

Engaging Students in APA-Style Writing

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If you want to strike fear into the heart of your average undergraduate, include a formal paper in the course syllabus. If you really want to terrify students, try requiring all psychology majors to take an APA-style writing class, and tell them that they will be writing three formal papers with multiple revisions in a semester. I have been teaching Writing for Psychology at a small state-sponsored university for approximately three years. This class creates so much anxiety for students that I have considered providing smelling salts along with the syllabus. Every semester, I reassure students that writing three papers in 16 weeks is a goal that they can achieve.

At the end of the first class, after we have explored the syllabus and talked about their previous writing experiences, I make my students a promise. I tell them that if they trust me, work hard, and carefully follow the steps that I line out for them, they will succeed. I explain that by doing these three things, students will not simply get a good grade in the class, but will emerge from the class with genuine skills that will help them succeed in every psychology class after this one, and may even help them get jobs. As a bonus, students come out of the class with at least one paper that can be used as a writing sample in a graduate school application. Embedded in the promise I make to my anxious students are three important issues related to increasing engagement in the academic writing process. The first issue is trust. To learn what is being offered to them, students must trust me as their instructor and themselves as learners. The second issue is working hard. To succeed in an APA-style writing class, students will need to put in extensive academic work hours. They will also need to use a kind of mental energy that they may not be accustomed to employing in other academic work. In short, they will need to be highly motivated. The third issue is following the steps. Students will need to follow an exacting set of rules, to organize their thinking and work within a specific framework, so they can produce work on which they will be stringently evaluated. That is, they will need to develop both task-specific competence and self-discipline to make use of their new skills.

Developing Trust

The development of trust is an essential part of making an APA-style writing class work. This trusting relationship must be fostered with students from the first day of class. Think for a moment about what undergraduate psychology majors are bringing to the table as budding writers. When I ask students about their reading habits, it often seems like they are reading as little as possible. They are not reading for pleasure. What students typically read is brief, informal, colloquial, and electronic (see Junco & Cole-Avent (2008) for an excellent discussion of this; also Laird & Kuh, 2005).

If students are not reading on a regular basis and thus experiencing reading as an ordinary part of their lives, the specific challenges of reading and interpreting psychological texts and empirical articles may become much more difficult. Not only are students dealing with difficult material presented in formal terms, but they may be experiencing the whole process of reading as difficult, or at least as burdensome. One of the first challenges of an APA-style writing class is to engage undergraduates in reading and comprehending journal articles and other primary texts. A dual focus on active learning and positive support in the first few weeks of class can help students to feel more competent as readers, and to increase their trust in themselves as growing writers.

For instance, the first paper assignment for my writing class leads students to make a critical evaluation of what “everyone knows” about psychology. I provide students with a list of apparent common knowledge statements about psychology, such as “Eating sugar can cause or exacerbate the symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder,” or “More psychiatric hospitalizations occur during full moons,” or “Childhood trauma always leads to profound psychological problems in adulthood.” Students must find two empirical articles that provide evidence either supporting or refuting assigned statement, and they must summarize the findings. This assignment helps beginning writers engage with the process of finding, reading, and interpreting

interesting empirical literature in psychology, without becoming overwhelmed.

The earliest stages of my writing class are built around active classroom learning involving this first paper. On our library day, we practice using the psychology databases by searching for the articles they will use for this paper. In class, we use the articles they find as exemplars, looking at what goes into formal psychological writing. As we examine the elements of journal articles, students start to understand how to use these articles to support their points. These first two articles with which the students engage become familiar ground upon which they can begin to trust themselves and their ability to understand the literature of psychology. I also ask students to time themselves reading one of the articles at home. This exercise helps students develop skills as project planners. Even the best students, the most comfortable readers, express amazement at how long it takes them to read a formally written article in psychology. This exercise helps students to see project planning skills as salient, not just for writing for psychology, but for success in other classes as well.

