APA Writing Style and Mechanics: A User's Guide

Ima A. Student

Ottawa University

(Note: Instructors may ask for additional items on the title page such as course name and

number, instructor name and date.)

Abstract

The abstract provides a brief, comprehensive summary of the paper. Abstracts typically range from 150 to 250 words, unless otherwise stated, and should note the major ideas of the paper. The abstract appears on a page by itself, between the cover page and first page of text and, unlike all other paragraphs in the research paper, is not indented. An abstract is required for all graduate papers; however, for undergraduate papers, the abstract is optional.

APA Writing Style and Mechanics: A User's Guide

Writing in the style prescribed by the American Psychological Association (APA), the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 6th Edition* (2010) can be a daunting experience for both students and faculty members. Green and Gold (1996) suggest that an additional guide can be helpful, minimizing the need for searching through the sometimes confusing and highly detailed text of APA. This guide presents a review of the information most often used by students in research papers and is typed in APA style.

Formatting

Most of the common errors that students make are merely in the formatting of a research paper (Green & Gold, 1996). The few basic requirements described herein simplify the process of presenting an orderly APA-style paper with in-text citation style.

Page Makeup and Typography

The basic requirements for typing the typical research paper are quite straightforward. These requirements are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Margins and indents. Margins are required to be 1" equally—top, sides, and bottom. This rule does not apply to the last page of the text, which may end at any point above the 1-inch margin. The 1-inch margin rule is broken to avoid placing a lone heading on the last line of the page or a single line of text on the top of the next page. All paragraphs within the research paper are indented five to seven spaces or ½ inch.

Page numbers and running heads. The page header contains the first 50 characters of the title of the paper and appears at the top of every printed page, flush left in all uppercase letters. Page numbers appear in the upper right-hand corner of every page. Pagination begins with 1 appearing on the title page.

Typefaces/ spacing. Preferred typefaces are 12-point serif, such as Times New Roman, Palatino, or Courier New. Writers should avoid using sans serif typefaces, such as Helvetica and Arial, because they can be difficult to read in lengthy documents. A research paper is double-spaced throughout, with only the left-margin justified. Leave one space after all punctuation, including periods. However, space twice after punctuation at the end of a sentence.

Levels of Heading

All major headings are centered, with each of the main words capitalized. All subsection headings to a major heading are left justified and boldface, with each of the main words capitalized. All sub-subsection headings are indented with the paragraph, boldface, and followed by a period, capitalizing only the first word (unless a proper name is included in the heading). This guide illustrates proper typing of all subheadings throughout. Since the paper is double-spaced, no additional space is inserted before or after subheadings.

Subheadings illustrate the balance of coverage within a paper. While the number of subheadings and levels of subheadings varies with papers, one would not use a single subheading of any one level. Where there is one subheading, there should be at least one additional subheading to balance it.

In-Text Citations

Plagiarism constitutes a serious academic concern. According to Lawton, Cousineau, and Hillard (2001), "academic communities demand that writers credit others for their work and that the source of their material clearly be acknowledged" (para. 6). They further stated, "a mark of strong academic writing is the practice of situating one's claims and findings within a tradition of inquiry into the subject" (para. 4). Well-selected quotations and well-articulated paraphrases from the literature support the student's organization and development of the research paper.

Gibaldi and Achtert (1977) emphasized the relationship of cited material to the whole:

> It is important to remember that the research paper is not just a collection of other persons'
> opinions but a carefully constructed presentation of an idea—or series of ideas—that relies
> on other sources for clarification and verification. Learned facts and borrowed opinions
> must be fully documented . . . in such a manner that they support rather than overshadow
> the paper itself. (p. 1)

An in-text citation is required for any direct quotation or paraphrased material within the research paper. Each in-text citation corresponds to full source information organized in the reference page at the end of the paper. The following are some basic guidelines to assist students in completing an in-text citation.

Direct Quotations

Direct quotations must mirror exactly the original source, even if errors are contained in the original. To alert the reader that any errors are part of the original material, the word *sic,* enclosed in brackets and italicized, should follow the erroneous material. The source of information must be cited for all quoted material. The format of direct quotations may vary with the placement of the quoted material in the sentence, but the three essential elements of an in-text citation for a direct quote are: author last name(s), year, and page number (p.). Paragraph number (para. or ¶) is used for sources such as online database journals that do not provide page numbers.

