

Psychology Department Writing Policy

The Psychology Department has 7 learning goals for its majors. Goal # 5 is that students who complete the major will be able to effectively communicate with clear, grammatically-correct writing that conforms to APA style. To help reach this goal, the Psychology professors have agreed to implement a common writing policy in all PSYC courses at the 200- and 300-level; the portion of the policy concerning APA format, only applies to PSYC 282 and 300-level classes. This policy will apply to all graded written papers/essays; it will not apply to in-class writing assignments, to ungraded written assignments, or to written essays that occur as part of exams. It applies equally to majors and non-majors in relevant classes.

When a professor finds one of the following mistakes in your paper, s/he will indicate the type of mistake by writing (or typing) a code nearby the mistake. S/he will write WM if it is a writing mistake, P if it is a punctuation mistake, T if it is a typographical error, and APA if it is an APA error. S/he will then write a # (and perhaps a small letter as well) to let you know which type of mistake was made. So, for example, WM2b signifies a problem with subject-verb agreement, P2a signifies a problem with a colon, and APA 1 signifies a problem with an in-text citation. If you see one of these types of marks, you can then refer to this policy in order to know what mistake you made and how to avoid making that mistake again in the future; if you do not understand how to fix the mistake even after you have read this document, talk with your professor.

Writing Mistakes (WMs) are penalized at 1% per mistake; no freebies are given, and there is a 20% cap on the amount of points a student can lose due to WMs. Punctuation mistakes (Ps) are penalized at .5% per mistake; 1 freebie is allowed per 250 words of paper length, and there is a 20% cap on the amount of points a student can lose due to Ps. Typos (Ts) are penalized at .5% per mistake; 1 freebie is allowed per 250 words of paper length, and there is a 20% cap on the amount of points a student can lose due to Ts. APA mistakes (APAs) are penalized at .5% per mistake; 2 freebies are allowed per paper and there is a 20% cap on the amount of points a student can lose due to APAs.

The total amount of points that a student can lose on a single paper due to mistakes s/he made relevant to this writing policy (i.e., summed across the four categories of WMs, Ps, Ts, & APAs) is capped at 25% for 200-level classes and 40% for PSYC 282 and 300-level classes.

In the recognition that reinforcement is a more powerful external motivator than is punishment, the Psychology Department also offers Extra Credit for excellent, error-free writing. A student can earn 2% Extra Credit points if the paper has 0 WMs **and** has so few Ts and Ps that the student was not penalized for these types of mistakes (i.e., only freebie errors occurred). In addition, in relevant courses, a student can also earn 2% Extra Credit points if a paper has 0 APAs.

Writing Mistakes

These mistakes include problems with grammar, clarity, and proper use of words.

1. Sentence Structure:

- a. **Fragmented sentences** occur when a sentence is not an independent clause, i.e., when it lacks either a subject or verb, or when a sentence is actually a phrase masquerading as a sentence. Fragmented sentences are always incomplete thoughts. For example "Near the printer on my desk" has neither a subject nor a verb. "Twenty seven females and ten males" has no verb and "Went willingly to the room" has no subject. All necessary parts of speech must be within a particular sentence. So "The stapler sits near the printer on my desk" adds a subject (i.e., stapler) and verb (i.e., sits). "Twenty seven females and ten males participated in the study" adds a verb (i.e., participated). "She went willingly into the room" adds a subject (i.e., She). Sometimes a fragmented sentence does have an action and an actor, as in "Bill, running down the corridor." The problem here is that the thought is incomplete. "Bill ran down the corridor" is a complete thought, as is, "Bill, running down the corridor, smashed head first into Dean."
- b. **Run-on sentences** occur when two clauses that could stand independently as sentences are smashed together into one seeming sentence, sometimes with a comma between them, although not always. "Measures of depression are commonly used, they really work" is a run-on sentence because "Measures of depression are commonly used" stands alone as a sentence, and "they really work" stands alone as a sentence (i.e., each has a subject and a verb). One way of fixing a run-on sentence is to make it two different sentences, as in "Measures of depression are commonly used. They really work." Another solution is to separate the two sentences with a semi-colon or, less commonly in scientific writing, a dash "Measures of depression are commonly used; they really work." Typically the best solution is to connect the two sentences with a comma and a type of conjunction, as in "Measures of depression are commonly used, and they really work." With this solution, the run-on is fixed and a transition is provided.

