

Research Papers & Reports in Psychology

Your psychology instructor will have specific requirements and expectations for research assignments. This handout has some general suggestions for writing research papers in psychology; however, your instructor's handout is the final authority.

Psychology assignments might include a research paper or a research report. A **research paper** will generally discuss a summary of current research and/or theory on an issue or topic in psychology. A **research report** reports your findings from your own original research study, which you have conducted in your course. Research reports must be done in correct APA format, outlined below.

Choosing Your Topic: Your instructor may give you a list of approved topics for your research paper. If you are asked to choose your own topic, your paper must be written for that particular course, not be one written for another course. (Some instructors may give permission to use a similar topic as a paper for another course, but will require you to write a new paper for each course, according to the course requirements). Try to avoid choosing one of the over-used topics that are easily bought on the internet - your instructor will probably then check to make sure it wasn't plagiarized.

Reading & Researching Your Topic: Your instructor will be looking for your clear understanding of the issues and current research findings in your topic, expressed in your own words, and with the sources of your material referenced correctly. Your background reading should be current, credible psychology sources. Don't use references that are too old or too elementary. Apart from historical theories, you should review only current research (since 2000, in most cases). If using a textbook that is frequently revised and updated, which includes most of our course texts, use the most recent edition. In Introductory Psychology courses (Psyc 100 and Psyc 101) many of the instructors will accept the Introductory Psychology text as a reference. However, this may not be an acceptable reference for a second year course.

In general, don't use references outside the discipline of Psychology. These are usually written by non-psychologists, and may be inaccurate or superficial. Your library has a collection of academic texts and journals, but you will rarely find any cite-able references in your public library. (In Psyc 100, some instructors allow *Psychology Today* and *Scientific*

American - Mind. However, other psychology instructors may not allow these magazines, while some may expect you to read newspapers, etc. for your assignments. As always, check with your instructor if in doubt.)

Acceptable sources include academic texts in the library that are written or edited by psychologists; journal articles from psychology journals, found in our library or accessed through PsycINFO; and articles found on credible web sites, such as university web pages.

As well as a good understanding of the issues and research in your topic, your instructor will also be looking for a *critical* understanding of the topic. Psychology includes a wide diversity of perspectives, and research findings often conflict with each other. This critical thinking and argument would be based on your knowledge of opposing theories and research, not on your personal beliefs or feelings.

Research Paper Organization: Always begin a research paper by first preparing an outline; it will help you to organize your argument or discussion into a coherent order.

Discuss aspects of your topic in a logical, well-organized way. In Psychology papers, **do use subtitles** to separate the sections. For example, in a paper on the nature/nurture issue in the topic of intelligence, sub-topics could include:

Introduction

Introduce your topic or issue briefly, and outline where you are going with it. In general, the Introduction should be brief and to the point, with no unnecessary words or filling. Omit vague generalities such as “Researchers have long debated the nature/nurture issue...”. A history of your topic is not usually necessary. Simply introduce your topic or argument briefly, and outline where you are going with it. Some relevant and necessary background may be given in the Introduction if you don't want to discuss it in the body of the paper, but every sentence in your introduction should convey necessary information.

Then discuss aspects of your topic in some logical order. For example, in an issue paper discussing the genetic and environmental influences on intelligence, the following could be your sub-headings:

Heritability and Intelligence
Environmental Influences on Intelligence
Critical Analysis and Conclusions
References

This order outlines the issue, discusses both sides of it, and concludes with your own analysis of the argument on both sides.

Research Report Format: The required APA format for a research report follows. Note that in APA format, the main headings are centred and the subheadings are on the left margin and italicized.

After the title page, begin with a brief **Abstract** of the study. This would briefly summarize all the sections of your study, including your Results & Discussion, into one, single-spaced 150 word paragraph.

Introduction

The introduction is comprised mainly of a *brief* (2-3 page) review of background reading & research in the area of your topic. The introduction includes a review of the theoretical background of your topic, and/or relevant past research that has been done in your topic. End with the reasons why your research adds to the field, and your specific hypothesis or research question.

Method

Participants

Describe the subjects or respondents in your study, with enough information to describe them adequately. The number of respondents, their gender, age, and the situation of the study must be included (e.g. if respondents were university students).

Materials/Instruments

If any are used, describe (e.g. questionnaires, tests, etc.)

Procedure

The Procedure section includes exactly how you did your study. Describe your research method and your methods of data collection and analysis. It should include enough detail that anyone could repeat your procedure.

Results

Include your results, summarized and presented in a way that is easy to follow and to understand. If appropriate, these results could be presented in tables, which would include descriptive and inferential statistics. With qualitative research, you may be able to use tables, but usually a prose description of the results is more useful.

The results section should not include conclusions or interpretations; these would be in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Use the Discussion to relate your results to the theory or past research you described in the Introduction. The "why" of your results are discussed here, and what they mean in terms of theory and research. Add a discussion of the limitations of your study.

