

How to present your paper in correct APA style

The guidelines for presenting a report in APA style are provided in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (the publication manual) (5th edition, 2001). This is updated periodically, so check that you have the latest edition. You can also check the website for the APA Publication Manual at www.apastyle.org.

If you are studying psychology, this is the set of conventions that you must follow. The publication manual sets out the way in which your report should be structured, the headings, format, abbreviations, punctuation, references, table and figure formats and so on. Although many of these conventions may seem 'picky', it is important that you adhere to them exactly if you have been asked to comply with APA style for your report. You may be penalised if you don't.

The publication manual details the exact presentation required if you intend to submit your work to a journal for publication. This is formatted in a way that makes it easier for the publisher to typeset the material for publication. Some universities require you to submit all work in this format. There are situations, however, where you are not submitting the material for publication; instead you are 'publishing' the material in its final form yourself. An example of this is a thesis. Some flexibility in the content and format is allowed in this situation. This is discussed further below.

The APA publication is a large and very detailed book which many undergraduate students find a bit intimidating to use. There are a number of other writing guides that present the basic principles in an easier-to-read format (see [References](#)).

General presentation of the report

Main sections of the report

Preparing a thesis

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General presentation of the report

The APA publication manual recommends that the report be double spaced throughout, with margins of 2.54 cm (1 inch) all around. Use good quality paper, and only print on one side of the paper. Do not 'right justify' your report (that is, don't use a uniform right margin, as you see in published books). Normally the font used is Times New Roman, set in 12 points. The start of each paragraph is indented 5-7 spaces (one tab), except for the abstract. Each page must be numbered at the top right-hand side of the page.

Headings

The APA publication manual gives clear guidelines concerning the format to be used for the different levels of headings. These are illustrated below:

CENTRED UPPERCASE HEADING LEVEL 1

Centred Uppercase and Lowercase Heading Level 2

Centered, Italicized, Uppercase and Lowercase Heading Level 3

Flush Left, Italicized, Uppercase and Lowercase Side Heading Level 4

Indented, italicized lowercase paragraph heading ending with a full stop. Level 5

For many research reports only two levels of headings are required. In this case, the publication manual (2001, p. 114) suggests using heading level 2 and heading level 4, as illustrated below.

Method

Participants

Materials

Procedure

Results

Discussion

References

The other levels of headings will need to be used if additional headings are used throughout the introduction, or if you need to divide your results or discussion sections into subsections. If additional heading levels are required consult the APA publication manual (pp.114-115).

Abbreviations and punctuation

The APA publication manual provides very clear guidelines concerning the abbreviations and punctuation to be used throughout your report. You should check these carefully. A nice simple summary of these is provided in Sternberg (1993) (see [References](#)).

Some commonly used abbreviations are listed below:

e.g.	for example	<i>n</i>	number of subjects in each group or subset of the sample
etc.	and so forth		
i.e.,	that is	<i>M</i>	mean
vs.	versus	<i>SD</i>	standard deviation
et al.	used when you have multiple authors and you have already provided the full citation	<i>ns</i>	not significant
		<i>p</i>	probability
<i>N</i>	number of subjects in the total sample	<i>df</i>	degrees of freedom

Note that the statistical abbreviations are presented in italics.

See page 141-144 in the Publication Manual for abbreviations to be used for statistical terms.

Tables and figures

If you are using tables and figures (graphs) to present the results of your study, you should consult the APA publication manual for the requirements (see pp. 147-175).

Tables

When using tables you do not use vertical lines in the table, each table must be numbered consecutively, and a clear concise title provided. The main words in the title are capitalised. The table title always appears above the table that it refers to. The actual title is underlined and presented on a different line to the table number. Both the table number and title start on the left margin.

For example:

Table 1

Correlation Between Perceived Control and Well-being for Males and Females

Figures

Figures are also numbered consecutively (Figure 1, Figure 2) but separately from tables. The figure caption is presented *below* the figure that it refers to. In the figure caption, the word 'Figure' and the number of the figure is underlined, however the title is not underlined (see example below). Unlike tables, the main words in the caption are not capitalised (only the first word). The figure caption finishes with a full stop. For example:

Figure 1. Comparison of mean perceived control scores for males and females.

