

The Basics of APA Writing

Gregory Harder

Simon Fraser University

May 28, 2017

Abstract

This is a paper about writing in American Psychological Association [APA] style. As with all formatting styles, APA follows some standard rules that are not too difficult despite the confusion that comes at first glance. This paper will describe the general trends in APA formatting right alongside the rules. This aims to ease the confusion associated with learning academic writing.

Keywords: APA, academic writing

The Basics of APA Writing

The essay is an important part of disseminating academic information, or any form of information for that matter. So it is important to have the skills that will help you relay information in a way that is well respected and well known. APA style is used in many disciplines and can be adapted easily to the other academic formats.

General Format of an APA Paper

APA format is used in the social sciences (psychology, linguistics, sociology, economics, and criminology), business, and nursing (*When to Use APA*, n.d.). There are many types of APA papers - literature reviews, empirical studies, theoretical articles, methodological articles, case studies, and others (American Psychological Association, 2010). The first two of the aforementioned are the most common papers and are described below.

The typeface should be a 12 point Times New Roman. Double space the entire paper with no extra space anywhere (i.e. no extra spaces after titles or after paragraphs). The title of the paper is centred, and written in regular font-style. Margins are 1 in (2.54 cm) on all sides. Indentations are 0.5 in (1.27 cm). This includes the beginnings of paragraphs, hanging indents in the references section, and block quotations (which are indented in their entirety). There should also be a running head and page numbers at the top of each page. A title page and references page are also required. These are the basic rules of APA formatting.

Literature Review

The literature review is a summary of the current literature on a subject you are exploring. It usually contains only one section, so section titles are usually not required, and tables and figures are not part of this type of paper. Therefore, formatting the literature review is

simpler than formatting other types of reports. Only the basic rules of APA formatting need to be followed.

Empirical Studies

Empirical studies require more knowledge about formatting than the review because they usually contain multiple sections, tables, and figures. The typical major sections within an empirical study are the title page, abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion, references, and appendices. The abstract is written on its own page, and the reference list and appendices each begin on a new page. The actual essay (i.e. introduction through discussion) requires section headings.

Section Headings

The section headings follow a specific format as outlined in Table 1. The table shows the layout of a five level APA paper. The first level heading is centered, bold, and written in title case. The second level heading is left aligned, bold, and written in title case. The third, fourth, and fifth level headings are indented and written in sentence case, but each has a different font-style.

First, the introduction requires no title - it is well known that the first section is the introduction. Generally, the sections requiring the level 1 heading are method, results, and discussion. Some papers, such as this one, will have a different set of level 1 headings. Any subsections within the main sections would follow through the levels. For example, the method may have two different experiments. This would necessitate a level two heading for each of these experiments.

Table 1

Heading Format in a Five Level APA Paper

| Level | Example and description of heading |
|-------|--|
| 1 | Centred and Bold Begin your paragraph below the heading following the usual guidelines. |
| 2 | Left Aligned and Bold Begin your paragraph below the heading following the usual guidelines. |
| 3 | Indented, bold, and ending with a period. Begin your paragraph after the heading. |
| 4 | <i>Indented, bold, italicized, and ending with a period.</i> Start your paragraph. |
| 5 | <i>Indented, italicized, and ending with a period.</i> Start your paragraph. |

Note. Table adapted from Lee (2009) and DeVry University (n.d.)

Levels 1 and 2 are written in title case, which means that important words are upper case and unimportant words are lower case. Prepositions and conjunctions are the types of words that will use lower case. The remaining levels of headings are written in sentence case.

Citation

Citation in APA involves both a reference list at the end of the paper as well as in-text citation. References can come from a variety of sources and this can cause some confusion about proper citation. Luckily, there is a very basic trend to citation in APA. The in-text citations follow from the reference list, so the reference list will be addressed first.

The Reference List

The citation in the references section must address these four questions in the following order: Who? When? What? Where?

Who wrote the paper or made the film? Is it an author or authors, an organization, or is it unknown?

When was the paper written? Usually the year of publication is fine, but sometimes a specific date is required because the year is too vague (i.e. newspaper articles).

What is the title of the article, book, or movie? Interestingly, the title is written in sentence case in the reference list.