At the same time as we work together on these initial steps, students are slowly gaining trust in me as their instructor. I help them find the articles, sort through the information in the texts, and organize their thoughts about that information. I also help them to envision themselves as developing writers who are gaining specific skills. By the time they put something on paper for the first formal draft, they have already reviewed their ideas and their concerns with me, and they know that I am supporting their efforts. They also begin to accept that my verbal and written comments on their writings as indicators of development rather than indicators of failure. This reframing is essential. If a writing-intensive class is going to be successful, the professor must appreciate that turning in a paper is an anxiety-provoking moment for most students. It would seem that offering a student an opportunity to turn in multiple drafts of a paper would be a way to diminish anxiety. I have come to realize that for students to turn in drafts that they know to be imperfect is an act of real courage, not to mention an act of faith in me. I emphasize the developmental nature of a writing class, and tell students that they will gradually acquire skills through our back-and-forth transactions of writing, editing, and revising; however, for students to accept my feedback on their papers and take their work to the next level, they need to be able to accept themselves as learners. This means that I first need to demonstrate to students my own willingness to accept them as learners.

Trust-building, then, is an important aspect that needs to be also built into the structure of an APA-style writing class. For instance, I start with an assumption that baseline grammar competencies will be varied; therefore, I build basic grammar review into the class, with in-class exercises that emphasize humor as well as proficiency. Weekly 10-point grammar quizzes give students a chance to study specific problem areas such as semicolon usage or active voice. Optional 10-point homework assignments give those students with fewer grammar skills a chance to make up points and gain the proficiency they need. Again, humor is an important part of these assignments: one homework exercise includes a sentence which, when properly punctuated, reads “Problems in anger management are often noticeable in the workplace; specialists in these areas have advised supervisors to arm themselves with large sticks.” For further examples, see Appendix A.

It seems important to acknowledge both the need for accurate grammar, punctuation, and usage, and the need for students to experience themselves as capable users of the English language, despite varying cultural and educational backgrounds. Another way to engage students in the thorny grammar-skills-acquisition process is to encourage them to bring to class examples of bad grammar, punctuation, and usage. For a more formal discussion of issues of trust and instructor credibility in student learning, see Bolkan and Goodboy (2009) or Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005).

Working Hard

It is necessary for students to put in extensive academic work hours and to use a high level of mental energy in the process, if they are to succeed at academic writing. Barkley (2010) has framed engagement as a product of motivation and active learning, or learning through doing the tasks of the discipline. Little effort will be expended if students lack interest in a task or if they perceive the task as being without meaning. How can students become motivated to spend the necessary time on research, writing, and mastery of APA style? One path is through the development of a classroom community, or a classroom culture, that showcases and supports effort and persistence. It is important to invite students to talk in class about their papers in process. This not only gives instructors a chance to check on progress, but it also gives students an opportunity to model for each other their use of the tips and techniques being taught in class. Guided practice may also build classroom community. My rule of thumb is that anything taught on a given day should be

actively practiced that day. In class, my students practice writing references for journal articles and books, complete grammar and punctuation examples, develop summary paragraphs, and page through journals to find examples of how to write methodology sections or phrase transitions. They often work in dyads or small groups, checking each other's work and encouraging each other.

Another important issue in fostering hard work involves increasing expectancy. The effort students put into a task is “a product of the degree to which they expect to be able to perform the task successfully (expectancy) and the degree to which they value the rewards as well as the opportunity to engage in performing the task itself (value)” (Barkley, 2010, p. 11). Both guided practice and rehearsal are linked to expectancy. In another example, my writing class includes two tests on APA reference and citation styles, which every student must pass with 80% or better. To pass, students must write references and citations for published works such as journal articles and book chapters without referring to the style manual or their notes, and must do so perfectly. Obtaining mastery is a painstaking process that requires multiple exam retakes and considerable at-home practice in writing references and citations; however, students emerge from this experience with the ability to readily write a reference or citation for almost any source. See Appendix B for sample mastery exam items.

