Sample Paper of American Psychological Association Style

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Abstract

The abstract is a brief, inclusive summary of the study, limited in length by journal guidelines to between 150 to 250 words. Using digits and abbreviations is helpful. It summarizes each of the substantive sections of the paper including a statement of what the researchers did and why, important elements of the method (how they carried out the study), the basic findings without too many minute statistical details and the interpretation of those findings (what it all means). The abstract often appears by itself, for example in *PsychInfo*. Therefore, it needs sufficient details for the reader to decide whether to acquire and read the entire article. The Abstract should be comprehensive, accurate, self-contained, to-the-point, readable, and nonevaluative. Type the abstract on its own page, for most student papers this will be page 2 of the manuscript, with the word “Abstract” centered after the short title. The layout consists of one, unindented paragraph with nothing else on the same page. As a guideline, this abstract contains 166 words.

*Keywords:* APA style, style rules

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The introduction section begins on a new page regardless of where on the previous page the abstract ended. It begins the body of the paper and begins at the top of a new page. The full title appears in title case, and appears centered on the first line of the page, with the text beginning after a normal double space. In fact, authors should double space the entire paper.

In terms of content, the introduction presents, in order, the problem being investigated, past research (relevant literature review), an overview of the method, hypothesis or hypotheses tested as well as the rationale for each, and finally the expected outcomes. It is important to keep the literature review focused on the main purpose of the study. Students read many articles and often have the temptation to cite every one of them as if doing so will earn a higher grade on the paper. But if a particular source is not directly relevant to the study, this can be distracting and confusing.

This section may go on for several pages with each new paragraph beginning with a ½-in. indentation. The preferred font is Times Roman, 12-point size. Margins for a paper in American Psychological Association (APA) style are at least 1 in. all around. APA style requires the use of two spaces after a period that ends a sentence. The only exception occurs when a heading or subheading occurs at the bottom of a page. Then the heading should appear on the next page and a slightly larger margin remains at the bottom of the previous page.

There are many additional general typing rules. For example, check the APA manual to see the proper way to use abbreviations, as has been done on this page for APA. Check the manual for the proper way to type numbers--when to write them out and when to use digits. The general rule requires writing out the numbers one through nine, and using digits for numbers greater than 10; but there are many exceptions to the general rule. For example, when a number appears as the first word in a sentence it must always appear written out; however, in the “Abstract,” all numbers appear in digit format, unless they appear as the first word in a sentence. Furthermore, APA style mandates that authors never hyphenate words at the end of a line. If an entire word does not fit, it is just started on the next line. Left-margin justification is the rule and never right-margin or full justification. Check the APA website for an acceptable sample paper to use as a model.

All citations require proper formatting. This format can differ depending on the number of authors, whether there is a reference to multiple publications in the same year by the same author(s), whether the references citations are within or outside of parentheses, and the number of times the reference is to same source. If a passage is a direction quotation then APA style mandates the use of quotation marks around the quoted text followed by a reference citation that includes the author’s last name, year of publication and page number. If paraphrased text from an article follows closely the original author’s ideas or words then quotation marks are not necessary but the reference citation must include the same information as does a quotation.

An additional consideration is that in scientific writing style, writers use first and second person language sparingly. Instead, the convention is to use the more neutral and objective sounding third person. However, when an author must refer to himself or herself then the preference is or the use of first person because the use of third person can leave the reader confused about the reference. For example, it would be awkward to say, “The researchers used the same task for both experiments” when the authors are the researchers. It is more appropriate to say, “We used the same task for both experiments.”

In terms of verbs, the active voice gives a more direct sense of action, whereas the passive voice suggests the occurrence of events that no one controls. Writing in the active voice can be difficult, and older, classic papers will appear primarily written in the passive voice and therefore, are not very good for modeling more recent writing. This combination of rules, to use third person, objective sounding language, while at the same time maintaining active voice, can be challenging for beginning, as well as for experienced scientific writers.

The sample paper in many textbooks (c.f., Cozby, 2007) can provide a good reference source, but quite often reflects the guidelines for the previous edition of the APA style manual. There are several books as well as many websites that present templates that can be downloaded to help with APA style. Angeli, et al. (2011) provide extensive, excellent guidelines as well as a sample paper. Templates help with the technical details of style, but do not help in determining appropriate content for each section. Austin and Calderón (1996) provide such a template for the previous style manual. In addition, many educators consider the mastery of APA style as a way to socialize young psychologists into the discipline (c.f., Madigan, Johnson & Linton, 1995). Therefore, learning to write in APA style is more than just an exercise in learning to follow rules.

When the introduction ends the next section continues on the same page. This is the method section and the word “Method” appears centered in bold font on the next line of text. This section provides specific information about the details for conducting the study, with sufficient information to permit exact replication. Because this is a report of a completed study, this section should be entirely written in past tense, active voice.