Where is the article located? In which journal can I find the article? Where is the book published?

Following the “who, when, what, where” general rule will set up virtually every APA reference.

The second general rule is that virtually every citation has an italicized title. Italics indicates a major work. The minor work is in regular font and precedes the title of the major work in the reference (i.e. Minor work. *Major Work*.). Sometimes, as in the case of a book, there is only the major work, which would be cited in italics. Consider the following citations, one for an academic journal article and one for a book.

Bouchamma, Y. (2012). Leadership practices in effective schools in disadvantaged areas of Canada. *Education Research International*, 2012. doi:10.1155/2012/712149

Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Notice that if there are two titles, then the first title is in regular font-style (the minor work) while the second is italicized (the major work). If only one title is in the citation (the major work), then it is italicized.

The third general rule is to always have the date as the second item in the reference list. If the author is unknown, move the title ahead of the date (i.e. what? when? where?). This is shown in the “*When to Use APA, 2016*” reference in this paper.

Appendix A is a reference list containing a variety of sources to compare and contrast.

Authors and In-text Citation

Author citation is the next element of proper references. The rules are laid out in Table 2. The main theme of the table is to show when there are changes in the citation style. Citation style changes depending on the number of authors in the citation. For example, if there are six authors, then the first in-text citation uses *et al.* If there were five authors, then the first in-text citation must list all five, but *et al.* is used for any occurrences thereafter. The reference list has a very simple rule; the maximum number of authors within a citation is seven. The first six authors (if there are that many) and the last author are listed. “Paiz et al., 2012 & 2014” in this paper serves as an example.

A common way to present the in-text citation is to place the author and year in brackets after the quote or paraphrase [i.e. ...some paraphrase (Paul & Chen, 2009).]. However, there are other signal phrases that can be used to include cited information into your article [i.e. Paul and Chen (2009) explained some paraphrase... or In 2009, Paul and Chen explained some paraphrase...]. Basically, write out the sentence without thinking about citations at all. If the

date or author is missing once the sentence is complete, then insert the missing information within brackets.

Table 2

Author Citations: In-text and Reference List

| Authors | In-text | Reference list |
|---------|------------------------------|--|
| 1 | (Paul, 2009) | Paul, C. R. (2009). |
| 2 | (Paul & Chen, 2010) | Paul, C. R., & Chen, S. J. (2010). |
| 3 | (Paul, Chen, & Dalton, 2012) | Paul, C. R., Chen, S. J., & Dalton, T. T. (2012). |
| | (Paul et al., 2012) | |
| | (thereafter) | |
| 4 | “ | “ |
| 5 | “ | “ |
| 6 | (Paul et al., 2015) | “ |
| 7 | “ | “ |
| 8 | “ | Paul, C. R., Chen, S. J., Dalton, T. T., Santos, R. V., Joyce, G. C., McInnes, P. S., ... Cross, N. F. (2016). |

Note. Constructed using information from the Purdue OWL website (Paiz et al., 2012 & 2014)

Titles Within the Text

Sometimes we need to include the title of the work within the text of the paper.

Essentially, the title in the text should appear as it does in the reference list. That is, a title in regular font-style is transferred into text in regular font-style. It is placed in quotations to

distinguish it from the other text. If the title in the reference list is in italics, then the in-text title will also be in italics. There is one key difference; in-text titles are written in title case, while reference list titles are written in sentence case.

Tables and Figures

Tables and figures may be included in the main body of the paper or in the Appendix depending on your presentation preferences. Regardless of their placement, they are presented in a sans serif font like Arial or Gill Sans. Tables and figures are presented in virtually opposite ways.

Tables 1 and 2 are examples of APA tables. Titles for tables are positioned above the data. Each table is identified with a number that is written in the first line, below which is the title of the table in italics. Horizontal dividers are at the top and bottom and divide major sections in the table: title, data, and notes. The next section begins with underlined column headers and accompanying data. The notes section contains in-text citations or other information pertinent to the presented data. There are no vertical dividers in the table.

For figures, the title will be below the figure. The figure is represented by a number and written in italics, and the title follows on the same line, written in regular font-style. Appendix B contains a fictitious figure as an example.