Full instructions for the display of figures is available in the Publication Manual (p.176-204).

Main sections of the report

The report is made up of a number of distinct sections including the title page, abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion, references and appendix. The content and format of each of these sections is covered in the APA publication manual on pp. 7-20. The key points relating to each section of the report are presented below. For an example of each of these sections, see the **sample report**.

Title Page

The format of the title page is illustrated in the **sample report**. The major components are described below.

Title

The title of your report should clearly and concisely capture the essence of your study (in 10 to 12 words). This is not easy to do! Drop any words that are not useful (e.g., 'a study of . . .'). Don't include any abbreviations in the title. The title is positioned in the centre of the page (vertically and horizontally). The first letter of the main words is capitalised.

Name

Underneath the title you type your name (usually your first name, initial and then surname). This is also centred.

Affiliation

Below your name put the name of your university or organisation.

Running head

The title also includes a 'running head'. This is an abbreviated title which will appear on each of the report if it is published. It should be all capitals and no more than 50 characters (letters, spaces, punctuation) in length.

Page header

On the top right-hand side of every page of the paper is a few words of the title. Five spaces along is the page number. You don't need to type these on every page yourself: use the 'header and footer' function of your word processor.

Abstract

The abstract is presented on a page of its own (page 2), using the heading 'Abstract', which is centred. The first line is not indented. It provides a brief summary (120 words or less) of the main elements of your report. It should describe the question that was addressed, the sample used, the experimental method, an overview of the main findings, and the conclusions and implications of the study. To help you get an idea of what is required in the abstract have a look through journals published in your topic area. Collect examples of good concise abstracts to use as role models. See p.14 of the Publication Manual for more details.

Introduction

The introduction is presented on a new page (page 3). Unlike the other sections of the report, it is not labelled 'Introduction'. Instead the full title of the report is presented at the top, centred, with all main words starting with a capital letter. All paragraphs are indented 5-7 spaces (one tab if you are using a word processor). The introduction indicates the problem that is to be addressed and reviews the relevant literature in the topic area (using citations as appropriate). In the closing section of the introduction, the purpose or rationale of the study is presented and the specific hypotheses stated. See p.15 of the Publication Manual for more details.

Throughout the introduction, you must acknowledge the sources of all the information that you provide (references). Depending on the circumstances, there are a number of different ways this can be done. Examples are provided below:

Many studies have explored the role of control perceptions in a variety of physical illness such as cancer, AIDS, cardiac disease and arthritis (Helgeson, Jenkins & Pargament, 1988; Taylor, 1983). *Note: The references are listed in alphabetical order, separated by semi-colons. When two authors are involved in the one reference, their names are separated by '&'.*

Thompson and Spacapan (1991) distinguish three main categories of perceived control. *Note: When the authors' names are provided in the sentence (rather than in brackets) the names are separated by 'and', rather than '&', as in the previous example.*

According to Taylor (1986) psychological control is 'the sense that one can anticipate or predict the events that occur in one's environment and that one can influence or modify them' (p. 329). *Note: For direct quotes you must provide the page number.*

This is clearly illustrated in the series of studies conducted by Chapman, Skinner and Baltes (1990). Research by Chapman et al. (1990) suggests that competence beliefs are more strongly related to cognitive performance. *Note: When you have a reference that has three or more authors and you have already referred to this reference, you may condense the reference using et al. for all subsequent uses of this reference. The full reference, giving all authors' names, must be provided in the reference section at the end of the report.*

Method

The method section is not presented on a new page, but flows on from the end of the introduction. It describes exactly how your study was conducted, with sufficient detail that another researcher could repeat the study. The method is divided into a number of subsections.