Another issue in increasing expectancy involves providing rubrics for all assignments. In developing rubrics, I have often borrowed from the work of Dunn (2010) and Landrum (2008), both of whom make excellent suggestions on quantifying and qualifying student writing (also see Morgan & Morgan (2006) for helpful suggestions on constructing rubrics for writing). I provide rubrics to students long before assignments are due. They use them to structure papers, check for missing APA-style elements, and generally reduce anxiety about the process. A sample rubric may be found in Appendix C. I have also found it helpful to direct students to the presubmission checklists for student publications developed by Psi Chi (Dunn, Ford, Rewey, Juve, Weiser, & Davis, 2001; accessible online at <http://www.psichi.org/pdf/presub.pdf>). Unfortunately, as of this writing those checklists have not been updated for compatibility with the 6th edition of the APA style manual. They remain an excellent resource, however, and can easily be adapted by instructors. For students still struggling to hold onto all of the rules and details of APA style, this well-organized checklist can be a lifesaver. It is also a terrific tool for students who are gradually learning to edit and revise their own work. When I

show students this 2-page checklist, I also and remind them that this is only part of what I look for in each of their papers.

Following the steps

Suppose that I now have a group of trusting, hard-working students (wow!) who are ready to follow the steps toward writing well in APA style. How can I best support their ongoing developmental process? Shulman's Table of Learning presents an elegant summary of the process professors hope to elicit from students across all learning experiences. His taxonomy of learning depicts students in a process of “engagement and motivation; knowledge and understanding; performance and action; reflection and critique; judgment and design; commitment and identity” (2002, p. 37). A student writer in the commitment and identity stage has internalized the values of good scientific writing, and sees him or herself as an APA-style writer. To get to this place, however, it is not enough for professors simply to correct student errors in writing. The ultimate goal is for students to become self-correctors. They need to be editors and revisers of their own written work, and indeed of their own thinking, researching, and creating process. Developmentally, that is a big order. Basically, it means that students must be critical thinkers. They must approach the primary texts as critical readers, so that they can begin to construct critical writing as opposed to simple summaries in their own papers (Hillard & Harris, 2003). They must also become critical readers of their own work.

Throughout the semester, I have found it helpful to make my own editing and revising processes transparent to students. I have also offered “helicopter sessions” to students, in which I stand by the student's shoulder as he or she sits at my computer with a paper in progress. Although I may find an error or suggest a correction, it is the student who makes the changes. Again, students who are struggling often seem to make more progress when I am coaching them and providing scaffolding through this kind of enacted critical thinking (for other scaffolding methods in teaching writing, see Bean, 2001).

The other major active learning in this developmental process of becoming self-correctors lies in the classes I call “How to Proofread, Edit, and Revise like a Professor.” Students learn an editing and revision method that involves knowing themselves as writers, using a “microscope” scan (i.e., checking details of APA-style, grammar, punctuation, and usage), and a “macroscope” scan (i.e., checking organization, meaning, and message

delivery). See Appendix D for this handout. We then practice the method in class, using three exemplars. First, we practice as a class with a perfectly awful two-paragraph selection with two references, deliberately badly written by yours truly. Then the students practice in two-person teams, editing a selection from an actual student draft (volunteered by a brave student from a few semesters ago). Finally, students bring in their own literature review papers in progress, and courageously allow their classroom partners to edit them. These exercises seem to help students put the pieces together as they simultaneously try to track grammar, usage, citation rules, and meaning.

Writing Matters

At this small state-sponsored university with many underprepared students, teaching Writing for Psychology is an enormous challenge, one that requires many out-of-classroom hours for the professor. It is not a task for the faint of heart. I often spend 1 ½ to 2 hours on the first draft of each student's paper, and subsequent drafts can require at least an hour to read and edit. It is, however, an immensely rewarding task, as it has a powerful connection to student success in the major, in our university, in graduate school, and in the workplace. It is my hope that we will see more undergraduate psychology programs instituting APA-style writing classes in the future.