2. Problems with verbs

- a. **Consistent verb tense.** Students sometimes switch verb tenses within a single idea, moving between past and present tense within the same sentence or paragraph, as in "Subjects complete a measure of depression; then they were randomly assigned to condition." This problem can be solved by identifying the verb tense that makes the most sense for the idea you are expressing and using it throughout the idea unless there is a valid reason to switch. Thus, the better sentence would be "Subjects first completed a measure of depression; then they were randomly assigned to condition."
- b. **Subject-verb agreement:** The verb form one uses in a sentence depends upon whether the subject is singular or plural **and** whether the subject is

first, second, or third person (e.g., I am, you are, we are, she is, they are). Mistakes in subject-verb agreement increase when the subject and verb are not directly next to each other in a sentence or when the verb precedes the subject. For example, the sentence "There were very few students who did not do well on that assignment" is correct because "students" is the subject, and therefore "were" is the correct verb form.

- i. Note that "Data" is a plural term; "datum", which is rarely used, is the singular. As such, "These data are interesting" is correct.
- ii. Words that are "collective nouns," like "set," "class," "audience," and "couple" represent a unit, and therefore are almost always treated as singular. Thus, while one would correctly write, "These findings are interesting," one would also correctly write, "This set of findings is interesting."

3. Pronoun problems

- a. **Unclear references:** This problem typically occurs when a pronoun refers to an earlier word (the antecedent) but it is not clear exactly what word the pronoun refers to. For example, "Lane told Joe that he had failed the course" could mean the Lane had failed the course or that Joe had failed the course. The reader has no way of knowing. This is easily solved by being clear and writing "Lane told Joe, 'You failed the course.'" Another type of unclear reference sometimes occurs with "which," as in "She avoided using slang, which greatly improved her speech." Here the reader cannot tell whether the avoiding of slang or the slang itself improved her speech. It would be clearer in this case to write, "By avoiding slang, she improved her speech."
- b. **Pronoun-antecedent agreement:** This problem often occurs when an earlier word in the sentence (the antecedent) is singular but the pronoun is plural, e.g., "When a person does not study for a test, they often fail." The problem is that "A person" is singular but "they" is plural. This problem can be fixed by making the antecedent plural, as in "When people do not study, they often fail." It can also be fixed by making the pronoun singular, as in "When a person does not study, she or he often fails"; this, admittedly, is more clunky. A third way to fix this problem is to reword the sentence to remove the pronoun, as in "People who do not study often fail." Although debate continues regarding the usage of "they" as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun, at present the Psychology department does not recognize "they" as a singular pronoun.
- c. **I and me; he/she and him/her; we and us; they and them:** "I," "he/she," "we" and "they" are words that function as subjects (i.e., who the sentence is about). "Me", "him/her," "us," and "them" function as objects (i.e., the receiver of the action associated with the verb). Thus, "Larry likes Hank more than me," means that Larry likes Hank more than Larry likes me. "Larry likes Hank more than I" means that Larry likes Hank more than I like Hank. This latter sentence would be clearer by adding a verb, as in, "Larry likes Hank more than I do."
- d. **Who vs. that:** Generally, "who" is used to refer to people and "that" is used to refer to animals or nonliving objects. For example, it would be

correct to write, "The individual who was responsible for sending the hateful message was not available for comment." While the Psychology Department recognizes that many people, and some authors, use "who" and "that" interchangeably when referring to people, we believe it is important to 'humanize' people through the use of "who" rather than "that."

4. **Parallel construction:** Parallel construction is necessary for clarity and involves making sure that lists of things are expressed with the same grammatical forms. So, in the case of "Joe went shopping, drank two beers, and one martini," there is a problem in grammar with the "and one martini" just hanging at the end of the sentence. In this case, the sentence could be fixed by writing "Joe shopped, and then he drank two beers and one martini" so that "shopped" and "drank" are parallel, and so it is clear what happened with the one martini. Another option would be to write, "Joe shopped, drank two beers, and downed one martini" to add a parallel verb form that explains what happened to the martini. Parallel construction problems also occur in sentences like "Many professors work hard, taking no vacation." In this case "work" is not parallel to "taking." The sentence can be fixed by rewriting it as "Many professors work hard and take no vacation" or as "Many professors are working hard and taking no vacation."

