

Writing Standards, Learning Guide, and Scoring Rubric

Department of Psychology, Art Therapy, Rehabilitation, and Mental Health Counseling



(available at <http://www.emporia.edu/parm/documents.htm>)

The Writing Standards

1. The student will write clearly.
2. The student will write concisely.
3. The student will write with felicity of expression.
4. The student will write primarily in active rather than passive voice.
5. The student will use the correct person.
6. The student will correctly match all pronouns with their antecedents.
7. The student will present parallel ideas in parallel form.
8. The student will correctly punctuate.
9. The student will correctly spell.
10. All writing will otherwise adhere to APA format.

Introduction

One of the most valuable skills psychology majors learn is to write well scientifically. Learning to write well improves the clarity of your thinking and, subsequently, the clear expression of that thinking, enabling you to communicate effectively so that readers understand your meaning. Writing is a mirror reflecting meaningfulness from the writer's mind to the reader's mind.

The faculty have placed such a high value on quality scientific writing that Standard 3 of the BS/BA Psychology curriculum is "Our majors will demonstrate the skills to be clear writers and articulate presenters." In support of this standard are a variety of short and long writing assignments in required and elective courses in the major, culminating in the literature review and research paper for the Senior-level Internship.

Note that the faculty differentiate in Standard 3 between writing and presenting. Writing is not talking with words. Although writing a paper and writing a presentation are similar, writing to be read requires different punctuation, different expressions, and different approaches than writing to be heard. The writing standards presented in this document apply to papers to be read.

To write well means correct punctuation, grammar, and syntax. It also means putting words together so that the reading flows smoothly and the meaning is easy to grasp. The writer is responsible for making the meaning readily accessible to the reader, and the goal of the department's writing standards is to support the student in meeting this responsibility. "Correct grammar and thoughtful construction of sentences ease the reader's task and facilitate unambiguous communication" (*Publication Manual*, p. 41).

Faculty are not editors of your writing but evaluators of your content and your thinking to sculpt the content into your paper. These writing standards are designed to guide students and faculty in the teaching and learning of quality writing. Assistance with your writing is also available in the Campus Writing Center located at 345 SE Morse (x5380), although staff do not know APA format. Also, proof your papers before you submitting them.

APA format. The American Psychological Association publishes the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th edition). The department has two copies in the Davis Lab and one copy in the Conference Room of the department office for students to use. In addition, a variety of websites contain APA format tips and style pointers. As a complement to the *Publication Manual*, we recommend the APA Research Style Crib Sheet available at <http://www.docstyles.com/apacrib.htm> for its accuracy, brevity, readability, and accessibility.

ALL written assignments in your psychology courses will adhere to APA format. All writing will be double spaced, punctuation and capitalization will adhere to the rules of grammar, citations will be cited correctly in both the text and the reference section. Some of your written assignments (e.g., literature reviews, research papers) will use *full format*, that is, a title page, abstract, and references will be included with the body of the text. Other written assignments will require the *brief format*, which will include just the body of text and possibly the references. Professors will indicate for each writing assignment whether the full or brief format is to be used.

Grading. In grading written assignments, faculty often allocate 10% or more of a paper's final grade to the quality of the writing as defined by the adherence to these standards and APA format. The faculty expect all students to be good writers.

Standard 1 The student will write clearly (Publication Manual, pp. 36-40).

The goal of all good scientific writing is to communicate with clarity. Clarity means that the writing communicates exactly the meaningfulness that the writer intended. Thus, when you write the sentence:

I have always been interested in psychology.

you are saying that you have been interested in psychology since your first recollection of childhood. This is neither true nor accurate, and thus poor writing. A better sentence because of its clarity is:

My interest in psychology began with my high school psychology course.

Writers do not want their writing to be like a Rorschach inkblot, where different readers create different meanings from the same text. Clear writing is read literally, thus using words precisely is essential and using poetic expressions, rhyming, clichés, symbols, or figurative language like metaphors and similes are avoided (*Publication Manual*, p. 61). Does the following sentence:

I am ready to get back in the swing of things.

mean that the person is looking for a swing or wanting to swing. No. “Getting back in the swing of things” is a figurative expression. The sentence is unclear what the person is ready to do and assumes the reader is familiar with the expression.

A reciprocal relationship exists between writing and thinking. To write clearly requires clear thinking about the topic being written about, and the more clearly the writer understands the topic, the clearer will be the writing.

