

# Do's and Don'ts of Effective Writing in Psychology

The primary purpose of APA style is to report information and findings in the field of psychology. Its goal is a **clear, concise, and orderly flow of ideas** presented in a scholarly and objective manner. Appropriate citation of the work of others is also paramount. The following do's and don'ts of writing are based on mistakes (both APA style errors and scholarly writing errors) commonly made by beginning writers in psychology. Many of the points raised earlier have been boiled down and summarized here, as well as more detailed points that bear specifically on APA rules. **Do** check your paper against this list before turning it in!

## APA Style Errors:

1. **Don't write a novel.** Fiction writing and scientific writing have different purposes and consequently different styles. Don't weave a tale of suspense complete with foreshadowing, flashbacks or surprise endings. *Don't* wait until the end of the paper to give the punch line!

**Do tell a story.** Your paper should be a straightforward tale of a circumscribed question in want of an answer. The answer is your thesis, and you are going to tell the tale of why your thesis is the answer to the question. Keep it simple and direct and make it clear from the beginning what you are arguing.

2. **Don't try to "prove" a theory.** In science, you cannot prove a theory. The best you can hope for is that a theory accounts for the known data. There is always a chance that new data will come along that challenges the existing theory, and the theory will then have to be revised. So all theories in psychology (as in other scientific fields) are provisional. Therefore, it is incorrect to talk about "proof" in psychology. You are better off comparing and contrasting two or more alternative theories (or hypotheses), and showing that the weight of the evidence favors one of them. Your primary job in evaluating a hypothesis or a theory is deciding whether there is evidence in support of or against it, not whether there is proof for it.

**Example (avoid):** This proves that Bellows' (1998) theory was right.

**Do support the theory.** Even though you cannot prove a given theory, you can certainly provide support for (for against) it in the form of evidence.

**Examples (preferable):**

This study provides support for Bellows' (1998) theory.

The results of this study are consistent with Bellow's (1998) theory.

3. **Don't overuse low-value sources of evidence.** Not all sources of information are equal. Newspapers, popular magazines, and best-selling books are considered lower-value secondary sources. They may best be used to provide examples or case studies, which can be helpful when introducing your topic to the reader, but cite these sources sparingly.

**Do use high-value journals and professional books as your main sources of scientific evidence.** The highest value sources of scientific evidence are peer-reviewed journals. Many of these can be located online through the Harvard Library System (see Appendix), or in hard copy in Widener. Articles in peer-reviewed journals have been subjected to review by experts in the appropriate field of psychology. (Note that, in Reference sections, the APA gives preference to professional journals by capitalizing each word in the journal name.) Trade or professional books are also high-value sources (although these books are generally not subjected to peer review; APA capitalizes only the first word of a book title). The bulk of your reference section should be composed of articles from professional journals and chapters from professional trade books.

4. **Don't editorialize.** Avoid evaluative terms such as "horrible," "ridiculous," "indefensible," etc. Let the facts you present speak for themselves.

**Examples (avoid):**

"It would be foolish to ignore the evidence in favor of this theory."

"This study completely failed to prove the author's point."

"It is obvious that [this theory] is correct."

**Do express your point of view through an objective presentation of evidence.** One of the main goals of scientific writing is the **objective** reporting of information. Of course, you will have a point of view (your thesis). You want your readers to arrive at the same conclusion that you did by objectively weighing the evidence that you present.

5. **Don't overuse secondary sources.** If you find that you are using more than two or three "as cited in" references, then you need to get hold of the original articles and read them for yourself. Whenever you take one author's word for what another author has reported, you run the risk of misinterpretation. Use these secondary sources very sparingly. (Textbooks are considered secondary sources. They are summaries and interpretations of the work of others. As a rule, you should not cite textbooks in your paper.)

**Do read the work of all authors whom you cite.** Remember that you are responsible for the accurate reporting of the work of others. When you cite an author directly, the assumption is that you have read the work in question.