References

All citations in the introduction are included in the References section at the end of the report. Use correct APA style formatting.

Appendix

Any information that is relevant to the study, but not needed within the body of the paper should be included at the end of the report. These appendices should include further details of the research instructions, materials, results, psychological measures, etc., if any, and the raw data of the study (interview transcripts, collected surveys, observation notes, etc).

Mechanics: Unless your instructor suggests otherwise, your papers should always be typed. Leave 1" margins on all sides. A title page, with the paper title, the course, your name and student number, is a nice gesture, although some instructors prefer you to omit a title page or lay it out in exact APA style. Check with your instructor about this and whether your papers should be in a folder or not, and whether they will accept e-mailed attachments. (Many instructors do not accept attachments because of virus problems).

If you are using a computer, adjust the "justification" to "**left justify**", rather than "full". Full justification evens the side margins; to do that it varies the spacing between the words in the line, and this makes the paper very hard to read.

Double space your paper and use Times New Roman font (12pt size). Number your pages with the title page numbered as page 1. Spell-check your paper. Then carefully proofread it as well, as many errors are not detected by spell-checks.

Note: **Always** keep your rough notes and your first drafts as you may be asked to show them. Never hand in a photocopied paper.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is defined as the use of another person's ideas, concepts or words as your own. This is a form of cheating, and is a serious academic offence. It will result in a failure of the paper, and probably of the course as well.

To avoid plagiarism, your paper must be written by you; not, needless to say, written by someone else, bought on the internet, or borrowed from a friend. Also note that **if you had substantial help in writing your paper that can also be considered plagiarism**. If a friend or tutor is helping you with your English grammar and expression, be careful that their

help does not extend to writing the sentences for you (or dictating them, either). Editing help from a friend should only help you identify a common grammar problem, or to note where you need to rewrite a confusing or ungrammatical sentence or paragraph. You should always do the actual writing yourself.

A second source of plagiarism comes from missing citations. Research papers in psychology, as in other courses, must be written with correct citations of *every* paraphrased or quoted concept, idea, or words. Some students incorrectly believe a citation is only needed for a quotation, and that it isn't necessary to cite an idea, or a paraphrased passage, or the course textbook, or "common knowledge". If a statement is made as fact, or is not your idea, it must be cited.

In psychology papers, you should generally paraphrase rather than use direct quotations unless they are necessary to express the exact words of a source. **Paraphrase** ideas you read in your source texts, that is, rewrite the idea into your own words. Note that this implies *more than a change of one or two words in the sentence*. For paraphrased material, as for quotations, **you must cite all ideas and concepts that are not completely original**. Cite throughout the body of the paper, and provide the full reference on the References page at the end of the paper. If you do not cite and reference these ideas, or if you fail to use quotation marks or indents when you do include a direct quotation, you are in effect claiming credit for ideas and words that are not your own. Remember, this is plagiarizing and will result in a failed paper.

Recently, some students have plagiarized by searching for their topic on the internet, then copying and inserting whole segments of incited text from internet sources into their papers. Needless to say, this is cheating and will result in a failed paper when your instructor does the same search on the internet and finds your sources were copied verbatim, without citation or referencing.

Citing in APA Style: The purpose of a citation is to let the reader know who was the author of the idea, concept or quotation in your paper, and when and where this information was published. Then your readers could trace the information themselves and evaluate its validity. The various disciplines in the social sciences have different citing style requirements. Papers in psychology must have correct citations written in APA style. (See below). Make sure you are completely correct in your citation style, including your punctuation and capital letters. Most psychology instructors will deduct points for errors in APA citing and referencing.

To find information on APA style, see the APA format handouts in the Writing Centre or the Capilano Guide to Writing.

In APA (American Psychological Association) style, cite paraphrased material in the body of the paper with: (author's last name, year of publication). The full reference is then given

on the References section at the end of the paper. This differs from MLA style, which requires you to cite the author and page number, instead. In psychology, it is the year of the publication that is of concern to us, as current research may radically challenge older ideas. For quotations, use quotation marks around the quote, and add the page number after the author's name and year in the citation.

In APA style, don't use footnotes, or bibliographies. Also, don't include first names, initials, or titles in the citation. For example,

Freud, Jung, Cartwright, Faraday, among many others, have proposed very different theories about dreams (Weiten & McCann, 2010). While Freud believed that all dreams were wish-fulfillments (as cited in Weiten & McCann, 2010), Faraday (1972) suggested that dreams can tell us about neglected aspects of our psyche.

Yes, you *do* cite every assertion, idea, etc. However, if every sentence in a paragraph paraphrases information from the same source, citations at the beginning of the paragraph and at the end of the paragraph would usually be enough. Do, however, include a citation when you change a source, even if that occurs in the next sentence, as in the example above.

