



## **APA Formatting: Promoting Integrity and Structure**

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## **Abstract**

This whitepaper explores the need for faculty and students to master the use of the American Psychological Association's standards for formatting, noting the implications for students, online doctoral students, and instructors, alongside the fallout in terms of outcomes related to higher-than-average plagiarism numbers, faulty feedback and more. Suggestions are offered as well by the authors for those teaching APA style to help offset negative outcomes and allow for more engaged adoption of such standards of practice.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Student Reluctance to Implement Faculty APA Feedback.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>APA Edition Changes and Massive Research Publication Create Complexity .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Students Find the APA Publication Manual Difficult to Use .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Published and Corrected Papers Have High Error Rates .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>APA for Online Doctoral Students.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Increased Risk of Plagiarism .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Recommendations for Teaching APA Style .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>About the Authors.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>11</b>

## Introduction

An important aspect of enculturation for student researchers and writers is learning to write in a common scientific style (Mages & Garson, 2010). When students adhere to a common style, they enhance mutual understanding among members of the academic, scientific, and professional communities. Adhering to a scientific style includes using a standard structure and set of publication rules. One of the most common publication styles in graduate and doctoral programs is the American Psychological Association (APA) style as described in the *APA Publication Manual* 7<sup>th</sup> edition. The publication Manual includes guidelines for formatting, organizing, and writing academic papers and published manuscripts.

The American Psychological Association developed formatting, citing, ethics, language, and style rules to help students, scholars, and researchers conform to standardized guidelines. Van Note Chism and Weerakoon (2012) noted since student researchers and writers often rely on previously published papers to guide research, a standardized format helps students comprehend, compare, and evaluate published work. Writers who follow publication styles, including APA, maintain peer-agreements among discipline-specific communities of practice. By adhering to a specific style, students preserve mutually agreed practice standards.

Despite the importance of citing correctly, students even at the doctoral level, often neglect to focus on APA style guidelines (Graham, 2018). Many students use citation generators to avoid learning citation rules, but these programs are frequently inaccurate and do not correct formatting errors such as spacing, margins, and other APA conventions. Even after several years of graduate study, many students either incorrectly apply APA style, or fail to implement APA faculty feedback, limiting the ability to earn maximum points on assignments and successfully

publish after graduation. Implementing faculty feedback is especially important in the online classroom since students lack the benefit of face-to-face interaction to discuss feedback.

### **Student Reluctance to Implement Faculty APA Feedback**

A central element in any learning model, instructional faculty feedback is an important encounter between students and faculty. Faculty feedback highlights student writing and APA errors with the intent to help students understand and correct mistakes in future assignment submissions. Graham (2018) noted students often do not implement feedback despite faculty's earnest effort to help students improve.

In a study exploring online students' reluctance to implement APA feedback, Bailie (2020) cited a variety of reasons students fail to incorporate faculty APA feedback. Responses from a panel of 10 online graduate students revealed general unwillingness to adopt APA style guidelines. While some participants expressed an appreciation for following academic writing conventions, others believed there are too many APA rules to follow. Most participants agreed with the importance of adhering to a uniform writing approach, but questioned the importance of mastering APA guidelines if they had no intention to continue their studies or to publish after graduation. Seven of the 10 participants noted inconsistencies in faculty APA expectations, including five that questioned whether faculty had adequate knowledge of APA guidelines (Baile (2020).

### **APA Edition Changes and Massive Research Publication Create Complexity**

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) noted that students' primary difficulty and often unwillingness to correct APA style is failure to learn the guidelines. In the last decade, writers have had to review nearly 300 pages of the APA 6th edition Publication Manual in addition to the new features added to the 427-page APA 7th edition that debuted in 2020. The explosion in the

number of publications, each with variations of the basic APA style, exacerbates this difficulty. Ware and Mabe (2015) noted the growing number of available journals citing 2000 publishers who have added 11,550 online journals. These additions bring the total number of peer-reviewed journals to nearly 30,000, and the total number of published articles to 1.5 million each year. Digital technology and new publishing paradigms such as open access and the ability to publish worldwide has changed the conventional print journal publishing model making it more difficult for writers to conform to standardized guidelines (Suiter et al., 2020). Altbach and de Wit (2018) argued that the academic system encourages needless publication and suggested that reducing the number of academic articles and books could remove significant stress from students and academics.

### **Students Find the APA Publication Manual Difficult to Use**

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) noted the APA Publication Manual does not present information in order of difficulty or in a meaningful sequence, making it difficult for students to use. For example, Onwuegbuzie et al. questioned whether writers should learn about stating ideas and minimizing bias discussed in Chapter 1, before or after learning about writing style (Chapter 3) or whether writers should learn about punctuation before or after learning about formatting numbers. Since there are no definitive answers, students often have difficulty using the APA Manual and seek other sources of APA information.

In a study on how students learn APA style, Van Note Chism and Weerakoon (2012) noted students preferred *not* to use the APA Manual and some students admitted to *never* using the Manual. Students relied on other sources of APA information such as Google and Google Scholar or templates modeling correct APA format. Students viewed these alternative sources more user friendly and efficient than using the APA Manual. Students also found the Manual

overwhelming and were unwilling to devote more than 10 or 15 minutes to finding formatting information. Students complained the organization of the Manual is haphazard and unclear, and reported flipping through pages randomly. Students also complained that the Manual provided insufficient examples and that information did not connect logically (Baile, 2020).

Landrum (2013) noted as another alternative to using the APA Manual, students copy and paste references from published papers and other sources, not recognizing the governing style was not APA. These students assumed that because they found the reference in a published or authoritative source, the formatting was APA compliant. Students often argued, *I used what I found in the library, The citation generator produced the reference, so I assumed it was correct, or That is the way the reference appeared in the paper.*

### **Published and Corrected Papers Have High Error Rates**

Jiao et al. (2008) explored students' APA citation error rates and found citation errors ranged from 22% - 51% with the average error rate approximating 30% or one-third of the total paper contents. When students copied citation information from a published article rather than consulting the APA Manual, they did not recognize APA mistakes. Students believed they were using correct APA despite numerous errors, and in instances when faculty identified APA errors, did not accept responsibility, and blamed either former faculty, citation generators, or other sources of APA information.

To further negate the importance of APA, students argue the APA Manual is a *publication* manual not relevant for students unlikely to publish. The APA addresses this viewpoint. In an APA style blog, Hume-Pratuch (2010) posted that the APA Manual “was written predominantly for scholars seeking publication rather than for students seeking term

paper formats . . . because its primary purpose is to provide guidelines for writers submitting manuscripts to scholarly journals” (para, 5).

### **APA for Online Doctoral Students**

For graduate and particularly doctoral students, applying correct APA style has different implications. Most doctoral programs expect students to publish, and many scholarly journal peer-reviewers and editors have adopted the APA publication style. Properly citing in APA style is important for doctoral students and graduates to build credibility as authors (Spivey & Wilks, 2004). To submit articles for publication in various disciplines, writers must follow APA format. Failure to submit papers in APA style almost guarantees the article will be rejected.

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) warned most peer reviewers have limited tolerance for APA errors. A reviewer’s job is to evaluate the scholarly merits of submitted manuscripts, not format papers or correct citation errors or other APA mistakes. In addition, most journals include author guidelines specifying maximum word counts, page numbers, and other requirements. Following spacing, margin, font type, font size, and other manuscript preparation requirements helps authors ensure submissions comply with a journal’s submission guidelines. For example, an author who submits a single-spaced manuscript regardless of the APA double spacing requirement, would probably be submitting a paper twice as long as permitted in the author guidelines and could risk having the manuscript rejected for this reason. Notwithstanding the importance of correctly applying APA guidelines, Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) noted a significant



number of doctoral students graduate without sufficient APA knowledge making the transition from student to author or academician more difficult.

### **Increased Risk of Plagiarism**

Completing assignments culminating in a dissertation constitutes the primary coursework in both practitioner doctorate and Ph.D. programs, so students must comply with university style guidelines. Incorrectly applying style guidelines can expose students to an increased risk of plagiarism in coursework and dissertations and can hinder the publication process for novice authors. Plagiarism is a serious form of academic dishonesty for students and authors. It is also a blatant violation of ethical practice (Bertram, 2017). As is typical of graduate programs, students could incur one or more of the following for intentional or unintentional plagiarism

- Documentation in a student's university file
- A failing grade for a plagiarized paper or for the entire course
- An interrupted proposal or dissertation review
- Suspension or expulsion from the University

Plagiarism is problematic and a growing concern especially with the use of the internet to locate, copy and sometimes purchase on-demand papers (Bailey, 2021). Institutions generally approach plagiarism in one of two ways. The first is to treat plagiarism as a moral violation, and the other is to treat plagiarism as a serious academic offense. Institutions that treat plagiarism as a moral issue create codes of conduct to encourage students to behave ethically. Institutions that treat plagiarism as a crime impose punishments to discourage academic dishonesty. Perkins et al. (2020) suggested that citing sources is a learned skill and found that after students completed an intervention module on academic integrity, plagiarism dropped to 3.03% ( $n = 9800$ ); a 37.01% decrease in plagiarism after completing the intervention. These results suggest that

educating students on citing and referencing sources and following style guidelines reduces plagiarism levels.

Citation rules are complex. To prevent academic dishonesty and promote scholarship, faculty should treat citing and referencing sources as a collection of skills by stressing the importance of using correct APA style, encouraging continued learning, providing consistent and correct feedback, and promoting an APA culture.

### **Recommendations for Teaching APA Style**

There is vast literature on approaches for effectively teaching and evaluating APA Style (Daniel & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Jorgensen & Marek, 2013; Mages & Garson 2010; Morse, 2007). Daniel and Onwuegbuzie suggested training in four areas; basic writing style, referencing, methodology, and data reporting. Greenberg (2012) developed a reliable, valid scoring instrument to evaluate learning outcomes when grading APA-style research reports.

Morse (2009) surveyed 704 faculty and found 60% expressed concern about improper APA application, evaluation, and feedback in specific departments. Morse proposed several solutions to improve APA teaching, feedback, and accuracy. First, faculty should become well-versed in APA style standards and consistently provide correct APA feedback to students. Second, faculty should encourage students to purchase the 7th edition of the APA Publication Manual. Third, faculty should provide APA resources such as internet links to tutorials and other resources including APA resources in their university libraries and writing centers.

Bradley et al. (2020) suggested faculty could require that students review resources from the American Psychological Associations' *APA Style: Instructional Aids* (APA, 2020) which includes a guide to formatting the title page, templates for formatting headings, and sample APA papers. Faculty could also recommend APA webinars from the APA Publishing Training

channel on YouTube such as *Starting Papers in Academic Writer: Webinar Recording* (APA Publishing Training, 2019) or the webinar titled *What's new in APA Style—Inside the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Kamin et al., 2019).

Faculty could include a course assignment instructing students to review several journal articles and critique the authors' APA formatting; noting corrections where necessary. Faculty could also have students review certain sections of the APA 7<sup>th</sup> edition Manual and then complete the *APA Writing Style Assessment Inventory*. The *APA Writing Style Assessment Inventory* tests students' knowledge of the 7th edition APA Manual. The assessment contains 50 questions focusing on the major changes between the 6th and 7th editions. Borders (2019) noted that student learning improves through exposure to experiential learning activities. Faculty should not tell students to read the Manual but instead create experiential activities to help students recognize and understand APA style guidelines.

To complete the *APA Writing Style Assessment Inventory* students must read 50 statements and label each statement A for accurate or I for inaccurate and provide supporting evidence from the Manual. The *APA Writing Style Assessment Inventory* offers faculty a variety of creative opportunities to teach APA style formatting. In the online classroom, faculty could create discussion questions to engage students in dialogue and/or design a game such as Jeopardy.

### **Conclusion**

The American Psychological Association developed formatting, citing, ethics, language, and style rules to help students, scholars, and researchers conform to standardized guidelines. It is imperative that faculty master APA and provide corrective feedback on student assignment submissions. It is also crucial that students implement faculty feedback to increase APA

competency. To promote understanding and learning, faculty members must provide APA tools and resources while holding students accountable for maintaining academic honesty in written work. Using proper APA formatting is an important practice to ensure organized and academic discipline-accepted original, written work.

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