Quotations of fewer than 40 words are enclosed in quotation marks within the body of the text with their corresponding in-text citation (author, year, page number). Quotations of 40 words or more are set in a block format without quotation marks. The block quote is started on a new line, indented five to seven spaces, and includes a corresponding in-text citation (author,

year, page number). Examples of quotations are found throughout this guide, including two sample block quotes.

Paraphrased Material

Paraphrasing allows the writer to use the ideas of another, to represent another's argument, and to give proper credit to the original author or authors (Lawton et al., 2001). Each time an author is paraphrased, the source must be cited in the text using the surname of the author and year of publication. Within a paragraph, when the name of the author is part of the narrative, it is not necessary to include the year in subsequent nonparenthetical references to the same study; however, the year must be included in all parenthetical citations. Page or paragraph numbers are not required for paraphrased material that may summarize thought taken from several pages, a whole chapter, or a whole work; APA, however, encourages writers to include them if the paraphrased material comes from a particular page or paragraph.

Multiple Authors

As illustrated by example within this guide, two author last names when referred to within the text are joined by the word "and." When two names are part of the in-text citation within parentheses, however, they are joined by an ampersand (&). The same usage of "and" and "&" occurs with more than two authors, to join the final two. For citing a work within the text with three, four, or five authors, cite all the authors' last names at first reference; thereafter, only cite the first author's last name followed by the Latin abbreviation for "and others": et al. (Note: The "et" has no period; the "al." is followed by a period.) For citing a work within the text with six or more authors, cite only the last name of the first author followed by et al.

Two Citations by the Same Author in the Same Year

It is not uncommon for authors to publish multiple works within a single year.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the works to be similar in content and utilized for strengthening a student's point or thesis. The research writer distinguishes them by putting an "a" after the year of the first citation and a "b" after the second. The reference list must correspond to this in-text citation addition (e.g., 2004a; 2004b).

Organizations as Authors

Often an organization or a group, without a person's name, is the author of material that is important to a research paper. If so, the organization's name takes the place of the author's name and is spelled out in full. If the organization's name is unwieldy or an abbreviation is easily understandable, spell out the full name the first time it is used and use the abbreviation thereafter. A common example: American Psychological Association (APA, 2010). In the reference list, the full source information is alphabetized under "American."

Writing Mechanics

Correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure are essential components of professional writing. Strunk and White (2000) emphasized the importance of being succinct:

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all of his sentences short… but that every word tell. (p. 23)

The above direct quotation is an example of indenting a quotation of over 40 words. The three required elements of an in-text citation are present. Author last names and the year appear in the paragraph that introduces the quotation, and the page number follows the actual quotation; or, all elements—author, year, page number—may be inserted in parentheses after the final period of the block quote.

Grammar

"Grammar is a *sine qua non* of language . . ." (Gordon, 1993, p. xv). Rules of correct grammar are available through many web sources, including www.apastyle.org. Some important reminders have been selected for inclusion herein.

Subject and verb agreement. A singular noun requires a singular verb, and a plural noun requires a plural verb. Words that intervene between the noun and verb do not change that basic rule.

Noun and pronoun agreement. If a writer uses a subject that is singular, he or she must use pronouns that are singular. In order to avoid having to use he/she and his/her, writers may reword the sentence and use a plural subject, thereby eliminating the problem. For example, the sentence "A student applying for a job must carefully proofread his or her application" can be reworded to read, "Students applying for jobs must carefully proofread their applications." Use of plurals can help writers reduce sexist bias and avoid stereotypes.

Punctuation

Correct punctuation establishes the rhythm and readability of sentences. In APA style, only one space is used after periods, commas, colons, and semicolons. When a hyphen is used, no space appears before or after the hyphen. Research writers avoid the use of contractions (instead of it's, use it is).

Correct use of commas and semicolons can be problematic for students. Writers are encouraged to proofread their papers to ensure proper use of commas (Purdue University Online Writing Lab, n.d.). Strunk and White (2000) and APA (2010) have continued to emphasize the use of the comma before the "and" in simple series.

Typing the References

Only those references that have been cited in the paper are listed on the reference page. A sample reference page is included at the end of this guide. Additional sources that a student consults but does not quote or paraphrase within the research paper may not be included in the reference list. Rule of thumb: each reference cited in the text must appear in the reference list and every entry in the reference list must be cited in the text.