Students are often confused about how to cite a *secondary source* (that is, when your source cites a previous source), e.g. your source, Weiten and McCann, cited Freud. Give the citation for **only** the source you actually read. Although you will usually include the name of the original author within your sentence, do not cite the date of the original author's publication, or page number. If you cite the original author, you are in effect claiming you read the original author, and that is not true. For example, if you found Freud's theories about dreams in your text by Weiten and McCann, you would reference Weiten and McCann, **not** Freud, as follows:

In Freud's (as cited in Weiten & McCann, 2010) view, all dreams were wish-fulfillments.

This sentence is clear that the concept was Freud's, but that you read about Freud's idea in the Weiten and McCann text. If you copy Weiten and McCann's own citation of Freud himself, (e.g. (Freud, 1900)) you would be claiming that you looked up Freud's original work, presumably reading it in the original German publication!

In general, direct quotations are discouraged unless necessary and brief. If you must *occasionally* quote directly from your sources, all direct quotations (under 40 words) must be in quotation marks and cited with author, date, **and page number** before the period. If the quotation is over 40 words, quotation marks are not used. Instead, the entire passage is indented 5 spaces, and cited with author, date and page number after the period. Although usually double-spaced, APA guidelines now allow for single spacing this indented quotation for readability. For example:

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An individual might have a dream which contains mythic content, yet be unaware of the myth itself. May (2001) defined myths as "archetypal patterns in human consciousness" (p.37). These patterns are universal; according to May, the need for myths, indeed the cry for myths, will be present wherever there are persons who call themselves human.... (quotation continues for 40 or more words). (May, 1991, p.20)

As noted above, the full reference is given on the last page of the paper, the References section. All references cited in the paper (and only those references cited) are listed in alphabetical order on the References page. Note that there are many differences between APA and MLA style. The date occurs after the author's name; only the first word in the book/article title or subtitle is in capitals; and initials are used for first names. Electronic sources include a doi. An example of a book and print journal article reference follows:

References

May, R. (1991). *The cry for myth*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Weinberg. R. .A. (1989). Intelligence and IQ: Landmark issues and great debates. *American Psychologist*, 44, 98-104. doi:10.1037/0278-6133.24.2.225

The Capilano Guide to Writing, and the psychology department web page on APA style both have extensive examples of citations and references for different types of sources, including electronic sources and personal communications.

Style: Style is all part of the package, and a readable style helps you get your point across coherently and clearly. All writing must tailor its style for the context and situation; you write differently for a research paper than you would for a magazine article or your daily journal. For a psychology research paper, a formal, objective style is required. Remember, psychology is a scientific discipline; use an objective style rather than a narrative or personal style.

- Don't include long reams of irrelevant material to pad the paper. It will be noticed and it won't impress the reader. It may expand your paper to the required number of pages, but the lack of content will be penalized.
- Avoid personal references; avoid using "I", "we", or "you" (unless you are using introspection). Avoid slang and informal language. Use formal, academic discourse.
- Be objective and well-reasoned. Don't "soap-box" in a research paper in Psychology, even if it is a subject about which you have very strong feelings. Argue logically, not emotionally, using research evidence, not opinion, to support your view.

- Avoid narratives or poetry, or overly descriptive or metaphorical language. It's not necessary or appropriate. Your paper may sound dry, but it will be more concise and easier to read.
- In psychology papers, there is no need to "qualify" your sources. Since all your sources are (or should be) psychologists, there is no need to mention their titles or positions. By convention, only their last names are needed (e.g. "Freud suggested....") except in the rare cases where only the last name is misleading (e.g. "Anna Freud....").

Common Errors

- Incorrect or missing citations, or using direct quotations of all or part of a sentence without quotation marks and page numbers. As noted above, this is plagiarizing.
- Bad grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. Pick up a guide to university level paper writing available in the Library or Writing Centre, or consult writing style guides through the internet; they tell you how to write papers and review some common grammatical errors, such as punctuation misuse, or the use of "that" for "who", or "it's" (it is) for the possessive "its". Run-on paragraphs are also common. A rule of thumb is to start a new paragraph when you are starting to discuss the next idea or concept.
- Use of slang or informal language. The level of discourse that is expected is one that is appropriate to a university academic paper. Many of the words we use in everyday language are slang terms; the formal term should be used in your paper. (E.g. use "adolescent" rather than "teen").
- Expressing ideas and theories, or speculations, as fact. If a point is validly disputed, or is a speculation or theory of your own you can't be certain is correct or factual, it should be expressed as such. Example: "The recent murder-suicide of a young Vancouver family *may have been* predisposed by the father's abused childhood," rather than "The recent ... *was caused by* abuse in childhood".
The use of citations and references that are too old or obscure, or are at too elementary, as discussed above.
- Soapboxing. A research paper should avoid personal polemics. Your aim in this paper is to critically discuss a topic in Psychology, not to arouse sympathy, anger, indignation or even laughter in the reader.
- Do make every word count, and avoid "motherhood" comments in your introduction or conclusions that state the obvious, such as: "Therefore, we should all work for world peace, a clean environment, and the betterment of society".

Handout prepared by Janet Waters, updated by Claire Vanston (2009)