Scholarly Writing Guidelines

The chart below clarifies some of the most common academic writing standards from the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)* 7th Edition and other sources.

### Use third (not first) person when making an assertion in academic writing.

**Example of First Person:** Based on my experience in industry, participative leadership is the most effective style for retaining employees.

**Example of Third Person:** Participative leadership is the most effective style for retaining employees. According to Jones (2010) leaders who use participative leadership have the lowest organizational turnover.

**Avoid:**
- I, my, me (first person)
- Our, we (first person plural)
- You, your (second person)

Present information as if you are a reporter or narrator. Support ideas and conclusions with citations from the literature.

**Helpful Resource:** [Third Person vs. First Person](#)

### Use a formal, not casual, tone. Avoid clichés, jargon, and slang.

**Example of Casual Tone:** Math teachers have to be able to find a middle ground to teach algebra to kids who get it and kids who don't.

**Example of Academic Tone:** Math teachers must be able to devise teaching strategies for students at various mastery levels.

**Avoid:**
- Contractions (don't, can't, wouldn't)
- Addressing the reader as “you”
- Casual language

Instead of “deal with,” write “manage.” Instead of “kids,” write “students,” etc. Using academic language does not mean using “big” or “fancy” words but choosing more formal language.

**Helpful Resource:** [Academic Voice](#)

### Avoid anthropomorphism (assigning human characteristics to inanimate objects).

**Example of Anthropomorphism:** Leadership theories that give employees input into decisions usually inspire them to contribute.

**Avoiding Anthropomorphism:** Leaders who give employees input into decisions usually inspire collaborative contributions.

**Explanation:**
“Leadership theories” are inanimate objects and cannot give people input.

“Leaders” are people and can give employees input into decisions.

Pick the right verb for your subject. Objects like articles, data, reports, or studies CANNOT do human actions like think, conclude, investigate, or interpret.

**Helpful Resource:** [Anthropomorphism](#)
Avoid wordiness.

Wordy and Complicated: All things considered, survey respondents indicated that within organizations it is important for leaders in organizations to not detract from productivity and motivate employees using techniques regarding their emotional intelligence.

Clear and Concise: Survey respondents indicated that emotionally intelligent leaders use motivational techniques to stimulate productivity.

Helpful Resource: Writing Clearly & Concisely

Use the singular “they” when a gender is unknown or preferred pronoun unspecified.

Incorrect Use: A researcher must confirm his or her results.

Correct Use: A researcher must confirm their results.

Helpful Resource: Avoiding Bias

Use the pronoun “who” to refer to people; use “that” to refer to animals and things.

Incorrect Pronoun: Employees will respond positively to a leader that is firm, but fair.

Correct Pronoun: Employees will respond positively to a leader who is firm, but fair.

Helpful Resource: Commonly Confused Words

Use active voice.

Passive voice: The data were analyzed by Smith and Jones (2015).

Active voice: Smith and Jones (2015) analyzed the data.

Helpful Resource: Active vs. Passive Voice
Avoid unnecessary transition words and adverbs.

**Unnecessary Transition Word:** Effective leaders motivate employees to perform their best work. *Interestingly*, motivated employees are dedicated and committed to perform beyond expectations.

**Improved Sentence:** Effective leaders motivate employees to perform their best work. Motivated employees are dedicated and committed to perform beyond expectations.

**Helpful Resource:** [Making Your Writing Flow](#)

Use gender-neutral language.

**Reference to Gender:** According to Smith (2009), emotional intelligence is a key leadership skill. She theorized that this is why emotionally intelligent leaders often have excellent interpersonal skills.

**Gender-Neutral Reference:** According to Smith (2009), emotional intelligence is a key leadership skill. They theorized that this is why emotionally intelligent leaders often have excellent interpersonal skills.

**Helpful Resource:** [Avoiding Bias](#)

Cite sources in the past tense.

**Incorrect Present Tense Citation:** Jones (2009) *states* that leaders should use good judgment.

Researchers *show* that transformational leaders inspire workers to achieve more (Brown, 2010; Young, 2014).

**Past Tense Citation:** Jones (2001) *stated* that leaders should use good judgment.

Researchers *have shown* that transformational leaders inspire workers to achieve more (Brown, 2010; Young, 2014).

**Helpful Resource:** [Verbs](#)

Do not refer to an article as "the article" or to an author as "the author."

**Reference to the article and the author:** According to Smith (2009), emotional intelligence is a key leadership skill. *The article* stated emotional intelligence is learned. *The author* went on to say that emotionally intelligent leaders have excellent interpersonal skills.

**Correct:** According to Smith (2009), emotional intelligence is a key leadership skill. Smith *stated* emotional intelligence is learned. Emotionally intelligent leaders have excellent interpersonal skills (Smith, 2009).

**Helpful Resource:** [Avoiding Bias](#)
Use direct quotes sparingly; paraphrase instead.

Direct Quote: According to Jones (2010), “effective leaders are able to simultaneously manage employees’ personal needs and organizational objectives” (p. 12).

Paraphrase: According to Jones (2010), the best leaders can effectively manage both people and business needs.

Before using a direct quote, ask:
- Are the author’s words so unique that I cannot say the same thing in my own words?
- Does the author use technical terms that I cannot put into my own words?

If you answer no, paraphrase and cite your source.

Helpful Resource: Quoting, Paraphrasing, & Summarizing

Avoid rhetorical questions.

Rhetorical Question: Are leaders born or made?

The writer’s responsibility is to offer new knowledge, NOT to ask the reader a question.

Avoid vague time references.

Vague Time Reference: In the workplace today, employees communicate as much virtually as face-to-face.

Specific Time Reference: In the 21st-century workplace, employees communicate as much virtually as face-to-face.

Replace vague time references such as “today,” “recently,” etc. with specific dates or time periods.

“21st-century” orients the reader to a specific time.

Understand which common words are singular and which are plural.

Incorrect usage: The study data indicates a strong interest in collaboration among interns.

The criterion are clear.

Correct usage: The study data indicate a strong interest in professional collaboration among interns.

The criterion is clear.

The word “data” is plural. Thus, it should be “data are,” NOT “data is.”

The word “criterion” is singular; the word “criteria” is plural. Thus, it should be “criterion is” and “criteria are.”

Avoid absolute phrases.

Absolute phrase: These findings will contribute to a better understanding of social influence.

No absolute phrase: These findings may contribute to a better understanding of social influence.

As a researcher, you cannot predict the impact of your findings, so you cannot say that your work “will” contribute or do something.

Instead, use “may” or “might.”