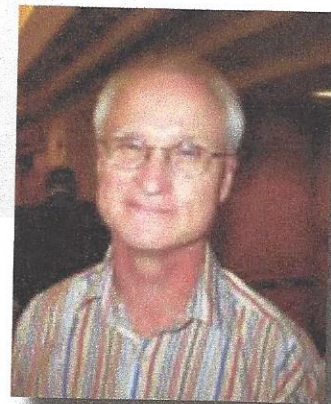


# Writing in APA Style: The Style We Love to Hate

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As far as I can tell, nobody has tabulated the number of ways that a writer could violate APA style in producing a write up. (For those of you keeping track, I just violated a rule. At the end of this article, you can view the errors I've embedded. Surely, I haven't gotten them all, though.) The possibilities are staggering. In the current publication manual of 468 pages with 380 sections with rules that one could violate, there are more potential errors than any of us would probably want to imagine. Many of the guidelines are quite trivial, triviality being in the eye of the beholder, of course; but quite a few of the rules relate to competence in writing, and writers are urged to attend to them.

Psychological writing has come a long way. The first APA style guide appeared in 1929; it was all of 7 pages (Instructions in regard, 1929). The most recent manual bears little resemblance to the initial set of guidelines. I suspect that we might be happier if APA kept the length of the manual to 7 pages, but we all know that is not going to happen.

Going back to the 1929 instructions, you will see less standardization with respect to prose style. The committee that produced the guidelines commented that "the committee realizes that it neither has, nor wishes to assume, any authority in dictating to authors, to publishers or to editors" (p. 57). Some current psychologists believe that APA's *Publication Manual* is dictatorial in nature (e.g., Roediger, 2004), as do many of my own students.

The first set of instructions reveals a very different world of publishing. Quite a bit of the style guide is devoted to the physical act of preparing a manuscript, although the authors did suggest that "the writer who is incompetent in spelling, grammar, or syntax should seek help" (p. 58). Incidentally, the first publication manual would not pass muster today. There are 18 passive voice verbs in the three paragraphs outlining the general form of the manuscript.

The authors also remonstrated about the "intemperate and unjustified use of capital letters" (p. 58). It is easy to understand their statement about poor writing style, but why the objection about capital letters?

In those days, a compositor worked from an actual typescript, creating lines of text using those movable characters that Gutenberg invented. The compositor had to literally reach into a different set of boxes for capital letters. These boxes sat above the small letters, which is where we get the terms *uppercase* and *lowercase*. A compositor had to take the extra time to reach into the upper case to get the capital letter, so it would cost more.

**An interesting development in this style guide was an explicit recognition that some psychologists were females.**

It isn't clear how much the compositor earned in 1929, but according to the 1944 version of the publication manual, APA paid printers \$2.50 per hour for making corrections after a manuscript had been typeset (Anderson & Valentine, 1944). At that point, intemperate use of capital letters could conceivably lead

to a cost of fifty cents or more.

The first publication manual stressed that tables and figures were expensive, so authors should keep them at a minimum. The current edition of the *Publication Manual* still talks about excessive use of tables which still have to be manually created, even though such creation does not still involve the use of movable type. Authors paid for half the cost of creating a table, approximately \$3.00 for a full page of tables in 1944, and up to \$6.00 to \$12.00 in 1952.

(The authors of the guidelines asserted that "every figure and every computation should be proved beyond the possibility of error" (p. 61). This use of the word *proved* meaning to test or investigate is obsolete now, but that meaning is the source of the maxim *The exception proves the rule*. This expression certainly does not mean that an exception to the rule shows that a rule is true. That makes no sense whatsoever. Rather, the expression means that the exceptions *proves* (i.e., tests or probes) the rule. So the real meaning of the expression is that an exception can test the rule to see if it is valid. As far as I am aware, the sole current use of *prove* in its meaning to test is in the phrase *proving ground* where military ordnance is tested.)

Figures were more problematic than tables from the viewpoint of an author. Authors today take for granted software that produces useful graphs. But early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, somebody had to get their bottle of India ink and a fountain or calligraphic pen for an illustration. In the 1944 version of the manual, over 15 percent of the guidelines are devoted to creation of figures, illustrations, and graphs.

