

## **American Psychological Association style primer**

Based on *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition (2010).

The full guide is an essential reference for academic writing. It is intended for articles written for APA journals, but your dissertation should follow it.

Use EndNote to make compliance with APA style easier, but you will still need to check some details. Sometimes, a search database such as PSYCHINFO will have information in the incorrect field, which leads to strange results in your reference list.

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### STRUCTURE

See pp. 27-36.

#### Chapter 1: Introduction

Subsections should: explore the importance of the problem, describe relevant scholarship, and state the hypotheses (or research questions) and their relation to the research design (p. 28). It is typical to have an overview of the dissertation at the end of the chapter.

#### Chapter 2: Literature review

#### Chapter 3: Methodology

Start with an overview, naming subsections that will follow. After this, an organization as follows usually works well:

*Participants:* Describe the characteristics of the sample (e.g., ages, demographic information, and previous experience with activities of interest), the recruitment of participants (criteria for inclusion, how informed consent was obtained), and the suitability of the sample. If you are doing an experiment justify the sample size by consideration of statistical power; if a case study, explain which the sample is suitable for achieving the objectives of the study.

*Procedures:* If you are doing an experiment, describe what the participants were asked to do. This is also the place to describe the curriculum, teaching approach, and similar things. Use a title for the subsection that is informative.

*Measures/data collection:* provide an overview of the data collected (e.g., pre- and posttest, interviews, observations), and their relation to the research questions. For example explain what you hope to learn from the interviews. Then have subsections or paragraphs on each data source.

If you are using a test, provide a rationale for using the test. Briefly discuss the literature on how the variable/phenomenon of interest is measured, and justify the specific test that you are using. If it has been used in other studies, cite these, and report what is known about the validity of the test from such studies. Establish that

the test is a good instrument for your study.

If you are doing something like rating bits of text (coding), define each level of the rating scheme and give an example how it was employed. Also report the results of a second independent rater who rated some of the data (typically around 30% of it). For example: “A second social studies teacher rated 100 protocols (35%) independently of the researcher; she did not know from which class a protocol came. Inter-rater reliability was 0.70 (Cohen kappa), which is considered good agreement (provide citation).”

For interviews, describe how the interview was set up, describe the interview questions, state whether it was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and how the results were analyzed. Mention if you did special things such as asking the participants to check the transcript to verify its accuracy.

Note that these examples are illustrations only—studies will vary regarding what is needed. In any dissertation, you need to make clear what you did, and you need to show that the methods you used are suitable for the study. Establish that the results of your study, using the methods you selected, can be trusted. Throughout, you need to relate to methodological aspects of the literature in your field. Whether a procedure is adequate is not a matter of your opinion, but is based on a position you take after consulting the literature.

For a dissertation, it is a good idea to have a section before the description of the participants on the overall approach to the study. How do people generally study questions such as yours? E.g., why do you think a case study is a good approach?

Chapter 4: Results (there may be several)

Report the results of the study. Be sure to report only and not go into a long discussion. For example, you should explain what a quote from an interview is telling you about your research questions, but not go into the literature and compare your result to other studies.

Chapter 5 Discussion/Conclusion:

Provide a brief review of what was done and found out in the study, but do not repeat the results chapter at length. Then return to the literature to discuss the significance and implications of the study for further research and practice. Also discuss the limitations of the study (which often can be turned into opportunities for further research).

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## WRITING CLEARLY

See chapter 3

Use heading effectively to alert the reader to the structure of your argument, see pp. 62-63.

## Tone

Writing should not be passionate or flamboyant

- Not *van Aalst failed to point out...* but *van Aalst did not point out ...*
- Not: *Another bright ideas was ...*

Also avoid writing that blames participants—as much as possible.

- Perhaps not: *The teachers were disorganized and failed to provide timely feedback on drafts ....* (Consider whether it is necessary to say it at all.)

## Economy of expression

Wordiness can constrain understanding; be as concise as possible.

- Not *they were both alike, but they were alike*
- Not *absolutely essential, but essential*
- Not *period of time, but time*

## Jargon

This is the “continuous use of a technical vocabulary, even in places where that vocabulary is not relevant” (p. 68). Avoid this as much as possible. When technical terms are necessary, make sure that you define them. Be charitable to your reader, and express your ideas as simply as possible.