The antithesis of clear writing is ambiguity, which refers to the reader’s uncertainty about the meaning of the writer’s words. When you write:

I work many hours a week.

do you mean 15 hours or 60 hours and what is the nature of the work—is the work sedentary or physically demanding, boring or mentally demanding? You need to be specific in your writing. A clearer restating of this sentence is:

I work 20 hours a week teaching two sections of PY100 Introductory Psychology.

When you use “this,” “that,” “these,” or “those” as pronouns, what these terms refer to may be unclear to the reader and may require the reader to reread previous sentences to maintain the writing’s meaningfulness. Instead, use these terms as adjectives.

Verbs like change, affect, differ, and influence are not as specific and thus not as clear as verbs that specify direction like improve, increase, deteriorate, decrease. The sentence:

The treatment influenced the rats’ weights.

becomes more specific when restated:

The treatment increased the rats’ weights.

Standard 2 The student will write concisely (Publication Manual, pp. 34-35).

Conciseness means that the writer writes only what needs to be communicated, creating different combinations of words and then deciding on the one optimal combination that most clearly states meaningfulness with the fewest possible words. Wordiness produces embellishment and flowery writing, which are inappropriate in scientific style, reveal a person with limited skill using language, and increase the reader's cognitive burden to understand the writing. Be frugal with words. Other than articles (a, an, the), do not repeat a word in the same sentence.

How can the following sentence be more concise:

I will be taking some courses over again to get a better grade.

“Repeat” means “taking over again.” Changing to active voice (see Standard 4) eliminates the word “be.” “To get a better grade” means improving. Thus, the more concise statement with 9 words instead of 13 words and written in active voice is:

I will repeat some courses to improve my grades.

Redundancy means saying the same thing twice. Do you see the redundancy in the following sentence:

Doing an internship is absolutely essential for getting into graduate school.

Embedded in the meaning of essential is the quality of absoluteness. Thus, absolutely essential means essential. The better sentence is:

Doing an internship is essential for getting into graduate school.

Other examples: write “small” instead of “small in size,” “68 participants” instead of “a total of 68 participants,” “four groups” instead of “four different groups,” a “summary” instead of a “brief summary”

Avoid using “there is,” “there are,” “there was,” “there were,” and “there will be.” Instead of writing:

There were several Psi Chi members who attended the APA convention.

write:

Several Psi Chi members attended the APA convention.

Avoid using all forms of “be able to.” Instead of writing:

The participants were able to type their responses into a computer.

write:

The participants typed their responses into a computer.

Avoid using “it has been suggested, noted, found, etc. that,” “it is possible that,” “it appears that,” and “it is important that” as these expressions are unnecessary. Consider the sentence:

It has been suggested that self-esteem changes in adolescence.

A better sentence is

Self-esteem may change in adolescence.

or

Leftwich (2005) proposed that self-esteem changes in adolescence.

Similarly, the expressions “previous research has found” or “a study by Holmes found” lack conciseness. The better expression of the sentence:

Previous research has found that classically conditioning fear is difficult in food-deprived rats.

is:

Classically conditioning fear is difficult in food-deprived rats.

The better expression of the sentence:

A study by Holmes found that GRE scores are not good predictors of doctoral completion rates.
is:

Holmes (1996) found that GRE scores are not good predictors of doctoral completion rates.

or even better for reading flow (see Standard 4):

GRE scores are not good predictors of doctoral completion rates (Holmes, 1996)

Standard 3 The student will write with felicity of expression (Publication Manual, pp. 32-34).

Felicity means an appropriate and pleasing manner or style (from dictionary.com). Good writing has a beauty of flow as the words are processed in the reader’s mind. The way words are arranged into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into sections heighten the writing’s interest, making the reader more involved with the text and motivated to glean all of the meaningfulness of the text.

How will you as the writer choreograph the understanding of the content in the mind of your reader? The flow from idea to idea, sentence to sentence, and paragraph to paragraph increases

readers' understanding and their likelihood of staying connected with the meaning conveyed by the writing.

Imagine the reading analogy of listening to a monotone speaker or driving through a barren landscape. How can you improve the "topography" of your writing to sustain the reader's interest? Mixing the complexity of your sentences and putting reference citations at the end of sentences contribute to keeping the reading interesting.

Standard 4 The student will write primarily in active rather than passive voice (Publication Manual, pp. 41-42).