Similarly, over a quarter of the 1944 version dealt with formatting references. Unlike the current edition, the sheer variety of references did not take up significant space. There were only eight different types of reference in the 1944 style guide. The bulk of the material on the bibliography (six pages) involved a listing of the abbreviations that authors were to use in citing previous work, including *Z. Papapsychol.* (*Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie—Journal of Parapsychology*). The listing of sources reveals a much different discipline, more international than today. The publications came from the United States, Germany, the current Slovakia, Argentina, France, Switzerland, and others places.

Once an editor had accepted a manuscript, the publication lag was 6 to 12 months (in 1944) or to 8 months (in 1952), although an author could have his or her manuscript published sooner by paying the total cost of the compositor who would be setting the type. During the war years, the paper shortage precluded this option; in 1952, the cost was about \$15.00 per page.

## The Emergence of the Current Style

The 1952 guidelines (*Publication manual, 1952*) began to show resemblance to our current edition. For the first time, the manual mentions tests of statistical significance, but without guidance

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as to how to present them. The sections of the journal articles were close to the current organization of articles, although the summary still appeared at the end. The abstract was not part of the article, but was intended for publication in *Psychological Abstracts*.

The 1952 style guide expanded on some of the more mechanical elements of writing, such as using italics (generally, don't); hyphenation (generally, don't); commas (use them freely); footnotes (generally, don't); appendixes (don't); and hyphens, "a demon among punctuation marks" (p. 407; be careful).

As late as 1952, however, the style guide was still largely bereft of recommendations about writing style, word choice, etc. The authors specified that "the main requirement is that authors should have something to say and should know how to say it" (p. 399).

This version also lacked the occasional attempt at humor that appeared in the previous version, such as the 1944 discussion of hyphenation of compound words, about which the authors said "it is only in the English language that a gentleman can take unto himself a gentle-woman and beget a generation of gentle children" (Anderson & Valentine, 1944, p. 352).

One change to the 1952 version was a list of abbreviations that psychologists were likely to use in writing references. This time, American journals receive prominence, with certain foreign words and their abbreviations being listed (e.g., *allg.* to mean *allgemeine* [general]). Again, the listing illustrates the difference between psychology (and psychologists) then and now. Abbreviations in languages other than English might come in handy, although the importance of German in this postwar list had declined. Such lists disappeared in later editions.

The 1952 version set the stage for later edict-like pronouncements in the style guide, in which guidelines began evolving into regulations. The authors commented that "it now seems desirable to eliminate all unnecessary idiosyncrasies due to historical accidents in the backgrounds of the journals" (p. 390). So not only did the acceptable format of journal articles begin to move toward current style, but so did the quest for standardization of presentation.

## Recognition of Biased Language

An interesting development in this style guide was an explicit recognition that some psychologists were females. In the reference list, if an author was a woman, her first name appeared after her last name, not her initials. For men, the default gender for psychologists, initials would suffice.

With the appearance of the 1974 edition of the *Publication Manual*, manuscript preparation was in essential agreement with the standards of 2006. The placement of the date in references was still after the journal name, but beyond that, a published article in the 1970's would be largely indistinguishable from one today in terms of format.

The writers of the 1974 *Publication Manual* noted that in 1929, APA could "gently advise its authors on style because there were only 200 or so who reached print in the 4 APA journals" (Publication Manual, 1974, p. 5). Further, the tightening

of rules of style, they said, "affirmed the maturing of psychological language" (p. 5), with psychology falling in line with other scientific disciplines.

The recognition of sexist language received its first notice at this point. The manual cautioned writers to be alert to the newly emerging style that eliminated the use of the generic *he* to represent people in general. The discipline would have to wait for recognition that other groups should receive consideration in the way authors described them. In the 1983 manual, explicit recognition of writing that is biased with respect to sex and ethnicity appeared (Publication manual, 1983). The manual listed specific alternatives to the biased language, initiating the increasing attention in the style guide to bias and stereotyping in the way writers label and describe people. The six pages in 1983 grew to 15 and 16 pages in the two most recent editions. The obvious intention behind the guidelines is reducing linguistic bias, although it isn't always clear to some why certain forms of expression are biased.

But let's get to the most important topic: Why do we have to call subjects *participants*? Actually, we don't have to call them participants. The manual states that writers should use *participants* (or other more descriptive terms) rather than *subjects* "when possible and appropriate" (Publication manual, 2001, p. 65). In fact, the manual refers to "subjects" in describing how to identify those who participate in research and states that the guidelines are not rigid rules; the goal is to describe people with respect.