## Colloquial expressions

These have no place in academic writing, although they may be useful in other kinds of writing and daily conversation.

Pages 71-76 discuss how you can reduce bias in your writing. Check your document for it, just as you check spelling.

The classic little book, *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White, is still an excellent resource on style. Read it from cover to cover to find out your mistakes.

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## CAPITALS

See pages 101-103.

Use only for:

- Beginning a sentence
- Major words in titles and headings
- Proper nouns and trade names
- Nouns followed by numerals or letters

- Titles of tests
  - Names of conditions or groups in an experiment
  - Names of factors, variables, and effects
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## USE OF TENSE

Use the past tense for things that occurred in the past but no longer continue. This includes the reporting of your own results. Use the present tense for the discussion section or if you believe the claim is still current.

- Cobb (1996) found that ... (reviewing)
  - Bereiter (2002) argues .... (reviewing, but still current)
  - Methods section: *We used a mixed method to ...* instead of *We will use a mixed method to ...*
  - Results section: *The experimental group outperformed the control group* instead of *The experimental group is better at problem solving than ...*
  - Discussion section: *According to our study, students make use of ...*
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## CITATION WITHIN TEXT

If the name is mentioned in the text add the year in parentheses:

- O'Neill and de Castel (1990) stated ...

If the name is not mentioned explicitly, you add the reference in parentheses at the end of the sentence or clause; also use "&" instead of "and":

- ... (O'Neill & de Castel, 1990)

If a list, separate them by ";" and order alphabetically:

- ... (Law & Wong, 2000; Rao, 1986; van Aalst, 2006)
  - NOT chronological (Rao, 1986; Law & Wong, 2000; van Aalst, 2006)
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## QUOTATIONS

If you make a direct quote (exactly as in the reference), you must add the pages (paragraphs in web documents).

- "... Winne (1994, p. 4);
- "... Bielaczyc (1999, pp. 20-24)
- 

If the quote is over 40 words, use an indented block quote *without quotation marks*. Dissertations and articles are double-spaced; however, in dissertations you can use single or 1.5 spacing for block quotes. Do not put the whole quote in italics.

Give the punctuation first, then end or begin the quote:

- According to Wells (1921, p. 34), “Vygotsky did not become old.”

In web documents that do not have page numbers use ¶ to refer to the paragraph number. For example:

- van Aalst (2005, ¶ 5) stated ..... If the web document is not dated it would be van Aalst (n.d., ¶ 5).

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## REFERENCE LIST

Check APA journals for many examples. The reference list should be double-spaced. Use overhang.

### *Journal article:*

Chan, C., Burtis, J., & Bereiter, C. (1997). Knowledge building as a mediator of conflict in conceptual change. *Cognition and Instruction, 15*, 1-40.

If each issue of the journal starts with page 1, state the issue number in parentheses, after the volume number (not in italics). If the page numbers continue from one issue to the next issue, the issue number is not given.

### *Book chapter:*

Davydov, V. V. (1999). The content and unsolved problems of activity theory. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R. Punnamäki (Eds.) *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 39-52). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cole, M., & Engeström, Y. (1993). A cultural-historical approach to distributed cognition. In G. Salomon (Ed.), *Distributed cognitions: Psychological and educational considerations* (pp. 20-34). New York: Cambridge University Press.

The book title is in italics, but the chapter is not.

In the reference list only the first word of a title and proper nouns are in capitals, but in the text of the paper all the major words are in capitals, if the whole title is written. So:

- In *Education and Mind in the Knowledge Age*, Bereiter (2002) states ...
- In reference list: Bereiter, C. (2002). *Education and mind in the knowledge age*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

### *Conference paper:*

Sha, L., & van Aalst, J. (2003, April). An application to social network analysis to knowledge building. In J. van Aalst & C. Chan (Chairs), *Probing individual,*

*social, and cultural aspects of knowledge building*. A structured poster session presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003.

Give the month in parentheses with the year, and give the full date of the conference.

*Web document:*

Benton Foundation (1998, July 7). Barriers to closing the gap. In *Losing ground bit by bit: Low-income communities in the information age* (chap. 2). Retrieved August 18, 2001, from <http://www.benton.org/Library/Low-Income/two.html>.

When in doubt, consult the APA guide.