

# APA writing style: do's and don'ts



Partially quoted and paraphrased from the Department of Psychology and Special  
Education  
Emporia State University

<http://www.emporia.edu/psyspe/documents/WritingStandards.doc>

# TEN STANDARDS FOR SCIENTIFIC WRITING

**Write clearly and say what you mean**

**Write concisely**

**Write with felicity of expression**

**Write primarily in the active voice**

**Adopt an impersonal style of writing**

**Use correct spelling and grammar**

**Avoid biased language**

**Do not plagiarize**

**Cite sources correctly and include a reference list**

**Take responsibility for looking up APA rules**



## **Standard #1 WRITE CLEARLY AND SAY WHAT YOU MEAN**

**Don't: I have always been interested in psychology**

**Do: My interest in psychology began with my high school psychology course.**

**Don't: I am ready to get back in the swing of things.**

**Do: I am ready to return to my daily routine.**

**Don't:** The treatment influenced the rats' weights.

**Do:** The treatment increased the rats' weights.



## **Standard #2 WRITE CONCISELY**

**Use the fewest words possible to convey clearly what it is you want to say. Wordiness produces embellishment and flowery writing, which are inappropriate in scientific style.**

**Don't: I will be taking some courses over again to get a better grade.**

**Do: I will repeat some courses to improve my grades.**

**DON'T: Doing an internship is absolutely essential for getting into graduate school.**

**DO: Doing an internship is essential for getting into graduate school.**

**DON'T: There were several Psi Chi members who attended the APA convention.**

**DO: Several Psi Chi members attended the APA convention.**

## **Standard #3 WRITE WITH FELICITY OF EXPRESSION**

**Felicity means an appropriate and pleasing manner or style (from dictionary.com). Good writing flows:**

**between the words in your sentence**

**from sentence to sentence**

**from paragraph to paragraph**

**from section to section**

**Disjointed writing reflects poor planning & thought.**

## Standard #4 WRITE PRIMARILY IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

**DON'T:** The survey **was conducted** in a controlled setting.

**DO:** We **conducted** the survey in a controlled setting.

**DON'T:** The experiment **was designed** by Grover (2005).

**DO:** Grover (2005) **designed** the experiment.

## **Standard #5 ADOPT AN IMPERSONAL STYLE OF WRITING**

**You can write in first person (I or we) in only one situation—when you are referring to yourself or your lab group in the procedure:**

**I administered the survey to the participants.**

**Do not use “we” to refer to yourself and the reader, or to yourself and humanity.**

**DON'T: We all need to be concerned about the prevalence of date rape.**

**A research report is not a personal story and should be written in an objective and impersonal style. Do not include phrases like “I think”, “I believe”, “I like”, “this is important to me”, or “I went to the library and found an article on” ...**

**Never address the reader of your paper.**

**DON'T: I am sure you will agree that...**

**DO: A likely consensus is that...**

# Avoid anthropomorphizing



Attributing human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena.

**DON'T:** The experiment showed...

**DO:** Through this experiment, I showed...

## **Standard #6 USE CORRECT SPELLING & GRAMMAR**

**DO: proof-read**

**use your spell & grammar checkers**

**take your paper to the writing center**

**DON'T: use contractions**

**replace “don’t” with “do not”**

**“I’m” with “I am”**

**“can’t” with “can not”**

# Standard #7 AVOID BIASED LANGUAGE

In general, avoid anything that causes offense.

**DO NOT use . . .**

ethnic labels (for example, Hispanic) "men" (referring to all adults)  
"homosexuals" "depressives"

**When you can use . . .**

geographical labels (for example, *Mexican American* if from Mexico) "men and women" "gay men and lesbians" "people with depression"

## Furthermore...

Use “participants” when referring to people, and “subjects” when referring to animals

Use “men” and “women” when referring to adult participants

Use “boys” and “girls” when referring to child participants

You **SHOULD** use “male” and “female” when referring to animal subjects, or as adjectives when describing human participants

e.g. write “male and female students”  
not “men and women students”



## **Standard #8 DO NOT PLAGIARIZE**

**Do not pass off someone else's thoughts, ideas, or findings as your own. Give them credit!**

**Cite everything in your paper *except*:**

**your own ideas (as long as they haven't already been published)**

**your own observations, research results, statistics**

**common, everyday knowledge or facts**

**e.g. the Earth is round, many Americans consider the Holocaust to be among History's most tragic events**

## **Standard #9 CITE SOURCES CORRECTLY AND INCLUDE A REFERENCE LIST**

**Citations in text: include author(s) last names & year of pub  
(e.g. Smith, Jones, & Davis, 2003)**

**The first time you cite a source, include all  
authors' names (note exception for 6 or more authors)**

**After the first time (or if 6 or more authors) include  
last name of lead author and "et al."  
(e.g. Smith et al., 2003)**

**Except for personal communications, all sources cited in text MUST  
be in your reference list.**

**The ONLY things in your reference list are the primary sources you  
cited. A reference list is NOT a bibliography!!**

# Primary vs. Secondary Sources

**Primary Sources:** analogous to “direct from the horse’s mouth”  
e.g. You read an article by Smith, and you wish to use some of his ideas/findings presented in this article.

**Secondary Sources:** analogous to “he said, she said”  
e.g. You read an article by Smith. In it, he writes about ideas proposed by Jones in a different paper. You can cite Jones *in text*, but do NOT include Jones in your reference list.

**In text, write: (Jones, 1999, as cited in Smith, 2002)**



## **Standard #10 TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LOOKING UP APA FORMATTING RULES**

**Most of the rules, and there are MANY, are pretty “cut & dry”.**

**Make sure you have some APA style reference guide beside you  
when:**

- a. Formatting your paper**
- b. Constructing your title page**
- c. Constructing your reference list**
  
- d. Any time you have a question about APA style & format**