Writing in active voice makes the sentences more interesting, less wordy, more focused, clearer, and less ambiguous about the meaning. In the sentence,

The survey was conducted in a controlled setting.

it is ambiguous who conducted the survey. A better sentence is:

We conducted the survey in a controlled setting.

How could you better write the following sentence to reduce the number of words:

The experiment was designed by Grover (2005).

The answer is convert to active voice:

Grover (2005) designed the experiment.

Standard 5 The student will use the correct person (Publication Manual, p. 39).

When you write about theories, results, methods, ideas, you are writing in the third person. When you switch to second person, you have included "you" in your sentence, which is not permitted. 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.

or

We changed the protocol after every trial.

Watch out for anthropomorphism (Publication Manual, p. 38). Anthropomorphism means attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena. Thus, an experiment cannot attempt to demonstrate or a method cannot control unwarranted variables. Instead, use "I" or "we." Thus, the following sentence:

The experiment collected data from participants at both sites.

should be rewritten to read:

I collected data from participants at both sites.

Standard 6 The student will correctly match all pronouns with their antecedents (Publication Manual, pp. 47-48).

Each pronoun must refer clearly to its antecedent and agree with the antecedent in number and gender. What is incorrect about the following sentence:

Interviewing the participant means that they answer 10 questions.

The pronoun “they” is plural but refers to “participant” which is singular. Correcting this error means making participant plural:

Interviewing the participants means that they answer 10 questions.

Do not use the pronoun combinations of he/she, (s)he, he or she, him or her in your writing. Change the antecedent to plural and then use “they” as the pronoun. Instead of writing:

The participant moved to the second testing room when he/she heard the tone.

write:

The participants moved to the second testing room when they heard the tone.

Standard 7 The student will present parallel ideas in parallel form (Publication Manual, pp. 57-60).

Using between/and, both/and, neither/nor, either/or, and not only/but also is rarely necessary as the sentence can be made more concise without these conjunctions. If you do use these terms, make certain that all elements of the parallelism are present before and after the coordinating conjunction. For example, the sentence:

The rats were both difficult to feed and weigh.

needs to change to read:

The rats were difficult both to feed and to weigh.

but the best (i.e., most concise) version is:

The rats were difficult to feed and weigh.

Here is another example:

The participants signed not only the consent form but they also requested a debriefing session.
needs to change to read:

The participants not only signed the consent form but also requested a debriefing session.
but the best (i.e., most concise) version is:

The participants signed the consent form and requested a debriefing session.

Elements in a series (Publication Manual, pp. 115-117). Elements in a series must be parallel in structure. The sentence:

The participants were told to be comfortable, read the instructions, and that they should ask about anything they did not understand.

presents a series of three elements where two elements are infinitives (to make themselves comfortable and to read the instructions) and the third element is a dependent clause. All three elements need to have the same structure, thus:

The participants were told to be comfortable, read the instructions, and ask about anything they did not understand.

Also, elements in a series are identified with lowercase letters in parentheses to prevent misreading or to clarify the sequence or relationship between elements. For example,

The course's three requirements are (a) writing and presenting article summaries, (b) participating in class discussions, and (c) working on a group project.

Using numbers to identify elements in a series is used only for separate paragraphs in a series, such as itemized conclusions or steps in a procedure. The number is followed by a period but not enclosed in or followed by parentheses.

Standard 8 The student will correctly punctuate (Publication Manual, pp. 78-88) and capitalize (pp. 94-100).

APA format requires correct punctuation and capitalization. Most punctuation errors involve overusing the comma, usually when it is placed where the speaker would be pausing in orally presenting the text. The rules that govern the use of punctuation are based on grammar, not on how the text sounds as one is speaking it. The comma in the following sentence:

The rats buried the device making the noise, and then ran to the opposite side of the cage.
should be deleted so the sentence reads:

The rats buried the device making the noise and then ran to the opposite side of the cage.

and more concisely read:

The rats buried the noise-making device and then ran to the opposite side of the cage.

Standard 9 The student will correctly spell (Publication Manual, pp. 89-94).

Correct spelling is essential for quality writing. Incorrect spelling detracts the reader from the text's meaningfulness, slows reading rate, disrupts the reader's continuity or flow, raises doubts about the writer's intellectual ability, and mars reading enjoyment. Most word processing programs have built-in spell checkers as part of their word-processing software (e.g., Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, etc.); however, this check will not catch situations where an incorrect word but correctly spelled is used—plane instead of plain. Also, contractions (e.g., don't, can't, won't, didn't, etc.) are not used in scientific writing.