Summary

The APA writing style is guided by rules that follow a regular pattern. Once these are learned, it is easy to adapt to other styles such as MLA or CMS (Modern Language Association or Chicago Manual of Style).

References

- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- DeVry University. (n.d.). *Five levels of headings* [PDF document]. Retrieved from <http://library.devry.edu/>
- Lee, C. (2009, July 9). Five essential tips for APA style headings [Web log post]. *APA Style Blog*. Retrieved from <http://blog.apastyle.org/>
- Lee, C. (2012, March 1). How to capitalize and format reference titles in APA style [Web log post]. *APA Style Blog*. Retrieved from <http://blog.apastyle.org/>
- Paiz, J. M., Angeli, E., Wagner, J., Lawrick, E., Moore, K., Anderson, M., ... Keck, R. (2012, October 31). *Reference list: Author/authors*. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- Paiz, J. M., Angeli, E., Wagner, J., Lawrick, E., Moore, K., Anderson, M., ... Keck, R. (2014, December 2). *In-text citations: Author/authors*. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- When to use APA format: Disciplines and writing assignments*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.write.com/>

Appendix A

Sample Reference List

- Angrist, J., Bettinger, E., Bloom, E., King, B., & Kremer, M. (2002). Vouchers for private schooling in Colombia: Evidence from a randomized natural experiment. *American Economic Review*, 92(5), 1535-58.
- Behrman, J. R., Sengupta, P., & Todd, P. (2000). *Final report: The impact of PROGRESA on achievement test scores in the first year*. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.
- Dee, T. S., & Jacob, B. A. (2007). Do high school exit exams influence educational attainment or labor market performance? In A. Gamoran (Ed.), *Standards-based reform and children in poverty: Lessons for "No child left behind"* (pp. 154-200). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Israel Ministry of Education. (2001). *Statistics of the matriculation examination (Bagrut) test data, 2000*. Jerusalem: Ministry of Education Chief Scientist's Office.
- Lang, K. (1993). *Ability bias, discount rate bias and the return to education* [PDF file]. Retrieved from <http://people.bu.edu/>
- Leuven, E., Oosterbeek, H., Sonnemans, J., & van der Klaauw, B. (2008). *Incentives versus sorting in tournaments: Evidence from a field experiment*. (IZA Discussion Paper 3326).
- Reich, R. (1998, January 9). Putting the surplus, if any, to work. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>

Appendix B

Sample Figure

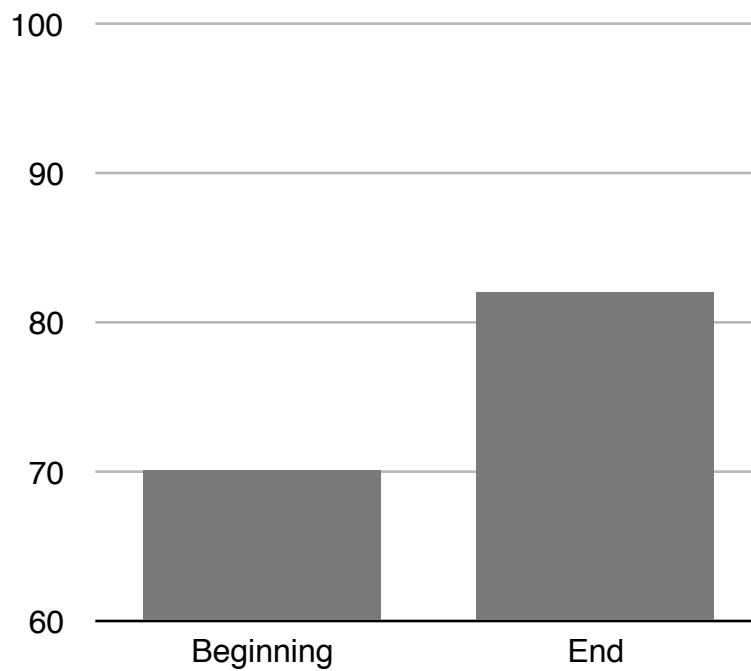


Figure 1. Average standardized test scores of students at the beginning and end of the program.

Although this figure is formatted correctly, it is a poor example of a figure because it would ultimately add nothing to the text. This information could easily be stated in one sentence.