The method section usually has several subsections, the most common of which are labeled “Participants,” “Materials and Apparatus,” and “Procedure.” Each of these subtitles appears on the next text line with the first letter capitalized and in bold font, without any punctuation.

**Method**

**Participants**

This section describes the nature and number of participants so that a reader can visualize them. Include only the relevant characteristics as they pertain to the particular study. Other details may detract from the main point of the study. Authors may, however, want to include sampling details if these affect the generalizability of findings.

**Materials and Apparatus**

This section describes any equipment and materials used in the study. The description should be sufficiently detailed to allow exact replication, but without including details irrelevant for replication, operationalization of concepts in the hypothesis, or for later critique in the discussion. For example, most researchers do not want their study to depend on too narrow a range of stimulus materials. Therefore, most researchers describe their stimuli in terms of the most important characteristics but seldom need to specifically include the exact, verbatim, stimulus materials that they used.

**Procedure**

This section tells the reader exactly what happened, step-by-step, just as it occurred during the study. This section should include sufficient details to allow for exact or modified replication by other researchers. If the study itself is a replication then only the substantive modifications need to be mentioned. Sometimes researchers add details that pertain to a later discussion of findings. This might also be the best place to provide an operational definition of variables.

**Results**

The results section continues the main body of the paper. This section needs to have sufficient details to justify any conclusions later reached in the discussion section. The use of subheadings can greatly clarify complicated results sections. This section only presents the numerical facts as they correspond to the hypotheses; however, there is no need to present the raw data. Any interpretations of these results appears in the next section, the discussion section.

**Narrative Description**

The results can appear in several ways. It is often best to start with a simple narrative description, followed by a statement of descriptive statistics (i.e., means) and then any inferential statistics (significance tests) performed on the data. APA style requires authors to italicize letters when they name a statistic, i.e., *t*-test. The results should appear in the same order as the hypotheses in the introduction. Inferential statistical tests require the reporting of the test, the degrees of freedom, the obtained value, and the probability of that value, as well as the effect size, in that order.

**Tables and Figures**

Another way to report data is to use tables and figures. Tables summarize large arrays (rows and columns) of data (see Table 1). Figures, as depicted in Figure 1, present a visual display that helps to understand the outcome of the study and which cannot appear as an array, i.e., graphs and pictures.

In APA style, the authors of a manuscript do not place the figures and tables in the body of the paper; these belong after the references. Each figure and table appears on a separate page and must have a reference to it in the body of the paper (e.g., Figure 1 presents …). Similarly, each table and figure that an author refers to in the body of the text must be included at the end of the manuscript.

Tables immediately follow the references, but each one appears on its own page. Figures then follow tables. Table captions appear immediately above the table, whereas figure captions appear immediately below the figure. The title or caption for each table and figure should reflect the information presented, and can include an explanatory legend. Tables might also require a note, explaining any abbreviations used in the table, or other relevant information.

**Discussion**

Continuing the body of the paper, this section continues on the same page as the results. This section provides an examination of the implications of the results—-whether the results support the hypothesis(ses) or not, or perhaps whether the results replicate or follow from past research.

The discussion section should open with a summary of the purposes and/or goals of the study. This is not a style rule; however, the reader has just finished reading all of the technical details of the method, and all of the mathematical details of the statistics. Now that the reader is ready for the interpretation, it helps to bring the focus back to the purpose of the paper. Once again, it is appropriate to discuss the hypotheses in the same order as they had been presented in the introduction.

If the results are not as predicted, then the original theory may need to be revised, or it may be that the procedure was faulty. This is the place to critique one’s own study, and to suggest future studies. Finally, the manuscript must have a true ending. Many beginning writes go through interpreting each result and then suddenly stop. In summary, there is nothing wrong with beginning the last paragraph with a phrase such as “In summary…” or “In conclusion...’ The paper needs closure and should not just abruptly come to an end.

The discussion ends the body of the paper and no more is printed on this page. A new page starts the references, which appear listed alphabetically by the first author's last name, with the first line flush with the margin and all subsequent lines indented ½-inch.

References

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(These are examples respectively, from a website, a chapter from an edited book, a book, and a journal article.)

((Next would come Tables, Figures—each on its own, separate page.))

Table 1

*Mean Percent Correct Recall across the First Two (Primacy) and Last Two (Recency) Serial Positions, as a function of Conditions*

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Condition

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Position Control Speeded Delayed

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Primacy 66.0 42.2 52.2\*

Recency 70.9 59.3 53.1\*

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*Note.* \* p < .05 compared to Control Condition

*Figure 1.* Mean percentage of recall per item as a function of serial position (primacy/recency) and presentation condition (control/speeded/delay).