5. **Words that sound alike: KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN:**

- a. **Then vs. Than:** "Then" refers to comparisons in time, as in "First she ran, and then she swam," and to causal statements, as in "If I drop this, then it will hit the ground." "Than" is used for comparisons, as in "Daniel is taller than Frank."
- b. **Effect vs. Affect:** When discussing causality, "affect" is a verb whereas "effect" is a noun. As such, the following is correct usage: "Joe's statement affected Helen's self-esteem; this, in turn, had drastic effects on her performance on the test." "Affect" can occasionally be a noun, referring to emotion, as in "The researchers measured levels of positive affect." "Effect" can occasionally be used as a verb meaning "to bring about," as in "The earthquake effected great change in the highway system." Your best rule of thumb is to use "effect" as a noun and "affect" as a verb, except for the two exceptions above.
- c. **There vs. Their vs. They're:** "There" is an adverb that indicates place (e.g., "I want to go there on spring break") or it is an expletive (a "stand in" for a subject or verb in a sentence; e.g., "There are many places I want to visit on spring break"). "Their" is a possessive pronoun (e.g., "Their spring break plans have changed"). "They're" is a contraction that means "They are" (e.g., "They're not going to New Orleans on spring break").
- d. **Lay vs. Lie:** "Lie" means to recline or rest on a surface whereas "lay" means to put or place something. "Lie" does not have a direct object (someone or something that did the lying) whereas "lay" does. "The laptops lie on the desk" and "Lay the laptop on the desk" are both correct. To make it more complicated, keep in mind that the past tense of "lie" is "lay" and the past tense of "lay" is "laid."

- e. **Too vs. two vs. to.** “To” is a preposition, as in “He is going to France.” “Two” is a number, as in “She has two dogs.” “Too” is an adverb, as in “I have too many pimples.”
 - f. **Your vs. You’re.** “Your” is a possessive, as in “The baby has your eyes.” “You’re” is a conjunction of “you” and “are,” as in “You’re wonderful.”
 - g. **Loose vs. lose.** “Loose” is an adjective, as in “That knot is loose.” “Lose” is a verb, as in “I bet she will lose her tooth tonight.”
 - h. **i.e. vs. e.g.** While these abbreviations do not sound alike, they are often confused. “i.e.,” is a stand-in for “that is” and is used to express an idea in another way, as in “The driver stopped at the red light, i.e., he followed the law.” “e.g.” is a stand-in for “for example” and is used to introduce possible examples, as in “The zoo has many animals, e.g., elephants, aardvarks, giraffes, etc.” Importantly, both “i.e.” and “e.g.” should be followed by a comma in normal usage. Further, they are typically used in parentheses as opposed to the body of the sentence.
- 6. Proper use of articles (a, an and the):** An article signals that a noun is about to appear (although the noun does not need to directly follow the article). Generally, “a” or “an” means “one among many” and either word is used to refer to a noun that is not specific or specified but is “countable.” “A” is used before a consonant sound; “an” is used before a vowel sound (e.g., “She wanted me to read a book” or “She wanted me to read an interesting book”). “The” is used with a noun whose identity is known (e.g., “She wanted me to read the book that the professor mentioned in class yesterday”). Non-count nouns (entities that cannot be counted, like energy, food, and advice) do not take an article (e.g., “She wanted me to read classic literature”).
- 7. Avoid overstatements.**
- a. **Absolute statements.** Using such words as “always” and “never” (and related words such as “constantly,” “continually,” “forever,” “endlessly,” “at no time,” “not in any way”) should be avoided. Many students write sentences such as “She never smiles” or “He is always a hard grader.” Both of these are almost certainly overstatements and misuses of the words “never” and “always.” “People never run faster than the speed of light” and “People always die eventually,” are examples of proper uses of these two words. The earlier sentences can be fixed by choosing more moderate words, as in “She rarely smiles” or “He is usually a hard grader.”
 - b. **Prove.** Scientists very rarely claim that they have “proven” anything, although some form of this word is used by lay people with frequency. The use of any form of this word typically overstates results (which are usually probabilistic). Thus, rather than writing “These results prove that...” a more appropriate statement is “These results support the idea that...” or “These results are consistent with the idea that...”
- 8. Making comparisons:** The sentence “The experimental group scored higher in aggression” makes it impossible for the reader to know to whom or what the experimental group’s aggression scores are being compared. When comparison words like “higher” or “lower” or “more” or “less” are used, it is crucial to include