Annotated Bibliography: Teaching Writing for Psychology

For this annotated bibliography, I've listed APA-style textbooks first, then books that can provide additional resources for the teacher of an APA-style writing class.

A short guide to writing about psychology (3rd ed.). This is the textbook I use in my classes. In addition to including all necessary information needed for undergrads to understand APA style, this APA-style writing textbook has excellent checklists on revising essay-style and empirical papers. It is also a great resource for professors who wish to create rubrics.

- Dunn, D. (2010). *A short guide to writing about psychology* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Writing papers in psychology (8th ed.). Another excellent resource for students, this APA-style includes particularly good tips on working with electronic databases and organizing the research process.

- Rosnow, R. L., & Rosnow, M. (2009). *Writing papers in psychology* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Writing with style: APA style made easy (5th ed.). This APA style textbook has especially helpful grammar exercises in the "Grooming tips" chapter.

- Szuchman, L. T. (2010). *Writing with style: APA style made easy* (5th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Undergraduate writing in psychology. Excellent resource for increasing understanding of how scientific writing differs from other forms of writing. More of a conceptual resource than an APA-style textbook.

- Landrum, R. E. (2008). *Undergraduate writing in psychology: Learning to tell the scientific story*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

The deluxe transitive vampire. A grammar handbook with a sense of humor, this like all of Gordon's works, contains marvelously humorous grammar and usage examples for classes, homework assignments, and quizzes.

- Gordon, K. E. (1993). *The deluxe transitive vampire: A handbook of grammar for the innocent, the eager and the doomed*. New York, NY: Random House.

Eats, shoots, and leaves: The zero tolerance approach to punctuation. Funny and accessible, this handbook is a good source of examples for classroom exercises, homework, and exams.

- Truss, L. (2003). *Eats, shoots, and leaves: The zero tolerance approach to punctuation*. New York, NY: Gotham Books.

The elements of style. Advanced students seem to especially benefit from reading this quietly witty classic on writing with brevity, clarity, and style; professors may also benefit from an occasional refreshing dip into its contents!

- Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E. B. (2000). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

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- Barkley, E. F. (2010). *Student engagement techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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- Hillard, V., & Harris, J. (2003, Fall). Making writing visible at Duke University. *peerReview*, 6(1), 15-17.
- Junco, R., & Cole-Avent, G. A. (2008). An introduction to technologies commonly used by college students. *New Directions for Student Services*, (124), 3-17. doi: 10.1002/ss.292
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- Morgan, R. K., & Morgan, D. L. (2006). Writing in psychology. In W. Buskist & S. F. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of the teaching of psychology* (54-58). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Shulman, L. S. (2002). Making differences: A table of learning. *Change*, 34(6), 36-44. Retrieved from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/elibrary/making-differences-table-learning>
- Umbach, P. D., & Wawrzynski, M. R. (2005). Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(2), 153-184. doi: 10.1007/s1162-004-1598-1

Appendix A

Humorous Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation Examples for Class and Homework

Affect vs. Effect

Affect = a verb. *Drinking moonshine may affect your brain in a negative way.*

Effect = a noun. *Drinking moonshine may have a negative effect on your brain.*

HOWEVER, in psychological writing, AFFECT can refer to emotion. Used this way, the word is usually accompanied by the words *negative* or *positive* as modifiers. *Drinking moonshine may produce positive affect, but in the long term it may have a negative effect on your brain.*

Semicolons and Colons. Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses when the second clause begins with an adverb, such as *accordingly*, *besides*, *however*, or *thus*.

INCORRECT: *I wanted to be on time for class, however, the cat threw up on my jacket, and I was delayed.*

CORRECT: *I wanted to be on time for class; however, the cat threw up on my jacket, and I was delayed.*

Use a colon after an **independent** clause that is followed by a list of particulars. Never use a colon after an introduction that is not a complete sentence. Pick the right sentence, or suffer the horrible consequences...

