

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
CHECKLISTS FOR WRITING ESSAYS & PRACTICAL REPORTS
September 2014

These checklists provide a summary of the style requirements typical for undergraduate assignments in psychology (note that the style requirements in your other subjects may be quite different). The style described here is based on the conventions contained in the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Publication Manual, sixth edition* (a copy of which is available for consultation in the Departmental Office). You can also access this manual at www.apastyle.org/manual

WRITING ESSAYS

Essay lengths depend upon your year of study, please consult the appropriate handbook.

Before you hand in the final draft of your essay, you should be able to answer "yes" to all of the following questions:

CONTENT

(a) Have you given a full and relevant answer to the essay title? If it has two or more parts, have you given each part due weight in your answer? "Discuss" means "argue a case"; "describe" means "tell a story". Don't describe that which you are asked to discuss. Note that phrases like "before I deal with X's theory. . ." almost always indicate irrelevance.

(b) Have you confined yourself to the specified word limit?

(c) Are your conclusions based on psychological evidence? Does your essay clearly show that you have had contact with a course in psychology? The layperson could often write a very interesting answer that would fail because it shows no understanding of the particular approach taken by the psychologist.

(d) Have you got the details of the evidence correct?

STRUCTURE AND EXPRESSION

(a) Have you given the essay a clear structure that is highlighted by the use of blank lines, headings, underlining, numbering of points, diagrams if appropriate, synopsis in the introduction, interim and final summaries, etc.?

(b) Have you re-read the essay to ensure that the style flows? First drafts usually seem *awful*. Second drafts often appear to be not much better. Your teaching assistant should see only the polished product. Watch out for flaws in the following: logic, grammar, spelling, punctuation, typos/slips of the pen, redundancy, overlong sentences, paragraphs with more than one theme, repetition of the same word in successive lines, etc.

(c) Is your choice of verb tense appropriate? Use the present tense for established facts and the past tense for describing details of experimental procedure. Avoid using the future tense.

(d) Have you used the first person singular where appropriate? Sentences using more impersonal forms (e.g. "one") can get very convoluted. "We" can sound pompous.

(e) Have you avoided gender-specific language? Do not use the generic "he". Use the plural or recast the sentence. "He/she" doesn't solve the problem!

REFERENCES AND CITATION

(a) Have you appended a reference section that contains all the sources cited in the essay? You should cite the authors of all ideas that are not your own (see also (f) below). There is a special convention for references that you have not read first hand, but need to cite (see (e) below).

(b) Is there a 100% match between citations in the text and those in the reference section?

(c) In citing references in the text of your essay, have you employed the APA "Author, date" convention. For example, you could write "According to Carlson, Buskist, and Miller (2006)..." or follow a statement with "(Carlson, Buskist, & Miller, 2006)". If you are using a direct quote from a source or pointing the reader to a specific or controversial point, you should also include the page number after the year, for example, "Carlson, Buskist, and Miller (2006, p.91) argue...". Check in Carlson, Buskist and Miller for examples. Avoid footnotes.

(d) In citing references in your reference section, have you given full details in standard APA format, so that the reader will have no difficulty in finding any of your sources? Use the reference citations in Carlson, Buskist and Miller (2006) as exemplars. Note the slightly different conventions for books and journal articles. Don't number your references or use quotation marks.

(e) Is it clear which references you actually read and which you came across in a secondary source, such as Carlson, Buskist and Miller (2006)? You can save yourself considerable effort in writing out reference details by using the following convention. In the text; Wilson (1979, in Carlson, Buskist, & Miller, 2006). In the reference section, cite only Carlson, Buskist, and Miller (2006).

(f) Have you avoided plagiarising your sources (e.g. presenting the author's words as if they were your own)? Put ideas into your own words, except where you want to use a definition or a particularly memorable statement verbatim -- then use quotation marks or indenting, and acknowledge the source with name, date and page number.

PRESENTATION

(a) Have you used A4 size paper?

(b) Is there a fully completed cover sheet attached to your assignment? (These are available at any time at the assignment submission box on Level 2 of the John Hume Building).

(c) Are the pages of your essay attached together with a single staple at the top left corner? Are they without a cover? Fancy covers and bindings make essays bulky and difficult to handle.

(d) Have you numbered every page of your essay in a single sequence, using Arabic (1, 2), not Roman (I, II) numerals? Are the numbers clearly visible after stapling?

An excellent introduction to writing in academic and professional psychology may be found in: Sternberg, R. J. (2003). *The psychologist's companion: A guide to scientific writing for students and researchers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

WRITING PRACTICAL REPORTS

LANGUAGE

Use scientific language. Be aware of psychological terms and those that have a special meaning in psychological reports. Avoid ambiguity. Make sure that you understand all of the scientific terminology that you use in a report. Define all terms operationally. Use the third person when writing a report (i.e. avoid "I did" or "we. . ."). Use bias-free language.

JOURNALS

Get into the habit of reading journal articles. Note the style of presenting information, but beware -- journals will use varying presentation conventions from those outlined here. Journals such as the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* and the *British Journal of Psychology* are recommended. Also, look at the recent issues in the current periodicals section of the library or on the library web page. This is the best way to become familiar with the scientific use of language and reporting styles.

PRESENTATION

Make sure your presentation is of suitable standard. Reports should be typed. Remember your title page, page numbering, labelling tables and figures, references, separate sections, etc.