The hanging indentation is used for the reference page; that is, the first line of the reference, beginning with the author's last name, rests against the left margin, and the following lines are indented block style five to seven spaces. (Note: Use "control + tab" to automatically register the hanging indentation.) The reference page is alphabetized by author last name and contains the date of publication in parentheses, directly after the author's name. Next, the title, the place of publication, and the name of the publisher are listed.

The proliferation of electronic materials has prompted the APA (2010) to create formats designed specifically for Internet and web- based materials. For electronic documents, learners should try to retrieve the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) assigned to the content. Many publishers display the DOI prominently on the first page of the article. When a DOI is used, no further retrieval information is needed. If no DOI has been assigned to the content, provide the home page URL of the publisher. It is not necessary to provide database information (such as EBSCO) and do not include retrieval dates. Samples of formatting of references for electronic sources are included at the end of this document.

Modern simplification of capitalization within the reference list requires that, even in book and article titles, the only words capitalized are: (1) the first word, (2) the first word after a colon, and (3) a proper name. Only the names of books and journals and their corresponding

volume numbers are italicized. Please note that no element in a reference list requires the use of quotation marks or underscore.

The sample references that comprise the references to this paper and Appendix A include: organization as author; books or journal articles by two or more authors; electronic version journal; article retrieved from an online database; and quoted material retrieved from a webpage. In all cases, the beginning information in each individual reference (author and year) must directly match the in-text citation. In the case of journals, the in-text citation contains the exact page number for quoted material while the inclusive page numbers of the entire article appear in the reference list.

Conclusion

A writer simplifies the research paper process by using a prescribed format and style such as APA. Some writers may wish to purchase the APA research paper template available through www.apastyle.org, but others find that the basic requirements illustrated in this guide are sufficient for a well-written and well-documented paper.

References

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Gibaldi, J., & Achtert, W.S. (1977). *MLA handbook for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations.* New York: Modern Language Association.

Gordon, K. E. (1993). *The deluxe transitive vampire: The ultimate handbook of grammar for the innocent, the eager, and the doomed.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Green, Q., & Gold, R. (1996). *Student writers: Faculty headaches.* Phoenix, AZ: Peculiar Press.

Lawton, K. A., Cousineau, L., & Hillard, V.E. (2001). *Plagiarism: Its nature and consequences.* Retrieved from http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/plagarism.htm

Purdue University Online Writing Lab. (n.d.). *APA formatting and style guide*. Retrieved from http://owl.english.purdue.edu

Strunk, W., & White, E. B. (2000). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). New York: Macmillan.

Appendix A

Additional Information and Samples of Reference List Entries

Ottawa University encourages the use of online library databases available via the MyOttawa Portal at myottawa.ottawa.edu. Other internet resources are widely available (please avoid Wikipedia, which is not considered a scholarly source). Research writers should exercise caution when using nonacademic dot.com sites.

When citing scholarly academic sources from online databases (APA format, of course), paste the DOI into your document. When no DOI is available, include the web address (URL) of the journal home page. In general, it is not necessary to include database information. No retrieval date is needed. The following are some examples of electronic reference entries not covered in the reference list to the preceding guide. Note that web addresses (URLs) are not underlined. That is, they should not appear as, or be, hyperlinks. Note further that references ending with URLs do not have a period at the end.

Examples:

Jacobson, J. W., Mulick, J. A., & Schwartz, A. A. (1995). A history of facilitated

communication: Science, pseudoscience, and antiscience. *American Psychologist*, *50*(9),

750-765. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.50.9.750

Parto, L. (1999). How much is too much. *American Journalism Review*, *21*(5), 74. Retrieved

from http://www.ajr.org

Secondary Sources

The term *secondary source* refers to use of information derived by an author from another *primary source.* While it is always preferable to access the original—*primary*—source, a secondary source can be used as follows:

Give the secondary source in the reference list; in text, name the original work, and give

a citation for the secondary source. For example, if Seidenberg and McClelland's work is

cited in Coltheart et al. and you did not read the work cited, list the Coltheart et al.

reference in the References. In the text, use the following citation:

Text citation: Seidenberg and McClelland's study (as cited in Coltheart, Curtis, Atkins, &

Haller, 1993) is indicative of …

Reference list entry:

Coltheart, M., Curtis, B., Atkins, P., & Haller, M (1993). Models of reading aloud: Dual-

route and parallel-distributed-processing approaches. *Psychological Review,*

100(4), 589-608. doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.100.4.589

Miscellaneous

For additional information, please consult the American Psychological Association

(APA), the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 6th Edition* (2010) or

the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/).