1. Writing for Psychology is: difficult, time-consuming, and possibly demonic.
2. Writing for Psychology is difficult, time-consuming, and possibly demonic.
3. Learning to write well means that you must consider three things: time management, information management, and demon management.
4. Learning to write well means that you must consider: time management, information management, and demon management.

Pronoun/Referent agreement.

WRONG: *When a student becomes tired of APA style, a quick nap can be helpful to them.*

RIGHT: *When students become tired of APA style, quick naps can be helpful to them.*

RIGHT: *When a student becomes tired of APA style, a quick nap can be helpful.*

Appendix B

Sample items for Reference and Citation Mastery Exams

BOOK TITLE: Current Directions in Health Psychology

BOOK EDITORS: Gregory Miller and Edith Chen

PUBLICATION DATE: 2005

PUBLISHER INFORMATION: Pearson Education, in Upper Saddle River, New Jersey

CHAPTER AUTHORS: Peter P. Vitaliano, Heather M. Young, and Jianping Zhang

CHAPTER: Is Caregiving a Risk Factor for Illness? Pages 24-31.

1. CREATE A REFERENCE FOR THIS CHAPTER IN THIS EDITED BOOK.
2. CREATE A PARENTHETICAL CITATION FOR THIS RESOURCE.

ARTICLE TITLE: The Social Psychology of Helping: The Parable of the 38 Witnesses

PERIODICAL TITLE: American Psychologist

DATE & VOLUME: September, 2007, Volume 62, Issue Number 6

PAGES: 555 to 562

AUTHORS: Rachel Manning (University of the West of England, Bristol), Mark Levine, Alan Collins (Lancaster University)

DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.62.6.555

3. CREATE A REFERENCE FOR THIS JOURNAL ARTICLE
4. CREATE A CITATION FOR THIS PHRASE, WHICH OCCURS ON PAGE 555 (that is, write a sentence that includes the quote and makes a citation). Make sure that you punctuate correctly.

“others overwhelm the will of the individual”

ARTICLE TITLE: The Fatally Flawed Marriage

PERIODICAL TITLE: Psychotherapy Networker

DATE & VOLUME: March/April 2006, Volume 30

PAGES: 40-46

AUTHORS: Barry McCarthy, Rebecca Ginsberg, Jennifer Cintron

5. CREATE A REFERENCE FOR THIS MAGAZINE ARTICLE
6. CREATE A CITATION IN PARENTHESES FOR THIS ARTICLE. Assume that this is the first time you have cited this article in your paper.

Appendix C

Sample Rubric – The Short Paper

Short Paper FORMAL DRAFT FINAL

Total possible points: 50

Grading Areas	Grading Criteria	Points possible	Actual points
Completion of Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis Paragraph clearly states the issue and introduces the topic under study: Clear, concise, sets reader up for what is to follow 	5	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 1: Clear explanation of the evidence presented for or against “what everyone knows” 	10	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 2: Clear explanation of the evidence presented for or against “what everyone knows” 	10	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclusion: Makes a clear statement about the meaning of the evidence described. 	5	
	ASSIGNMENT SUBTOTAL	30	
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper was clearly proofread: no obvious errors. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correct noun-verb agreement & pronoun-referent agreement. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correct punctuation. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All sentences complete; no run-ons. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No colloquialisms or contractions. 	2	
GRAMMAR SUBTOTAL	10		
APA Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper is correctly formatted: 1 inch margins, running head & page number inside top margin, 12 pt font 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • References cited correctly in text. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference page is correct. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title page is correct. 	2	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is nonbiased. 	2	
APA STYLE SUBTOTAL	10		
TOTAL		50	

COMMENTS:

Appendix D

How to Proofread, Edit, and Revise like a Professor

You must search your written text for errors before submitting it to an audience. That means looking for errors that are typographical, grammatical, textual, and stylistic.

A couple of basic tips before you begin:

- Always proofread from a hard copy.
- Take a break between finishing your paper on your computer, printing it out, and proofreading it, even if it's just a break to get a glass of water. You'll catch more when your eyes are fresh. If you are so sick of your paper that you can't see your mistakes any more, ask a friend to help you proof it!
- When in doubt, Read Aloud! You can catch grammar errors, run-on sentences, omitted and doubled words, and lack of transitions this way.
- Never trust your spell-check program (or a grammar-check program) to do your proofreading for you.