the comparator. So, for example, a correct sentence would be, “The experimental group scored higher in aggression than did either of the two control groups.”

9. **Dangling and awkwardly placed modifiers.** Words, phrases, and clauses are often used to modify (or further describe) some other word. Sometimes, however, writers place these modifiers in locations in the sentence that make it difficult to understand what the modifiers are modifying or that actually change the meaning of the sentence. For example, in the sentence, “The professor had two plants in her office that needed to be watered,” the phrase “that needed to be watered” is meant to modify “two plants,” but its location in the sentence actually makes it modify “her office”; obviously, her office does not need to be watered. Writing, “The professor had two plants that needed to be watered in her office,” solves the problem. This points to the clear solution for modifiers --- place them next to the word they are modifying. A similar problem can happen for “limiting modifiers,” which are words like “only”, “not”, “even” and “almost”. These words should be placed in front of a verb if they modify the verb; if they modify some other word, they should be placed in front of that other word. So, for example, “In the study, all subjects were asked not to place their hands in ice water” has a different meaning from “In the study, not all subjects were asked to place their hands in ice water.” In the first sentence “not” modifies the verb “to place,” and the sentence means that no one put his/her hand in the ice water. In the second sentence, “not” modifies “all subjects,” and the sentence means that some, but not all, subjects placed their hand in the ice water.
10. **Point of view consistency.** A particular sentence should usually stay with the same point of view in terms of person and number. So, for example, the following sentence drifts from one view to another: “Our class had to complete two assignments. You had to write an essay and take an exam.” Here, the author changes from the “we” point of view to the “you” point of view. The latter is incorrect, because “you” refers to the reader, when actually the reader was probably not part of “our class.” As such, it would be best to keep the point of view the same throughout the sentence by writing “We had to write an essay and take an exam.”

Punctuation

Although there are many forms of punctuation, the Psychology Department Writing Policy only concerns itself with some of the forms. Because the Psychology Department recognizes that punctuation errors occur occasionally even in the papers of careful writers, students are allowed one un-penalized punctuation error for every 250 words in the paper.

1. **End punctuation.** Most sentences should end with a period, although if a sentence asks a question it should end with a question mark. Exclamation marks can also end sentences, but they are used very rarely in scientific writing.
2. **Internal punctuation.** Internal punctuation occurs within the context of a sentence and affects how the reader reads that sentence.

