



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

American Psychological Association (APA) Style

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The style of the American Psychological Association (APA) can be found in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. The APA manual details the definitive style for ethics, research and writing mechanics, and citation standards in social and behavioral research. The APA sixth edition is notable for its inclusion of disciplines outside psychology. Thus, APA continues to be the primary citation format for quantitative and qualitative social research scholars in the communication field.

This entry includes a discussion of APA goals and corresponding standards, particularly as they differ from other common writing formats and style guides. This is followed by a brief presentation of APA history and controversies that surround the sixth edition of the APA manual.

APA Goals, Standards, and Characteristics

Goals and Standards

APA style is maintained with the goal of upholding scientific rigor in the research studies of social scientists (and to a lesser extent, humanities scholars). A desire to advance the field of knowledge through ethical research that is simple (for readers), transparent, and replicable has resulted in a standardized system for researching, writing, reporting, and presenting different types of research. To meet these goals, APA style necessitates that researchers use common standards at all stages of the research and writing processes.

APA-Specific Characteristics

There are a number of key differences between APA and other research styles. First, APA style encompasses information beyond the written word. The manual includes guidelines for presenting technological, visual, and audio information. Keeping pace with technological trends where data are no longer solely textual, APA formatting has particularly standardized the reporting of various forms of social media.

Next, the sixth edition of the APA manual reinforces previous APA goals to focus on the voice of the researcher. For example, in contrast to a Modern Language Association (MLA) style for English and other humanities disciplines, which focus on the importance of original authors' *language* and authorship, APA is more concerned with the *ideas* of previous works (and when they occurred) and how those are integrated by the present author. As a result, APA writers are encouraged to use their own words to paraphrase others' works whenever possible. The APA manual urges authors to avoid substantial use of direct quotations when possible; this is one reason why APA style reports in-text page numbers only for direct quotes and standardizes reporting of publication year instead (as opposed to MLA, where page numbers are reported even for paraphrased ideas).

Another APA standard modified over time has been the reconsideration of language bias in writing and reporting research. For example, previous versions of APA challenged the use of "he" to include people of all sexes and genders. The sixth edition continues in this vein and considers unique racial, ethnic, gendered, sexed, and other sub/cultural values by discouraging use of generic labels to describe specific groups. Keeping with this standard, the sixth edition of the APA manual specifically instructs writers on how they should address inappropriate (e.g., racist, sexist) or non-standard (e.g., online shorthand or slang) language

when reporting such works of others.

A third potential writing bias acknowledged in the sixth edition APA manual concerns authorship. By acknowledging that research bias even exists, and thus prioritizing first-person author-language (e.g., “We conducted . . .”) over pseudo-objectivist tendencies (e.g., “The researcher conducted . . .”), APA reflects a larger research paradigm shift in the social sciences from positivist, empirical approaches to more subjectivist-acknowledged trends.

APA style also prioritizes use of streamlined citations throughout a paper. This abbreviated approach balances ease of comprehension in the main text with a readers’ ability to quickly reference any originally cited works for himself or herself. For example, the *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMS), used by historians and other humanities disciplines, requires readers to jump to different paper locations for further information while reading. In contrast, APA style discourages significant use of footnotes and endnotes. APA style also tends to minimize space by listing full references only once, in a final References section. It also denotes use of author initials instead of full first names (e.g., as used by MLA and CMS) and includes an abbreviated style for commonly referenced source types such as periodicals. APA style further minimizes page space by use of in-text shorthand to denote multiple authors (et al.). Even the overall manual was significantly condensed from the fifth edition to the sixth, through use of corresponding online resources.

Finally, APA includes—via print and online versions of the manual—substantial consideration of how to ethically and clearly use, reference, and research Internet and other technologies (e.g., imaging, electrophysiological measures). Ease of use has been amplified by the APA sixth edition standard of including digital object identifiers (DOIs), often hyperlinked, which allow readers to directly access articles online. Ethical standards are identified for correctly attributing works and referencing actual authors in the face of free online access and non-reviewed information distribution (e.g., *Wikipedia*).

APA History and Controversies

The APA manual—in any edition—typically reflects historically informed research trends and changing research goals and methods, sometimes informed by the politics or community standards of a particular time or practice. Originally created in article format in 1929 by a group of interdisciplinary researchers, the APA manual’s sixth edition revision was overseen by a six-person committee to address needed changes in ethics; language bias; reporting standards for academic journals; writing style; and presentation of graphics, references, and statistics. As with many APA editions over the years, these changes were inspired both by current policies and research approaches and standards as well as by changing technologies.

A main source of criticism surrounding the sixth edition was the presence of errors in the first printing of the new manual in July 2009. The APA organization as a whole, held as the definitive source responsible for identifying formatting flaws of individual researchers, was subject to intense condemnation for failing to hold their own work accountable to those same standards; they were also criticized for refusing to issue replacement copies or refunds to those who had purchased the incorrect manual. Issuing an apology, the APA quickly published a supplement list of the errors on their website, followed by a reprinting of the corrected manual in October 2009.

Other controversies surrounding the APA sixth edition involved challenges to the standards

contained therein. Although generally seen as an improvement to the limited statistics recommendations provided in the fifth edition, the sixth edition has been criticized for overstepping a formatting role (i.e., *how* to report) by issuing content-related advice (i.e., what *should be* reported). However, in the introduction to the sixth edition APA manual, it is acknowledged that subfields should not necessarily adopt recommendations as requirements without consideration of how they convey *axiology* or research values (i.e., descriptive versus prescriptive standards). Further, the APA sixth edition concludes by emphasizing the publication process generally, as opposed to previously conveyed APA-specific policies and standards that may have applied only to psychologists. As a result of the attention paid to these issues and updated formatting standards in keeping with new forms of research, the APA sixth edition is a preferred style manual for researchers conducting research in the communication field.

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See also [Acknowledging the Contribution of Others](#); [Authorship Bias](#); [Authorship Credit](#); [Ethics Codes and Guidelines](#); [Gender-Specific Language](#); [Plagiarism](#); [Publication Style Guides](#); [Research Reports, Organization of](#); [Social Implications of Research](#)

Further Readings

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