A Guide to Key Features for Writing Papers in the APA Style

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Knowing how to write about research requires learning about research and learning about the conventions for scholarly writing. In this book, we have adopted the conventions of the sixth edition of the APA *Publication Manual* (American Psychological Association, 2010). This brief paper highlights several key features of using this style when preparing written papers about research and provides a guide to writing and formatting three major sections of a scholarly paper: the title page, the main text of the paper, and the references.

The Title Page of the Paper

Formal written papers include a title page that identifies the content and author of the paper. The title page should include a title that summarizes the content of your writing. That is, the title should tell the reader what your paper is about. A generic title such as "Assignment" does not convey a good description of your paper's content, whereas a specific title such as "A Literature Review of Strategies for Preventing Obesity" conveys the content and approach of the paper. The title page should also include your name and affiliation. In the APA style, title pages should be double spaced with centered text, use only 12-point font, and not include any boldface text. The APA style recommends the use of a short (no more than 50 characters) running head that identifies the paper with a consistent header.

The Main Text of the Paper

The main text of the paper is where you write the actual content of your paper. As you write, you need to consider the format, use of headings, and use of references.

Formatting the Main Text of Your Paper

Like the title page, the text of your paper should be double spaced and written using a 12-point font. Start the main text of the paper by repeating the full title from the title page. The title

should be centered, use title case, be double spaced, and be in regular font (i.e., not bold). Indent the start of each paragraph and do not leave blank lines between paragraphs. The margins for the paper should be one inch on all sides and each page should be numbered.

Using Headings to Organize Your Writing

Headings are very useful in writing because they provide an organizing framework for the reader. Use them to organize the big ideas of your writing, but do not overuse them so they take away from the flow of your writing.

The headings that appear within the text of your paper and organize your thoughts can appear as different levels. Levels 1, 2, and 3 are most common. Think of the levels of headings like the levels in an outline where secondary headings fall under major headings and, if needed, third-level subheadings fall under secondary headings. The APA style uses a different format for each of the heading levels. The number of levels you use is a personal choice that depends on the length of the paper as well as the details of the information that you are conveying. This paper uses three levels to demonstrate the different formats of each.

Major headings are the first level. Use a level 1 heading style for your major headings. The level 1 headings should be bold, centered, title case, and double spaced. An example of a level 1 heading is the heading "The Main Text of the Paper" used above. I recommend always using level 1 headings in your formal writings to convey the major ideas in your writing.

Secondary subheadings are the second level. Use a level 2 heading if you need subheadings under one of your major headings. The level 2 heading should be bold, left justified, title case, and double spaced. An example of a level 2 heading is the heading "Using Headings to Organize Your Writing" above.

Tertiary subheadings are the third level. Use a level 3 heading if you need further subheadings under one of your secondary headings. The third level of heading should be bold, indented, in sentence case, end with a period, and flow into the start of the paragraph's text. An example of this format is the heading "Tertiary subheadings are the third level" used at the start of this paragraph.

Using In-Text References to Give Credit to Others' Work

To avoid the serious offense of plagiarism, you must give credit by providing an in-text citation whenever you refer to ideas that have been published elsewhere by yourself or others. This is done through in-text references in the main body of your paper. APA in-text citation style consists of author name(s) and year of publication. Here are four pieces of advice for in-text references.

"And" versus ampersand ("&"). If a reference appears as part of the sentence and there are two or more authors, write out the word "and." If the reference appears as a parenthetical comment, then use the ampersand symbol ("&"). For example, we can say that Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) defined mixed methods as integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. We could also say that mixed methods research is defined as research that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Listing names versus using "et al." If a reference has two authors, always list them both (e.g., Plano Clark & Wang, 2011). If a reference has three, four, or five authors, list all the names the first time you refer to the work in your paper (e.g., Churchill, Plano Clark, Prochaska-Cue, Creswell, & Ontai-Grzebik, 2007) and then use the "et al." format all subsequent times you refer to the work (e.g., Churchill et al., 2007). If an article has six or more authors, then always use the "et al." format (e.g., Plano Clark et al., 2002).

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Ordering multiple references. If you provide multiple references for an idea, order them alphabetically by the first authors' last names and separate them with a semicolon. For example, much has been written about mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Plano Clark, 2010).

Direct quotes. If you directly quote words from a source, then you must indicate the direct quote with quote marks and include the page number of the original quote in the source. For example, it has been said that the APA manual is "the most popular style guide in educational research" (Creswell, 2012, p. 98).

The References List for the Paper

At the end of your paper, start a section for the references on a new page. Title this section as "References." Like the paper's title, this should be centered, use title case, be double spaced, and not boldface. In this section, you must provide full information on all references that you cited in the main text of your paper. All citations in your paper *must* appear in the list at the end. Likewise, all citations listed at the end *must* appear somewhere in your paper. Each type of reference needs to be formatted carefully (see examples at the end of this paper for books, chapters, and articles), including the hanging indent. The references are listed in alphabetical order based on the first authors' last names.

Conclusion

The APA manual is a complex document with many rules. Some of the rules are logical, but others you have to follow simply because those are the manual's instructions. This paper demonstrates the key aspects of the APA style that should be of concern when preparing scholarly written papers and assignments.

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