- a. **The colon.** Colons are most often used to draw attention to a list or to a quotation. They can only be used after an independent clause. Thus, one might write "There are four main sections to a research paper: introduction, methods, results, and discussion" because the portion of the sentence before the colon is an independent clause. However, one would not say "The four sections of a research paper are: introduction, methods, results, and discussion" because the portion of the sentence before the colon is not a full independent clause.
 - b. **The comma.** Unlike end punctuation or a colon, each of which signals a strong pause, a comma indicates a slight pause, allowing the reader to better follow the flow of thought and to clarify meaning within a sentence. For example, "After taking her nap my mother wanted me to help with dinner" can be clarified by adding a comma after "nap." Commas are also often used to set off a phrase. As a general rule, to determine if commas should be used for this purpose, ask yourself whether the information is essential to the meaning of the sentence. Information essential to the meaning of the sentence is rarely enclosed with commas. For example, in the sentence "Musicians who are just starting out rarely make money," the kinds of musicians who "rarely make money" are the ones who are "just starting out." As such, the phrase "who are just starting out" is **not** set off by commas. In contrast, information that is not essential to the meaning of a sentence is almost always enclosed by commas. "Professors, who often wear ugly ties, spend much of their time grading," illustrates this rule, as professors spend much time grading regardless of their tie preferences; the information about the ties is extra. Commas are also used to separate independent clauses when conjunctions are used (see WM 1b); place the comma before the conjunction, as in, "My cat is usually distressed during the day, but when I come home she seems to calm down." In addition, commas should separate all items in a series of three or more words, phrases or clauses. For example, "Lori worked in the yard, showered, did the laundry, and then cooked dinner."
 - c. **The semi-colon.** As noted in the section on run-on sentences, a semi-colon is used to separate two independent clauses; failure to use a semi-colon in that context is considered a WM 1b, not a P2c. Students will lose points for a P2c in cases when they use a semi-colon when they should actually use a comma or colon.
3. **The apostrophe.** Apostrophes are used for possessives, as in "Joe's candy is tasty" and "One's health is important." There are two exceptions where an apostrophe is not used for the possessive. The first is in the case of "Its," as in "The paint can fell off the table and landed on its lid." The second is in the case of "whose," as in "I have no idea whose paper this is." Apostrophes are also used sometimes to make a plural, as with numbers and symbols. For example, it is correct to say "The poker player held three 7's in his hand" but it is not correct to say "The chips and the poker player's sat on the table." An apostrophe is also used for contractions such as "It's" (when referring to "it is"), "who's" (when referring to "who is" or "who has") and "can't," (when referring to "can not"), but

such contractions are too informal for the writing in most psychology classes and should generally be avoided.

Typographical Errors

A typographical error is defined in this policy as a misspelling of a word (other than words that sound alike – see WM5), a mis-keying of a word, or the omission of a word that needs to be present in the sentence. So, if you intended to write, “I went to the circus,” any of the following would be considered typographical errors: “I went to the circsu”, “I went to the circle”, and “I went the circus.” Because the Psychology Department recognizes that typographical errors occur occasionally even in the papers of careful writers, students are allowed one un-penalized typographical error for every 250 words in the paper.

APA format

There are many features of APA format, and the Psychology Department Writing Policy focuses on only some of them. Because the Psychology Department recognizes that APA format errors occur occasionally even in the papers of careful writers, students are allowed two un-penalized mistakes per paper. The information below provides page numbers in the 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* for how to follow certain aspects of APA format.

1. **Correct format of in-text citations.** All citations mentioned in the text have a particular format that they should follow; this format depends on the number of authors and whether the citation has been previously mentioned. See pp. 174-179 of the APA manual; Table 6.1 on p. 177 is particularly helpful.
2. **Correct format of citations in reference section.** All citations in the reference section have a particular format that they should follow; this format depends on whether the citation is from a journal, a book chapter, a book, etc. See pp. 180-192 of the APA Manual; the reference section of the sample paper on pp. 49-51 is a good general guide.
3. **Match between in-text citations and citations in reference section.** All citations in the text should be in the reference section, and the reference section should contain only those citations mentioned in the text. Check this match before turning in your paper.
4. **Statistics.** There are standard ways of reporting statistical findings that depend on the results and the statistics utilized. Many useful statistical sentences are in the APA manual on pgs. 116-123; section 4.4 on pp. 116-117 is particularly helpful.
5. **Indentation, centering, and headings.** The placement of new paragraphs and headings depends on a number of variables. See the APA Manual for information on correct indentation (p. 229) and correct use of headings (pp. 62-63; Table 3.1 is particularly helpful).
6. **Line Spacing.** The entire document should be double-spaced, with no extra spaces between any lines (e.g., no extra line space between paragraphs, between headings, or between citations (see p. 229)). The reference section should be double-spaced as well.

7. **Figures & Tables.** Figures and tables should be correctly labeled, formatted and placed within the paper. See the APA Manual for guidance. Specifically, for tables see pp. 126-150; a helpful sample appears on p. 129. For figures see pp. 150-166; examples appear on pp. 152-160, with a data-based figure on p. 156. Tables and figures are **not** embedded in the manuscript, i.e., the text of the results section; they are placed after the reference section. See the sample paper layout (pp. 41-53) in the APA manual.