Think about the proofreading and editing process as involving a series of scans, some on a surface level, some on a microscopic level, and some on a macro, or wider-view, level.

1. **Know Thyself.** Know your most common errors, and develop ways to look for them. Run “find and replace” for your most common typos *before* you print out the paper in order to proofread it. For instance, I often mistype “form” when I mean “from”, so I look for all instances of “form” and correct the typos before I print anything out.
2. **APA SCAN. Look for basic formatting problems in APA Style.**
 - a. Check font: Is it consistent throughout the paper? Is it 12 point?
 - b. Check spacing: Is everything double-spaced, including the Reference page?
 - c. Check tabs: Is the Abstract flush left? Do all other paragraphs begin with a tab? Do all references have a hanging indent?
 - d. Check page numbers & order of material in the paper. Does your pagination begin with the Title Page? Have you included the running head and page number on every page?
 - e. Check every heading for (1) meaning and conciseness, and (2) correct APA style for the level used.
3. **RESOURCE SCAN. Check References and Citations.**
 - a. Does the Reference page start with the centered & bolded word **References**?
 - b. Is every reference correct? Check every punctuation mark, capitalization, and italicization. Are all names spelled correctly? Are all necessary retrieval statements included, such as doi information?
 - c. Is every reference in your Reference list cited at least once in the body of the paper? Look for this. Then check to make sure that the spelling and date of every citation matches the spelling and date of every reference.
 - d. Are citations presented with “and” outside parentheses, and “&” inside parentheses? Are they punctuated correctly? Do they include year and last names only? Are page numbers included for all direct quotes?
 - e. Make certain that sentence punctuation is correct for citations and quotes: remember that punctuation for a quote goes *after* the end parenthesis of the citation, unless it's a block quote.

4. **MICROSCOPE: Check word by word, sentence by sentence.**
 - a. Check for run-on sentences or missing punctuation. If there are two independent clauses in a sentence, they must be separated by (1) either proper punctuation (a semicolon or colon), OR by (2) a conjunction + comma combination.
 - b. Look for prepositional phrases, introductory phrases, or adverbs starting sentences: are they all followed by a comma?
 - c. Are all sentences well-balanced? Make sure that sentences are parallel, and that all verb forms in a sentence agree.
 - d. Skim your paper, checking every instance where you used “they”, “them”, “their”, etcetera, and make certain that (1) all referents for those pronouns are plural, and (2) all verbs in the rest of the sentence are plural.
5. **SENTENCE SCAN. Take one step back: examine your sentences.**
 - a. Check for your use of transitions between sentences. Do you have any? Do they make sense? Do they help the reader follow your point or argument? Do sentences flow from one to the next?
 - b. Is there some variety among your sentences, or are they all the same?
6. **PARAGRAPH SCAN. Take a second step back.**
 - a. First, check each paragraph: Eliminate any one-sentence paragraphs. Does each paragraph have a topic sentence and a clear point?
 - b. Does each paragraph clearly lead to the next? Are there any disconcerting leaps? Does your paper have a coherent order?
7. **APA SCAN PART 2. The bigger picture.**
 - a. Did your introduction telegraph, in order, every point you made in your paper? Does your conclusion refer back to the introduction, but go beyond it?
 - b. Do you have a comprehensive narrative? Does your paper tell a story, and end with a take-home message?
 - c. Does the body of your paper support your thesis? Do you offer enough evidence to support your claims? Is every claim properly documented?
 - d. Have you followed Conventions of Psychological Writing?
8. **MACROSCOPE: Think like a reader, not like a writer.**
 - a. Will someone reading your paper be able to follow your process of thought and understand how you have come to every point that you have made?
 - b. Will your reader be able to track down your resources and to confirm every point that you have made?