

## Guide to the Psychology Research Paper

### Purpose and Audience

Psychology research papers are intended to add knowledge to the field and build upon work that has already been done. These papers will mostly be read by other psychologists, many of whom will skim through, reading the headings and focusing only on the sections most interesting or relevant to them. Some might skip to the methods section to get ideas for their own research. Accordingly, each section should begin by reminding the reader of the hypothesis, as this will make it easier for them to understand, even if they only read a section or two. In this sense, it is acceptable to be repetitive.

### Sections

As a tutor, psychology may not be your area of expertise. With that in mind, here is a brief overview of the sections of a psychology paper. It is not comprehensive. Please see the APA Style Guide for more detailed information, and ask the writer for clarification as necessary.

### Title Page

Constructing the title page is a straightforward process outlined clearly in the APA Manual.

### Abstract

“An abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of the article” (American Psychological Association, 1994, p. 8). The abstract should be very concise, but extremely informative. At this point, the writer is **reporting his or her findings, not evaluating them.**

### Introduction

The introduction should present the problem studied in the paper, and state the study’s purpose. Make sure the intro includes an overview of the scholarly work that has already been done, assuming that whoever reads the paper will already have a basic familiarity. The introduction can include sub-headings about significant research that’s already been done.

This is a good time to point out what is missing in the current field of knowledge. The writer must clearly demonstrate how his or her research contributes to the field.

### Methods

The Methods section should be divided into subsections (*participants, procedure, materials...*). Make sure each section includes only the most essential information.

### Measure (optional)

Some research will use a measure (a scale), some won’t. Writers who used a measure should explain it in this section. This section is very psych-specific, but it should still be easy to follow.

### Results

Here writers should explain the statistical test they used to analyze the data. This section should involve lots of data, including descriptive (objective description) and inferential (conclusive) statistics. It is important for the writer to be comprehensive and cover all important results (Pelham and Blanton, 2007, p. 301). At this point in the paper, the writer should analyze their data and research **without interpreting the results.**

### Discussion

The discussion section is about interpretation. The author should start with a brief reminder of the study’s hypothesis and significance. The discussion should include a sentence about key finding(s). The writer should explain their results, and why they did or did not get the results they expected.

Next, the writer should delve into the implications of their findings: why their results are important and how they tie into previous research. (More on this on the next page.)

Discussion, cont'd: The writer should avoid generalizing or drawing conclusions that are not supported by their evidence. Instead of making too strong of a claim, make use of phrases like these results “*could be indicative*” or “*could mean.*”

The writer should discuss the limitations of their study and data without under-selling their research. **The author should couch the research’s limitations in a positive light in order to maintain their study’s validity.**

Finally the writer should discuss how future work can be done to build upon their study. This section can end the paper, or it can be followed by a brief conclusion.

### Writing Style

By virtue of following APA style, psychology papers will be organized and easy to follow by default. Headings and subheadings help make the writer’s focus clear and easy to follow. If the writer constructs their paper well, a lot of the details will naturally fall into place.

The tone should be explicit, straightforward, direct, and objective (Rosnow, 2001, p. 69). Clarity is key! Poor writing (like grammatical errors) and bad phrasing are detrimental to the paper.

It is best to use nonsexist, gender-neutral language (like the pronoun ‘they’) unless gender is pertinent to the study.

Another important piece of tone is the use of passive vs. active voice. APA prefers writers to use mostly active voice, except for cases when this would sound too subjective or informal.

Instead of relying heavily on quotations, the writer should synthesize and paraphrase information as it fits their purpose (Rosnow, 2001, p. 68).

### Common Problems

- “[Sometimes] the paper reads like a philosophy paper. There’s so much about what they think, and I tell them that psychology is a science, and while you can put in a little bit about what you think ... if you have more than one paragraph in a psych paper that doesn’t include references, it’s probably not a good psych paper. It needs to be research-based,” (Professor E. Pahlke, personal communication, April 15, 2014).
- The field of psychology takes APA style very seriously, so it is important that students follow the style closely. The writer must support their claims with a citation. Whenever a writer refers to another researcher’s work, whether a general reference or a direct quote, they should cite the author and the publication date in parentheses. (This genre guide’s citations are in APA style.)

<u>Helpful Resources</u>	
<u>Previous Studies</u>	<u>Verifying APA Style</u>
1. <a href="#">PsycINFO</a>	1. APA Manual [Find Print Copy in the Library or the Writing Center]
2. <a href="#">The Annual Review of Psychology</a>	2. <a href="#">Purdue Owl APA</a>
3. <a href="#">Google Scholar</a>	

<u>Reference List</u>
American Psychological Association. (1994). <i>Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association</i> (4th ed.) Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
Pelham, B. W., & Blanton, H. (2007). <i>Conducting Research in Psychology: Measuring the Weight of Smoke</i> (3rd ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
Rosnow, R. L. (2001). <i>Writing Papers in Psychology: A Student Guide</i> (5 <sup>th</sup> ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.

Words to live by:

“Write clearly, write well, and base your argument on empirical research,”  
(Professor E. Pahlke, personal communication, April 15, 2014).