6. **Don't overuse technical jargon.** Psychology, like all scientific fields, has its own jargon. However, the more jargon you use, the narrower the audience who will "get" your paper. Strive to make your paper comprehensible to an

audience with a good general education.

**Do define key terms.** If you must use a technical term, be sure to define it (either directly or by using it in a context where its meaning becomes apparent).

**Example (preferable):**

“Expressed emotion (EE) refers to the amount of hostility, criticism, or overinvolvement by family members directed toward the patient.”

Also, be sure to define your specific intended usage of terms that may have multiple meanings or connotations. (The word *aggression* has one meaning for sports psychologists, a different meaning for psychopathologists, and still a different meaning for animal psychologists. Its specific meaning in your paper should be defined.)

**Example (preferable):**

“Aggression, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as any case of unprovoked attack (hitting, biting, or kicking) upon another child.”

7. **Don't overuse direct quotations.** Remember that although quotations from experts may be considered “evidence” in many liberal arts disciplines, the opinions of others are not considered evidence in scientific fields. Direct quotes interfere with the flow of ideas and should be used sparingly. Beginning writers in psychology often flood their papers with direct quotes from published researchers.

**Example (avoid):** Seidman et al. (1997) have stated that for ADHD “the impact on society is enormous in terms of financial cost, stress to families, disruption in schools, and its potential for leading to criminality and substance abuse” (p. 150).

**Do rephrase and summarize the important points of other writers (properly cited, of course!) in your own words.** Paraphrasing improves the flow of ideas.

**Example (preferable):** Seidman and his colleagues (1997) suggested that the social impact of ADHD is enormous, including financial costs, family stress, school disruption, and the potential for criminal behavior and substance abuse.

8. **Don't use footnotes or endnotes.** The interruption of shifting one's eyes to the bottom of the page or (worse!) to the end of the paper to read a note detracts from the orderly flow of ideas.

**Do incorporate footnote material directly into the body of the paper.** The APA guideline is: if it is important enough to include in the paper, put it in the body of the text. If it is not important enough, delete it altogether!

9. **Don't substitute synonyms when expressing a given concept or vary sentence structure in an attempt to make your sentences more interesting.** Using different words or phrases for the same concept will only confuse your readers.

**Example (avoid):** Extraverted children demonstrate anger when their play is interrupted, whereas, contrary to their more outgoing counterparts,

youngsters with an introverted temperament, do not get mad when their activities are interrupted.

**Do attempt to use the same words or phrases each time you express a given concept to promote clarity.** Parallel sentence construction also promotes clarity.

**Example** (preferable): Extraverted children demonstrate anger when their play is interrupted, whereas, introverted children do not demonstrate anger when their play is interrupted.

10. **Don't write in First Person.** Avoid reporting First Person personal anecdotes, as well as phrases such as "I feel..." or "I believe..."

**Examples** (avoid):

"My Aunt Chloe had the same experience with depression..."

"I feel like Crespi and Cameron (1992) should have included a placebo control group in their study..."

**Do write in Third Person.**

**Examples** (preferable):

"Chloe Johnson (personal communication, April 15, 1999) reported a similar experience with depression..."

"However, Crespi and Cameron (1992) did not include a placebo control group in their study..."

11. **Don't overuse present tense.** Present tense is appropriate when describing currently-held theories ("Terror Management Theory states that...") or general statements of fact ("Independent cultures place greater value on..."); as such, it is commonly used in introductory and concluding paragraphs, as well as in topic and closing sentences. Don't use present when describing specific work that occurred in the past however. Instead, use past tense if the work occurred at a specific time and present perfect tense if the work spanned several studies or several researchers.

**Examples** (avoid):

William James, in his 1890 treatise, examines how different researchers conceptualize the unconscious.

Carlyle revisits this question in a series of studies (1992; 1994).

**Do use past or present perfect tense.** These tenses are preferred for actions that have already occurred.

**Examples** (preferable):

William James, in his 1890 treatise, examined how different researchers conceptualized the unconscious.