Participants

This section contains a brief description of the subjects or respondents included in your study. For studies involving humans you should report the major demographic characteristics of the sample (age, sex, race, education level etc.) giving both numbers and percentages of subjects in each category (e.g., males, females), and mean and standard deviations for continuous variables. Give the total number of subjects and the number of cases in each experimental condition. You can obtain this information by running **Frequencies SPSS** on these variables. Also indicate any 'drop-outs' or subjects that did not completed participation in the study.

Apparatus or materials

In a study involving a laboratory experiment you describe the equipment used under the heading 'Apparatus'. You also describe the tools to measure the dependent variable. If a survey or questionnaire design was used, you describe the scales or questionnaires used under the heading 'Materials'. Details of the reliability and validity of the scales would be reported, along with the Cronbach alpha obtained in the current study.

Procedure

In this section you describe the design of the study, the procedures used to assign subjects to the various conditions, and the techniques used to manipulate the independent variable. In a survey design you describe the sampling procedure and how the questionnaires were distributed and collected. Sufficient detail should be provided to enable another researcher to replicate your study.

For full details of the requirements of Method section see p.17 of the Publication Manual.

Results

In this section you would describe your data, the statistics used and the results of the descriptive and inferential techniques used. This section should be brief and to the point, but provide sufficient detail that the reader can understand what was done. It needs to be well structured, perhaps following the order of the hypotheses that were specified in the introduction. Remind the reader of each hypothesis, describe the statistical analysis used and report the results. Don't attempt to explain the results (except where it is necessary to perform an additional analysis to explore the outcome further)—the interpretation of results should be saved for the discussion section.

When reporting the results of statistical analyses you need to include the name of the test (e.g., independent samples t-test), the value obtained, the degrees of freedom, the probability level, the effect size and the direction of the effect (e.g., were males higher or lower than females). Where appropriate, you may also need to report the mean, standard deviation and number of subjects for each group.

Sometimes the results of analyses can be presented more clearly in table or graph format, rather than described in a paragraph. Don't go overboard with graphs save these for dramatic effect (e.g., when presenting significant ANOVA interactions). All tables and figures must be referred to in the text and sufficient explanations provided to ensure that the reader can understand what is presented. There are some quite strict guidelines for the formatting of tables and figures—you should consult the APA Publication Manual (see pp. 147-175, 176-204).

When submitting a research report for publication the tables and figures are presented at the end of the manuscript. For a thesis, however, the tables are incorporated in the main body of the report. You should check with your lecturer concerning the specific requirements for your report.

Discussion

In the discussion section you attempt to integrate or pull together all the various sections of your report. This involves a summary of the main findings of the study, followed by your interpretation of these results, in light of your literature review presented in the introduction. According to the APA publication manual, you are 'free to examine, interpret, and qualify the results, as well as to draw inferences from them' (p. 26). You should compare your results with previous research and suggest reasons for any differences found. You should consider the broader implications of your findings, discuss any limitations or weaknesses of the study, and make suggestions for future research.

References

The references section starts on a new page and provides details of the literature that was referred to in your report. Do not include other background material that you may have read but did not refer to specifically in your literature review. The very strict guidelines for the format used to present the different types of material (journal articles, books) are detailed in the publication manual on pp. 207-281. I have provided examples of some of the more commonly used reference types below.

- Journal article (one author)** Dawis, R. V. (1987). Scale construction. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 34, 481-189.
- Journal article (more than one author)** Anderson, J. C., & Gerbing, D. W. (1984). The effect of sampling error on convergence, improper solutions, and goodness-of-fit indices for maximum likelihood confirmatory factor analysis. *Psychometrika*, 49, 155-173.
- Book (one author)** Stangor, C. (1998). *Research methods for the behavioral sciences*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Book (more than one author)** Hair, J. F., Anderson, R.E., Tatham, R. L. & Black, W. C. (1992). *Multivariate data analysis with readings*. New York: Macmillan.
- Book (later editions)** Goodwin, C. J. (1998). *Research in psychology: Methods and design* (2nd edition). New York: John Wiley.
- Edited book** Robinson, J. P., Shaver, P. R., & Wrightsman, L. S. (Eds.). (1991). *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Academic Press.
- Book chapter in an edited book** Robinson, J. P., Shaver, P. R., & Wrightsman, L. S. (1991). Criteria for scale selection and evaluation. In J. P. Robinson, P. R. Shaver, & L. S. Wrightsman. (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes* (pp. 1-15). Hillsdale, NJ: Academic Press.