The designation of participant is not, in concept, new. In the initial style guide of 1929, authors were encouraged to note information about "subjects, observers or reactors, ..." (p. 59). So those who were reactors are now participants. And we have come full circle. It just takes 432 more pages in the publication manual to close this circle.

## Do Psychologists Need Guidance on Writing?

As a reader of journal articles, a reviewer of manuscripts, and a grader of student papers, I have concluded that psychologists need a lot of guidance on writing. I am not alone on this. Bruner (1942), an Editorial Assistant at APA, commented that in writing, a psychologist "bends all his efforts to the paradoxical search for the most colorless expressions, the least pointed, and the most roundabout" (p. 53), all the while resorting to "tortured circumlocutions of the passive voice" (p. 55).

She made what I think is a profound suggestion in writing: to choose some imaginary or real person to whom to address the prose, rather than writing for an abstract audience. She also wonders, "Why is everyone afraid of humor?" (p. 57). There are ways, she noted, to minimize the chance that the reader will doze by the wayside.

Bruner also commented on the importance of the introductory paragraph in enticing the reader. "The first paragraph scanned by the reader is, customarily, the first paragraph at the beginning of the article. This fact, so obvious in the saying, seems nevertheless to be news to many an author" (p. 61). If you read contemporary journal articles, you may very well conclude that it is still news to many an author.



# The Style We Love to Hate

My students have applied adjectives to my critiquing of their research papers. The word *anal* comes to mind, for instance. I have made a standing offer to my students that any paper without a single deviation from APA style will earn the student an automatic grade of A. I estimate that about a quarter of all papers lose that grade on the title page. The quest continues, though.

Secretly, I hope that no student ever commits the *Publication Manual* to memory with the hope of gaining the "easy" A. There are many more things in life worth learning.

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## APA Style Violations in This Article

If you don't believe me, as Casey Stengel used to say, you can look it up. The number in parentheses next to each error here is the paragraph number in which the error occurred.

(1) *Write up* is too colloquial; use *report*. The use of the first-person singular pronoun, *I*, is appropriate according to the *Publication Manual*, as long as I don't overdo it.

(1) *Writers are urged* uses a passive voice verb. As we all should know (but many don't), excessive use of passive voice verbs is a sure way to generate turgid prose. For those of you who urge your students to use active voice verbs, check to see if they know the difference between passive voice and past tense. Some don't.

(1) Incidentally, I shouldn't be using contractions because they are too colloquial. Although there is no APA style rule against using contractions *per se*, by implication we should avoid them. But I hope you'll forgive me this lapse.

(2) I used the numeral 7; we write out numbers less than 10.

(4) We should avoid vague or indefinite phrases like *quite a bit*.

(6) Should we split infinitives, as in *to literally reach*? Purists say no, but teachers of writing have relented. The rule appeared because of a silly attempt to make English grammar correspond to Latin grammar. In Latin there are no split infinitives because an infinitive in Latin is a single word, not a phrase. Ergo, we should not split them in English. We are still paying the price.

(8) The manual cautions against anthropomorphism. As such, a manual cannot *talk about* anything.

(8) There should be a comma between *tables* and *which*. The word *which* relates to nonrestrictive clauses and is set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma. The word *that* pertains to restrictive clauses and does not involve a comma. We use *that* when a clause is necessary for the meaning of the sentence, whereas we use *which* when a clause contains information that expands on the sentence but that is not necessary for the main point of the sentence.

(9) We are not supposed to use parentheses within parenthetical material. Instead, use brackets within the parentheses.

(10) There is number mismatch between *somebody*, which is singular, and *their*, which is plural.

(10) We are supposed to use the percent sign (%) when it follows a numeral.

(12) The *Publication Manual* says to avoid repeated use of "his or her," but occasional use is acceptable.

(15) Use Latin-derived elements only within parentheses. For example, *etc.* and *&* appear within parentheses, whereas *and so forth* and *and* appear outside parentheses. The exception is the use of *et al.*, which we use regardless of parentheses.

(19) As a rule, *female* and *male* are adjectives in APA style; *women* would be a better choice of wording here.

(20) To render a number plural, the letter *s* suffices. An apostrophe is unnecessary and unacceptable.

(References) The use of Katherine Bruner's first name would not have been an error in 1942.