Carlyle has revisited this question in a series of studies (1992; 1994).

## General Scholarly Writing Errors:

1. **Don't make your thesis a guessing game!** Your reader should not have to guess at the main point of the paper.

**Do formulate a restricted and concise thesis.** Make your thesis very clear and narrow enough in scope that you can thoroughly address it in your paper. State the thesis early in the paper (first or second paragraph). Then do not wander away from the thesis.

2. **Don't expect your reader to automatically understand the importance of your thesis.**

**Do present a motive for your thesis early in the paper.** Why is your thesis important? What larger question or problem will your thesis, when properly supported, make strides toward answering? Give your reader a reason for wanting to read your paper.

3. **Don't use vague pronouns.** If your reader must retrace the previous sentence to determine whether "he" refers to the participant or the experimenter of a study you are describing, then clarity has been compromised.

**Do check your pronouns.** Make sure that each pronoun in your manuscript has an obvious referent. One good rule is to replace all simple pronouns (this, that, these, those) with the appropriate noun or noun phrase.

**Incorrect:** This indicates that creativity and IQ may be correlated.

**Correct:** The results of this study indicate that creativity and IQ may be correlated.

4. **Don't use passive voice.** Passive voice often makes the object of a sentence into the subject and forces the reader to retrace the action in order to understand it.

**Example (avoid):**

**Incorrect:** A connection was found by these researchers between creativity and IQ.

**Incorrect:** It has been shown that there is a connection between creativity and IQ.

**Do use active voice whenever possible.** Active voice moves the story forward and improves the flow of the writing.

**Example (preferable):**

**Correct:** These researchers found a connection between creativity and IQ.

5. **Don't include more than one idea per paragraph.** If you have a paragraph that takes up an entire page (double-spaced), check to see if it includes two or more ideas that can be divided.

**Do keep paragraphs and sentences relatively short.** Shorter sentences and paragraphs promote clarity. As a general guideline, you should have 2-3 paragraphs per page. Sentences should contain no more than 15-20 words. You

may intersperse shorter sentences, but avoid sentences as long as 30 words.

6. **Don't use colloquialisms.** Your writing should be scholarly, rather than conversational, in tone. A scholarly tone does not imply pretentiousness of language but rather an avoidance of colloquialisms that could interfere with precision and clarity.

**Do choose language that is precise, clear, and scholarly.** Some examples:

**Examples:**

<b>Avoid</b>	a whole lot	on the mend	just around the corner	write-up
<b>Preferable</b>	numerous	recovering	upcoming	report

7. **Don't treat opposing points of view unfairly.** One mistake often made by beginning writers in psychology is called "bashing the counterargument." This technique includes finding very tiny methodological flaws in studies that contradict your thesis and using these flaws to completely discredit the opposing research results. The same microscopic flaw detection is not, however, employed when evaluating research supporting your thesis. This uneven handling of evidence generally backfires, as most readers will sense the unfairness and pull for the underdog!

**Do present all sides of your argument fairly.** Science is generally not black and white. You do not need to discredit all evidence that fails to support your thesis. You merely need to show in a convincing manner why your thesis is the best fit for the existing data.

8. **Don't write a single draft of your paper.** No one can write a good paper in one draft!

**Do revise and edit your paper!** Revise, proofread, and then revise and proofread again!

**Here are some strategies for revising and improving the quality of your paper:**

1. Lay it aside for 48 hours and then reread it. You will see many areas for improvement that were not apparent to you during the initial writing.
2. Read it out loud. It is often easier to hear (rather than see) sections that are unclear or awkwardly worded.
3. Give a copy to a friend (but be sure to proofread it first!). Then don't argue if the friend finds a section that is unclear. By definition, if it is unclear to your reader then it is unclear period!
4. Don't get too attached to a particular phrase, sentence, or paragraph. You have to be able to edit out anything, no matter how cleverly-worded, that does not advance your story.