TITLE

You should have a separate title page, stating the title of the report and your name. In addition, you should attach an appropriate cover sheet (available at the assignment submission box) with all required detail provided, including your name, student number, course, teaching assistant or lecturer's name and the date. The title itself should be informative, without being too verbose or convoluted; it should not exceed 12 words.

ABSTRACT

The abstract summarises the purposes of designing the study, what was done in the study (e.g. what participants did), what the main findings were and what conclusions you made. This should not exceed 150 words.

INTRODUCTION

The first page of your introduction is numbered as page 1. Any preceding pages are numbered using roman numerals (i.e. i, ii, iii, etc.). Here you give the background and introduction to your study, including (but not merely) a literature review. The introduction section sets out the reasons why you are conducting the research and in most experimental reports states the hypotheses. A general guideline is to structure your introduction into three related sections: a general introduction, detail about the specific area and an introduction to your own study. However, remember these are not three separate sections; it should read as a coherent whole. The first section deals with a general introduction to the research area, and should include some general statements, definitions of terms and reference to classic studies in the area of research. The next section moves to more specific material, such as studies relevant to your own, and a detailed set of issues to be addressed. In the final section of the introduction, you introduce your own study, particularly the rationale for conducting it. Your choice of design should, therefore, be justified in this section. In most experimental reports, you also list a set of hypotheses.

In general, the introduction for a 5,000 word practical should be 1000-1,500 words in length. You, therefore, need to select carefully the material reviewed here; you should not take too broad an approach or present a very general literature review. When citing research, give the full list of authors and the year of publication. If you use a direct quote, you need to give the page number from the original publication. Any papers referred to here (and in your discussion) should appear in the bibliography.

Remember that the introduction emphasises *why* you conducted the research, rather than *how* you did it, and always answers the question, "Why should this study be done?"

METHOD

On the basis of your method section alone, it should be possible to replicate your study. Therefore, this section requires much detail. There are normally four subsections to an experimental method section, with variations for

other methodologies (e.g. the method section of an applied [non-experimental] report normally omits the design sub-section).

PARTICIPANTS

The number of participants, the sampling method and any relevant characteristics should be included in this section.

APPARATUS/MATERIALS

Describe in detail any apparatus or materials employed. For apparatus, a straightforward description will suffice. For stimulus materials (e.g. word lists, etc.), you also need to give additional detail, such as where you got them, why those particular stimuli were selected, etc.

DESIGN

In an experimental report, it is necessary to outline what type of design was used, what independent variables were manipulated, how many levels were there of each IV and how they were operationalised. What was the dependent variable and how was it measured? If a factorial design was used, it may be useful to show conditions using a figure.

PROCEDURE

Describe exactly what was done in the study. Control should be implicit in this section (there is no need to list controls separately). It should be possible to replicate your study from the detail given here, so you need to include every detail (e.g. instructions given to participants).

ETHICAL ISSUES

In addition to the main sub-sections of the method section, you are required to give details of ethical considerations and implications raised by your study (approx. 250 words).

RESULTS

Unless specifically instructed otherwise, you should write your results section in the past tense (some Pracs may have a requirement that this section be written in the present tense, but you will be advised if this is the case). State how the data were derived. Present descriptive statistics, including tables of means and standard deviations (where appropriate). Describe trends and patterns in the data. Do not rely on your tables and figures. You must also describe in writing the main observations. Point out noteworthy features in your data. Your results section should be meaningful, even if the reader does not look at any of the tables or figures.

You cannot make conclusions about the statistical significance of differences between your conditions until you have carried out inferential statistics. Inferential statistics allow us to determine the probability of the differences in our results being due to chance. If you use these, report results from the appropriate statistical test. Again, use tables but describe what the statistics mean (i.e. put the results into words). Make conclusions about statistical significance on the basis of your results. In effect, interpret the results for your reader.

Label and title all figures and tables (e.g. Table 1: Means and standard deviations) and refer to them in the text of the results. Do not include raw data or statistical workings (e.g. the actual numbers from which a mean was calculated) in the results; put these in the appendices and refer the reader to them, if necessary. Only include tables and figures that are relevant and useful. Avoid repetition.

Do not work in groups to interpret the results. Any collaboration should cease once the data have been collected.

DISCUSSION

This section summarises your findings and then interprets the results in the broader context (in an experimental report, interpret the results with respect to the hypotheses). Refer to other studies where appropriate (e.g. to compare the results). Draw conclusions from your results. Point out any methodological flaws the study may have had and any suggestions for improvement in further research. However, do not be overly critical and do not use this section to excuse a bad oversight on your part (e.g. missing important controls; a glaring confounding variable, etc.). The emphasis should be on your own study. The word length will depend to some extent on your results; however, as a general guideline about 1,000 words should suffice.

REFERENCES

Everything cited in your report must be fully referenced here, in standard APA format.

APPENDICES

These contain all raw data, statistical workings (such as summary tables of significance effects, but NOT SPSS print-outs) and details of materials. Materials might be included here if they are very detailed (e.g. lists of words or nonsense syllables used in an experiment) or standard (e.g. a particular questionnaire that you used). Keep a separate appendix for each type of data. Refer to the relevant appendix in the main text of your report, for example, "The raw data were derived from reaction times on each task (Appendix A, p.20)."

Note that the reader should not have to refer to the appendices in order to understand the report, appendices simply provide additional information, should it be of interest to the reader.