The references are presented in alphabetical order by author. Each reference is given a new line, indented by 5-7 spaces or one tab. Multiple entries by the same author are ordered according to the year of publication, with the earliest listed first. References that have the same first author but different second authors are presented alphabetically by the surname of the second author. For more details on these conventions, see the APA Publication Manual, p. 207.

Appendix

If you have additional material that the reader might like to refer to, but is not central to your report, this can be provided in the appendix. This could include the item of a scale used in the questionnaire, the results of additional analyses conducted, or an example of responses to an open-ended question. If you need to use a number of appendices, these are labelled using a letter, rather than a number (Appendix A, Appendix B, and so on). Each appendix must be given a title.

Additional sections if preparing a journal article

If you are submitting your work to a journal for publication, there are a number of additional sections required. These include author identification notes and footnotes. These are illustrated in the [sample report](#).

Order of presentation

If you are submitting your research paper to a journal, or if you are required to adhere strictly to APA style, the following order should be used to present the various parts of your report:

- title page;
- abstract;
- introduction;
- method;
- results;
- discussion;
- references;
- author identification notes (not usually needed for research report);
- footnotes;
- tables (one per page), with titles attached;
- figure captions; and
- figures (one figure per page), with no captions attached.

This order is often relaxed, particularly when preparing a thesis, so check with your supervisor or lecturer.

Preparing a thesis

When preparing a thesis, a number of modifications to the APA style are required, although many of the conventions still apply. The main differences are highlighted below; however you should refer to the APA publication guide for further discussion on this topic (see Chapter 6, pp. 321-330). Another good reference source is Cone and Foster (1993) (see [References](#)). It is important that you consult your supervisor for the specific requirements of your department and institution.

- Additional preliminary pages are required for a thesis. These include acknowledgments, table of contents, list of tables and figures.
- The abstract for a thesis is usually longer than that of a research article.
- The different sections of the thesis (introduction, method, results etc.) are usually presented as separate chapters, each commencing on a new page. In a thesis the introduction is labelled (unlike an article).
- The tables and figures are usually presented as part of the results section, integrated with the text, as you would see in a published journal article or book.
- Different heading styles are permissible, particularly where they aid presentation and readability. This includes the use of different fonts, italics, bold etc. that are not usually part of strict APA style.
- Italics can be used throughout the paper wherever it is necessary to underline (e.g., in the reference section for journal titles, book titles etc.).
- Single spacing can be used where necessary in a thesis to improve presentation. This includes titles, headings, quotations, tables and references (however, keep the double spacing between references).

References

The exact requirements of APA style are detailed in:

American Psychological Association (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th edition). Washington: American Psychological Association.

If you are writing a thesis it would be a good idea to purchase a copy of this for your own reference.

For a simplified guide to the basics of APA style, you might like to start by checking the appendices of any research methods books that you have. These often include a section on preparing a research report. For example, see:

Goodwin, C. J. (1998). *Research in psychology: Methods and design* (2nd edition). New York: John Wiley.

Stangor, C. (1998). *Research methods for the behavioral sciences*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Other good books that can be used to help you through the report writing stage are detailed below. Keep an eye out for new editions of these titles.

Cone, J. D., & Foster, S. L. (1993). *Dissertations and theses from start to finish: Psychology and related fields*. Washington: American Psychological Association.

Sternberg, R. (1993). *The psychologist's companion* (3rd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

All of the above references contain annotated sample papers which I recommend you look at, particularly if you are reporting an experimental study, so you can see how the different sections are laid out.