Hyphenated words. APA has a set of five principles governing the use of hyphens:

1. Do not use a hyphen unless it serves a purpose, as delineated in the following principles.
2. Use a hyphen for a temporary compound used as an adjective if the term can be misread or if the term expresses a single thought. For example:

The adolescents resided in two parent homes.

is not the same sentence as:

The adolescents resided in two-parent homes

3. Hyphenating most compound adjectives occurs when the compound adjective precedes the term it modifies. Contrast:

She is forward thinking.

with

The forward-thinking woman anticipated the event.

4. Most words formed with prefixes (e.g., aftereffect, posttest, minisession, counterbalance, extracurricular) are not hyphenated (exceptions: words with self, words that could be misunderstood such as repair and re-pair, and words in which the prefix ends and the base word begins with the same vowel such as meta-analysis and co-occur).

5. When two or more compound adjectives have the same base, the base is used only with the last modifier, such as long- and short-term memory, or 2-, 3-, and 10-min trials, pre- and posttest.

Acronyms and abbreviations (*Publication Manual*, pp. 103-111). A term the writer plans to abbreviate must first appear written out completely, followed immediately by its abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter, the abbreviation is used instead of the term. Thus,

The American Psychological Association (APA) developed ethical guidelines to inform clinical practice.

The next time in the paper the writer used American Psychological Association in a sentence:

APA's ethical guidelines are reviewed and revised periodically to reflect current standards of conduct.

Numbers and percentages (*Publication Manual*, pp. 122-130). Words express numbers up to nine, and figures usually express numbers 10 and above. Thus,

The experimenter tested 14 participants each day.

When presenting percents, the number is given with the % sign. Thus,

In open field studies, 30% of the test animals stay within 10 feet of the water.

Standard 10 All writing will otherwise adhere to APA format.

Is the page header correct? Does the Running head appear all in caps? Is the title page numbered page 1? Is the first line of the Abstract not indented? Are the proper levels of heading used properly? Do reference citations appear correctly in text? Does the order of citations in parentheses parallel the order of references in the reference list? Are direct quotes cited correctly? Are statistical symbols properly italicized? Is "et al." used correctly? Do tables and figures adhere exactly to APA format? Do the references appear in appropriate alphabetical and chronological order? Are the references formatted correctly?

The Rubric

The rubric is the basis for the faculty to evaluate student writing and for students to know before they write the criteria on which they will be assessed. The rubric covers all 10 standards. Each standard can be awarded up to 10 points for a total perfect score of 100 if all standards are met with an excellent evaluation on each.

1. The student will write clearly. Excellent means that the meaningfulness of the text is consistently apparent to the reader. Unacceptable means that the reader is not sure of the text's meaning or that the text's meaning is ambiguous, that is, the text has more than one meaning and reader is uncertain which meaning applies.

2. The student will write concisely. Excellent means that the writer is expressing ideas using the appropriate words without being wordy. Unacceptable means that the writing "rambles," that the

writer is not making points directly and using unnecessary words or too many words to convey meaning.

3. The student will write with felicity of expression. Excellent means that the writing flows from topic to topic, that sentence structure is varied, and that vocabulary is used properly. Unacceptable means that the flow of reading lacks coherence, sentences tend to have the same structure, and word use is restricted to simple words.

4. The student will write primarily in active rather than passive voice. Excellent means that the writer primarily uses active voice. Unacceptable means that the writer primarily uses passive voice.

5. The student will use the correct person. Excellent means that the writer primarily writes in third person and knows the few instances where first person is acceptable. Unacceptable means that the writer uses mostly first or second person, except when referring to himself/herself in the Methods section of a report.

6. The student will correctly match all pronouns with their antecedents. Excellent means that all pronouns correctly match their antecedents. Poor means that pronouns consistently do not match their antecedents.

7. The student will present in a series parallel ideas in parallel form. Excellent means that items in a series will be syntactically similar. Poor means that items in a series are syntactically different.

8. The student will correctly punctuate. Excellent means that the writer makes no errors in punctuation. Poor means consistent errors in punctuation.

9. The student will correctly spell. Excellent means that the writer spells all words correctly. Poor means pervasive spelling errors.

10. All writing will otherwise adhere to APA format. Excellent means that APA format is adhered to perfectly without errors. Poor means pervasive APA formatting errors.