tense when stating well-accepted findings that are based on many studies. (For example, in the following sentence, the present tense is appropriate for the word *understand*: *Cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that people understand sentences better if they are in the active voice, rather than in the passive voice.*)

20. Avoid slang phrases such as *try and, would of, and could of.* Instead, use *try to, would have,* and *could have.* The slang word *alot* does not exist in the dictionary; instead, use either *a lot or many.* Informal phrases such as *to shy away from* appear unprofessional; instead, use *to avoid.*

21. Be careful to distinguish between homonyms, as well as similar-sounding words. Common errors include confusing *then* with *than,* to with *too* and *two,* and *their* with *there.* Students often confuse *it's* with *its*; the former is a contraction, whereas the latter is a possessive (e.g., *It's true that a school can improve its reputation.*). In psychology,
a common problem is to confuse the noun effect and the verb affect. Here are examples of correct usage: The effects of weather upon mood... but Weather affects mood....

22. Some nouns in psychology may look singular, but they are really plural. Here are some examples:

Singular: The datum is... phenomenon medium criterion
Plural: The data are... phenomena media criteria

23. Make certain that every pronoun has a clear referent. For example, a sentence such as This is difficult to determine is probably ambiguous because readers will be unclear which previous noun is referred to by the word this. Also, do not write this study if this could refer to two possible studies.

24. Make certain that each pronoun agrees with the word to which it refers. A student must be sure that they know the assignment... is an improper sentence because the plural pronoun they refers to a singular noun student. One correct option is: Students must be sure that they know the assignment.

25. Avoid the masculine generic, which is the use of male terms (e.g., his, he, man, mankind...) to refer to both males and females. The American Psychological Association does not permit the masculine generic in its publications, because psychologists are aware of the potential danger of excluding women from our language. It is usually more graceful to use the plural form than to use he or she or s/he. Incorrect: Each student took his examination. Correct: All students took their examinations. (Note: The APA Publication Manual discusses word-choice issue such as the masculine generic on pages 66-76.)

26. When discussing individuals with disabilities, place the people first, not their disability. For example, write people who are depressed, rather than depressed people or depressives. (Note: The APA Publication Manual describes this issue on pages 75-76.)

27. Do not use psychological terms inappropriately. For example, do not write negative reinforcement when you really mean punishment. Do not use "pop psych" terms such as an ego trip or nervous breakdown. Also keep in mind that psychologists do not prove theories; instead, we find support for theories. Furthermore, be certain that you use research-methods terms correctly. Terms such as experiment, correlation, and confounding variable have very specific meanings, and students often use them too broadly (e.g., using the term experiment to refer to all kinds of research studies).

28. Avoid contractions in formal papers. For example, write cannot instead of can't.
29. Do not overuse the pronouns I, me, and my. The APA Publication Manual now accepts occasional use of the first-person, singular form; however, your paper will look unprofessional if you overuse this form.

30. In general, avoid beginning a sentence with a conjunction (e.g., And the author also argued that...).

31. The numbers below 10 should generally be written in words. The numbers 10 and above should generally be written in numerals: eight, nine, 10, 11. One exception occurs at the beginning of a sentence, where a number should be written in words. It is usually more graceful to rearrange the sentence to avoid writing a very large number in words. Many rules and details about numbers are described in the APA Publication Manual (pages 122-130).

Citing References

32. Every article, chapter, or book that you mention in a paper must have a citation in your reference section, and every citation in your reference section must be mentioned in your paper. The two most common ways to mention resources within your paper are the following: A study was conducted by Garcia and Olsen (2004) and Two recent studies have demonstrated the relationship between mood and recall (Garcia & Olsen, 2004; Smith, 2003). Notice that you must use and outside the parentheses, but use an ampersand (&) inside the parentheses. In addition, notice that the date immediately follows the names of the authors.

When discussing a study, cite it using either of these two styles. You do not need to keep making parenthetical references once you have cited it. However, suppose that you discuss Garcia and Olsen's study, then Smith's study, and you want to return to Garcia and Olsen's study. You should write something like As Garcia and Olsen's (2004) study demonstrated....

33. APA reference style is a fine art form that many professionals have not yet mastered; consult the APA Publication Manual (pages 215-281) for more exotic details. Note that references must be double-spaced. Here are the three most common formats:

1. Journal Article: (Note that the journal title and the volume number are italicized.)

2. *Book:*


3. *Chapter in a Book:*


34. Avoid using secondary sources. Suppose that Nuñez (2004) discusses a study by Herrmann (1994). If you wish to discuss Herrmann's study, you must locate, read, and summarize Herrmann's original article. If you consult only Nuñez's summary and use that summary in your paper, you are relying on a secondary source, which is considered to be a form of plagiarism.

Note: The APA *Publication Manual* is a superb reference for stylistic issues, as well as specific issues concerned with APA format. APA style is used in education and numerous other disciplines, in addition to psychology. This reference is: