



A Guide for Writing in Psychology





A GUIDE FOR WRITING IN PSYCHOLOGY

by

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Introduction

The following guide is designed to help psychology majors throughout their academic experience. The guide focuses on three of the main psychological papers: the psychological literature review, the article critique, and the classic research paper. This guide was created with the assistance of Dr. Barry and Dr. Kotchick, all from the Psychology Department at Loyola University of Maryland. While specifically geared towards psychology majors, this guide will provide helpful tips for all college-level courses. Not only does the guide provide a summary of how to write, cite, and format in APA style, but it also provides useful, concise information for all writers including how to consolidate one's thoughts, an essential skill for psychology and related disciplines.

Literature Review

A literature review not only summarizes but also analyzes the scientific literature on a specific topic of interest. These reviews are a cornerstone of psychology course assignments. Involving intensive study on what is currently known about a given subject, the literature review encourages the writer to determine what future research will add to the existing conversation. Professors are more concerned with students' understanding of the literature related to the research topic, rather than points from a textbook. Often, students find themselves focused on merely summarizing the work of others. However, this is not the primary objective. A literature review must also present a critical analysis of the information in each article. The purpose of the genre is to place emphasis on making sense of what is known about the topic in order to determine what future research needs to be done. Understanding and interpreting how the network of articles relate to one another and the topic is key in writing an effective literature review. What follows is a breakdown of the sections in a literature review for a psychology course.

Title Page

A title page is necessary. While the example below is accurate according to the 2019 version of the APA Manual, it is always a good idea to cross reference examples as the APA manual is always in revision.

Running head: YOUR TITLE HERE:

1

The Title of Your Paper

Your Name

School Affiliation

Note: Each professor has a different preference for abstracts in literature reviews, therefore, always ask the professor whether he or she would like you to include one in your paper. The abstract will have its own page right after the title page.

Introduction to a Literature Review

In the introduction, explain the topic and its relevance to the overall field. This is called the 'rationale,' and it needs to be concise and clear. Next, a good introduction provides a 'big picture' of the topic. Elaborate on why the field is interested in this subject (consider both scientific and applied rationales) and introduce the themes of the subject. An important move is to identify any gaps that exist in the reviewed literature, because such a gap will increase the relevance of your topic. Through interpreting these gaps, potential research questions may be found. Once you've accomplished these steps, you can introduce your research question(s), which should illustrate the purpose of your literature review.

Body Paragraphs

As you continue with your paper, each paragraph should represent one theme of the literature. As in the introductory paragraph, the evidence you present to support your argument should be backed by reference to empirical sources. Your idea development may require a brief analysis of a key article that is relevant to the specific theme of the paragraph; however, focus on using the research articles to back up your points, rather than presenting the articles in detail. Be sure to find points of relation within the multiple articles, because connecting them will help with the flow of the paper. Remember to write about the themes, not the sources.

The last paragraph of the literature review should act as an extended logical explanation of the issues you have raised. Here, you can summarize the themes you introduced throughout the paper. If this is a stand-alone literature review, your final paragraph can synthesize the main issues, offer potential solutions to address identified gaps, or consider the broader implications of the issue being discussed.

Often literature reviews serve as the beginning section of an empirical paper (in which you propose a research study). In this case, your literature review should motivate the need for your research. The end of the literature review can involve reintroducing the gaps in the literature that your study will address. State the aim of your study, particularly, the question or questions the study will answer. After this, introduce your hypotheses for the research question. Make sure that all constructs discussed in detail are included in at least one hypothesis and that the hypotheses are predictions regarding your question. Hypotheses should be testable, refutable, logical (i.e., built on existing empirical evidence) and positive (i.e., positing the existence rather than the absence of a relation between constructs).

Reference Page

You'll need an APA style references page for all the articles quoted and summarized in your paper. Refer to the "Citations" section of this guide for advice on how to structure your references page.

Article Critique

Article critique focuses on your ability to read and understand completed psychological research. The critique should communicate the purpose of the article, demonstrate a thorough understanding of the themes, and provide a critical analysis of the methods, claims and evidence presented.

A good set-up for the critique would include an introduction (completed by a thesis statement), a brief article summary, an in-depth analysis of the article, and a conclusion. The summary should be an overview of the introduction, method, results, and discussion sections of the article. This should be in your own words and illustrate your understanding of the material described. The critique should note how the article may be lacking, as well as how the article was successful (e.g., methodological weaknesses and strengths). This section of your article critique should also include how the study could have been done better.

It is necessary that the critique and the summary remain separate, in order to keep your analysis distinct from the content of the original work. Writing in psychology usually *does not quote* from the article itself. The field prefers for articles to be summarized to demonstrate a clear understanding of what has been read. Only use quotations for very specific phrasing; for example, if paraphrasing, would cause you to lose something essential.

Note: Summarizing for a literature review is very different than summarizing for an article critique. While literature reviews might include a one-to-two sentence summary for a single article, article critiques usually require one-to-two well-formed paragraphs. This allows for the scope of the article to be fully understood.

If you are choosing your own article for the critique, make sure that it is a primary source, as secondary sources (e.g., review papers or book chapters) are already critiques.

Prompts for Proper Summaries

Below are some questions that are good to consider for the summary section of the critique. These questions have been adapted from professors' original article critique instructions, so they may be explained and generalized to all articles.

Introduction Section

What was the purpose of the study?

Try to understand why the article was written and for what purpose the given study was done. This should be relatively easy to find and must be put into your own words.

How are the variables defined?

Nearly all studies investigate specific constructs (i.e., hypothetical variables) to see how they relate to one another. Make sure you know each variable under investigation and why each is important to the study. If the variables are not outright explained in the article, then the operational definitions for these variables could be of some use. Determine how the variables are studied, and this could lead to a theoretical definition for the introduction section of your article critique.

What does the research reviewed say about these variables and how they might be related?

This question entails that you read and understand the article's own literature review that is presented at the beginning of the article.

Look for the major points that are explained by the researchers for a good way to understand the material as well as to gain knowledge as to which parts of the introduction are the most valuable for your critique. Major concepts developed by the author using multiple articles may be important to determining the answer to the research question.

What were the study's hypotheses?

All empirical articles should clearly state their hypotheses, which are their predictions based on reviewed research.

Methods Section

This is the section where researchers fully describe the procedures used for the study. How many participants were there? What did they do? Were any variables manipulated and if so, how? What measurements were used? Is reliability mentioned?

The information provided in the article should be sufficient for you to replicate the study and find identical results. If anything seems to be missing, write that down for your analysis section. Your goal is to identify the type of research design was used and explain any independent or dependent variables discussed.

Results Section

This section of psychology articles can be confusing if you have limited statistical knowledge, but do not worry. Instead of focusing on statistics you do not understand, focus on those you do. Means and standard deviations are always good numbers to mention, especially if they relate specifically with the results you are explaining. Sometimes, viewing figures or tables can help shed light on the key findings. The biggest question to consider is “what do the study’s results show?”

Discussion Section

How did the author interpret the results? Were the hypotheses supported? Were any recommendations made for the future? This section usually sums up the article’s results, and for you this is critical. It allows you to show your professor your understanding of the material, and how the article was essentially concluded. Any major points mentioned in this section are useful to you, as well as any changes that the researchers mention for the future. If the researcher made a mistake, or didn’t successfully execute a certain procedure, that information will be found here. Use that information to conclude your summary section and round it out so that the article is understood in a simple manner.

Your Analysis/Critique

This section allows you to put on your detective hat. Anything you noticed as missing or poorly explained should be noted. This section will be as many paragraphs as needed and may be a couple of pages in length. Do not insert your own opinion into this section, rather note where the researchers may have gone wrong and how they could have done better. Below you will find questions from professors’ instructions. These have been edited and explained for generalization and clarity purposes.

Were the hypotheses sufficiently motivated by existing research in the literature review? How solidly is the study grounded in theory? Were the themes relevant and sufficiently developed?

Was the research design appropriate for the research question? In other words, did the study match the question or the hypothesis?

Did the author give adequate operational definitions of the variables? Do the measurements (or manipulations) used make sense, given the constructs of interest?

Were appropriate steps taken to control potential confounds and other extraneous variables? Are there confounds or extraneous variables you think were not controlled well?

Can you think of a variable that might have influenced the results outside of the experiment? If so, then was it controlled?

Were the measures or materials appropriate (e.g. well-validated, good reliability, strong manipulations)?

Does the author appropriately interpret and generalize the results beyond the study? Are there threats to external validity? In other words, to what extent can the study’s results be generalized to the ‘real world’ and broader population?

Were there any ethical concerns raised by the study? Was anyone hurt? Did the study break any laws?

Do you have a better understanding of the issue having read the article?

What would you suggest as a follow-up study?

Remember the critique is not opinion-based. Be reasonable and understanding of the resources that the researchers had. Always follow opinions with a suggestion if you absolutely must include one.

Research Article

The research article is likely to be one of the largest projects you will complete in a psychology course. This involves creating, planning, conducting, and summarizing your own research. The article combines previous writing assignments into one, as it includes conducting research and writing an article critique, as well as running your own study. To begin this extensive process, research is a must.

Finding Relevant Research

Searching for articles and research for psychology assignments can prove to be quite difficult at times. However, if you look in the right places research articles are much more accessible. Before starting your research, think of a question that will guide your search. Select a decent number of articles to pick from, but do not overwhelm or underwhelm yourself with article selections either. Once you’ve selected a topic to focus on, you’ll want to start searching for basic information on it. While class notes, textbooks, and reliable websites cannot be used as evidence in your final paper, you can use them to educate yourself about the context and history of your topic. In addition, the scholarly sources that these materials cite may be of use

to you. It is important to save and organize all your scholarly sources so if you need them down the line, you will not need to search for them all over again.

Writing Your Article

Once you have your working reference list somewhat complete, you can begin writing your own research article. Follow your instructor's guidelines. When completed, research article manuscripts follow APA format and include a Title Page, an Abstract, an Introduction, a Methods section, a Results section, and a Discussion section. The contents of your article will depend on your instructor's guidelines. For example, you may be asked to provide the Title Page, Abstract, Introduction and Methods sections which comprise a "research proposal." For the rest of the sections to be finished, the research must be completed.

When working on the Abstract, remember to include your research question, your design, a brief explanation of the procedure, a brief overview of your results, and a brief statement of the implications of your research. The Abstract is like the summary section of your article -- so keep it clean, concise, and easy to understand. All the details should be introduced later in your research article.

For the Introduction, provide some general information about your topic and briefly discuss how it has been addressed in previous research. The Introduction is equivalent to the literature review described above. As such, you will include the rationale for your question, define any relevant terms, and use thematic paragraphs to motivate your question and hypotheses. This section is the cumulation of all the research you have done. Make sure that you carefully develop the themes of your topic and that they are tied to your original question. Every idea that you state as a fact should be backed by a reference to empirical research. Your hypothesis should be included here as well.

The Methods section is a portion of your writing that includes a detailed account of the research you conducted (or plan to conduct), though it should not include the findings. It is typically split up into three subsections: participants, measures, and procedure. Under participants, include how many participants were or will be involved, your recruitment method and consent plan, their demographics (or those that you will collect), and whether they were given (or will be given) a debriefing or an explanation of why the study was conducted. At this point, if your research is using an experimental design, a Materials section is included and you would use this to describe the manipulation of your independent variable. Next is the Measures section, and it is here that the operational definitions of your constructs need to be completely laid out. Operational definitions are the ways of measuring a construct. Finally, for the Procedure section, you should describe the study exactly as it was, or will be, conducted. You also need to include any controls that were used, how participants were assigned to conditions, if applicable, and the steps involved in the study.

After the study is completed, then the Results section can be written. Results sections should begin with a discussion of how missing data were treated followed by descriptive statistics of the dependent variables. If you conducted an experiment, present the results of your manipulation check next. Otherwise, proceed to the results of your hypothesis testing. Present results following APA format and include effect sizes with the results of your significance testing. It can often be helpful to include tables or figures in this section. Do not interpret or break down your findings as that will be discussed in the discussion portion.

In the final section, the Discussion section, you need to discuss your results in relation to your hypothesis. Did your results support your hypothesis? Connect your findings to the broader literature, citing other research as appropriate. Next discuss your study's limitations. How would you improve your research in the future? Where there any drawbacks or problems that occurred in your research? This section should allow you to explain any issues you encountered, draw conclusions from your research, and ultimately suggest changes if further research is to be conducted.

APA Format

APA format begins with the same general guidelines as MLA style. The paper must be double-spaced, with 1-inch margins and in Times New Roman 12-point font. Yet, this is where the similarities stop. For APA, it is also appropriate to have a running head at the top of your papers. Running heads are shortened forms of your paper's title. On the Title Page, the words "Running head" should begin the header, with the "R" capitalized and the "h" lowercase, leading into the shortened version of your title, which should be either 50 characters or fewer, including spaces and punctuation. The shortened version of the title of your paper should be fully capitalized. On the other side of the heading should be the page number.

The title of your paper, which should be no longer than 12 words in length, should be centered in the upper half of the page, with the first letter of each word in the title being capitalized. The subtitle should only have the important words capitalized, along with the first word in the subtitle. Underneath that should be your name, and then underneath your name should be your university's name. Remember that everything needs to be double spaced. Some professors ask for an honesty statement to be at the bottom of the title page. Type this up about two lines under your university name and then sign it once it is printed out. It should look as follows:

Running head: YOUR TITLE HERE:

1

The Title of Your Paper

Your Name

School Affiliation

For the following pages, the header should be different, containing only your shortened title and not the words “Running head.” To do this in Microsoft Word, go into the format or design option for the header and footer. A button will read “Different First Page.” Have this checked and for any page after the first one, you can have a consistent yet separate running head.

That is, the words “Running head” are now removed and only the abbreviated title in capital letters along with the page number is included. This should be your header from page two on.

Afterwards, start a new page and begin your abstract, which should have its own page, followed by your main body of the paper, and your references section. Headers should follow APA format, 6th edition. Use the guide in the APA manual to help you with formatting, as the APA manual is always being updated and revised. Our examples may be out of date. Keep it exactly Times New Roman 12-point. Each type of heading is different. Refer to the table below for help:

Level	Format
1	Centered, Bold, Capitalize First Letters of Important Words
2	Left, Bold, Capitalize First Letters of Important Words
3	indented, bold, lowercase with a period at the end.
4	<i>indented, bold, italicized, lowercase with a period at the end.</i>
5	<i>indented, italicized, lowercase with a period at the end.</i>

Each paper requires a different type of main body, so make sure you know the parameters of your paper and stay within the APA style.

In-text Citations

When it comes to citations, the APA manual should be your primary resource, but if you do not have that, then Purdue Owl is also a good resource. Remember that when writing, you must cite every fact you present. These include numbers, claims about associations between constructs or differences between groups, changes in things over time and definitions of constructs.

The following information is quoted from Purdue Owl, and further the 6th Edition of the APA manual:

“When using APA format, follow the author-date method of in-text citation. This means that the author’s last name and the year of publication for the source should appear in the text, for example, (Jones, 1998), and a complete reference should appear in the reference list at the end of the paper.”

If you are referring to an idea from another work but NOT directly quoting the material, or referring to an entire book, article or other work, you only refer to the author and year of publication and not the page number in your in-text reference. All sources that are cited in the text must appear in the reference list.

It is also important to note that you must always capitalize names and initials in the body of your text; however, you should typically refer to authors using only their last names. Also, do not write the titles of the articles you are discussing in your paper, as this is not customary in scientific writing. Italicize the titles of long books, edited collections, movies, television series, documentaries, or albums, and put quotation marks around short journal articles, articles from edited collections, television series episodes, and song titles.

To cite a work in-text, the citation must include the author (or authors’) last name(s) and year of publication. If you are using a direct quote, also include the page number for the reference. For example, from Purdue Owl:

According to Jones (1998), “Students often had difficulty using APA style, especially when it was their first time” (p. 199).

or ...

She stated, “Students often had difficulty using APA style” (Jones, 1998, p. 199).

References

Citing references in APA format is different than citing works in MLA. Most online citation machines can create these references incorrectly, so using this guide can keep from having unnecessary points taken off your grade. If one of your sources is not presented below, refer to Purdue Owl or the APA Manual. These formats and examples are from bibme.com. Please refer to Purdue Owl or the APA Manual for any further questions or updates regarding the APA format. Formats can change from year to year as the American Psychological Association updates its standards, so always check with an up-to-date resource.

Citing a book.

Author, A. (Year of Publication). Title of work. Publisher City, State: Publisher.

Collins, S. (2008). *Hunger Games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Citing a magazine article.

Author, A. (Year, month of Publication). Article title. *Magazine Title*,
Volume(Issue), pp.-pp.

Blubbernutt, K. (2015, May). Should I Eat That Lasagna or Has It Gone Too Bad?
Time, 147(26), 3-125.

Citing a newspaper article.

Author, A. (Year, Month Date of Publication). Article title. *Newspaper Title*, pp.
Xx-xx.

Doddlestein, G. (1661, April 27). Electronics are our new kings: all hail the lightbulb.
The New York Times, p. D26.

Citing a website article.

Author, A. (Year, Month Date of Publication). Article title. Retrieved from URL.

Scrooge, E. (1890, December 21). People suck and here is why. Retrieved from
<https://www.latlmes.com/breaking/people-suck-and-here-is-why-1>.

Citing a journal article.

Author, A. (Publication Year). Article title. *Periodical Title, Volume(Issue)*.

<https://doi.org/place>

Nevell, A. (1990). The changing of my heart to make room for procrastination.
*Teacher Education: The Journal of Teacher Education for Teachers Who
Work Too Hard*, 13(3), 147-95. <https://doi.org/10.54353/435fhe/6537>

Citing a film.

Producer, A. (Producer), & Director, A. (Director). (Release Year). *Title of motion picture*

[Motion Picture]. Country of Origin: Studio.

Flambo, L. (Producer), & Theman, Q. (Director). (1994). *Blubber in space* [Motion
Picture]. United States: Plagiarism.

Remember, when citing in APA style, you must still use a hanging indent. Make sure there are spaces between the initials of authors.

Tips

Sources should be primary sources, as secondary sources are others' interpretations of primary sources, and therefore can be biased or lack the content that is necessary for your article search.

Note that the literature review portion of a primary source empirical article is considered a secondary source, given that the authors are summarizing others' research in that section.

Most often, your school library will provide you with access to multiple journals that are accessible online and searchable; scientific journals are peer-reviewed and scholarly, which is important when gathering information.

Alternative online sources you can refer to for help finding articles are Google Scholar and PsycINFO.

Use keywords and/or synonyms for best results in your searching.

Review the title of an article and abstract to determine if the article might fit with your research. Continue reading the article if you suspect it could be useful.

Do not use an article if it is out-of-date (must be within 15 years of the day of your search).

In general, rely exclusively on empirical articles. It is also important to note that using websites as sources is generally not acceptable for college-level psychology assignments.

Being careful and deliberate when searching for resources that will work to your advantage and help in weeding out the unreliable sources.

Always ask your professor questions: "Can I use first-person?" "How many pages?" "Should we use APA format?" "Should we include a title page and Abstract?" While these questions may seem redundant, it does not hurt to ask. Knowing what your professor expects makes the writing process less stressful and more easily accomplished.

Once you have a rough draft, do not hesitate to take it to the Writing Center. Tutors there can help iron out any structural concerns, grammar grammatical worries, and APA technicalities you may have. Grammarly.com is another great resource that can help point out any grammatical mistakes that you may miss when reading through your paper.