

Scholarly Writing Guidelines

The chart below clarifies some of the most common academic writing standards from the APA sixth edition manual and other sources.

Use third (not first) person in academic writing.

APA, p. 69

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.

APA, p. 68

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).

APA, p. 69

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.

APA, p. 67

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.



Proofread your work. Eliminate unnecessary words. Construct short sentences, and choose the simplest word possible.

Simpler Versions:

- due to the fact that → because
- in regards to → about
- utilize → use
- within → in
- in order to → to

Helpful Resource: [Writing Clearly & Concisely](#)

Replace pronouns (it, they, them, he, she, this, that, it) with specific nouns.

APA, p. 68

Vague Pronoun: Leadership is a key skill. **This** is to inspire people to contribute.

Clear Noun: Leadership is a key skill. **Effective leaders** inspire people to contribute.

The pronoun “this” has no clear reference. What does the word “this” refer to?



Replace vague pronouns with clear nouns. “Effective leaders” is clear and specific. The word “this” is vague.

Helpful Resource: [Writing Appropriately](#)

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

APA, p. 79

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.

A leader is a person. Refer to a person using the pronoun “who,” not “that.”



Remember, although “that” sounds right in the example, “who” is the more correct choice grammatically and stylistically.

Helpful Resource: [Commonly Confused Words](#)

Use active voice.

APA, p. 77

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

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

Active voice is a style of writing that puts the subject at the beginning of the sentence, followed by an action, and then the object that receives the action.



The APA style manual recommends using active voice, as this style results in direct, clear sentences.

Helpful Resource: [Active vs. Passive Voice](#)

Avoid unnecessary transition words.

APA, p.67

Unnecessary Transition Word: Effective leaders motivate employees to perform their best work. **Additionally**, 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.

Make sure ideas flow and connect logically. When ideas meaningfully flow, there is no need to connect ideas with unnecessary transition words such as *additionally*, *therefore*, *moreover*, *consequently*, etc.



When possible, try to eliminate unnecessary words from your writing.

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

Use gender-neutral language.

APA, p.73

Reference to Gender: According to Smith (2009), emotional intelligence is a key leadership skill. She stated emotionally intelligent leaders have excellent interpersonal skills.

Gender-Neutral Reference: According to Smith (2009), emotional intelligence is a key leadership skill. Smith stated emotionally intelligent leaders have excellent interpersonal skills.

Always use the APA author/date method to cite sources in-text. Use gender-neutral language unless gender is relevant to the subject matter.

Avoid:

- he/she, she/he
- manpower, mankind
- gendered terms for professions: fireman, policeman

Helpful Resource: [Avoiding Bias](#)

Cite sources in the past tense.

APA, p.78

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).

Jones published the article in the **past**.

The researchers listed published the information in the **past**.



Thus, use **past tense** when discussing their ideas/research/work.

Helpful Resource: [Verbs](#)

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

Scholarly Writing Standards

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).

Always use the APA author/date method to cite sources in-text. Instead of saying "the article" or "the author" simply use the author's last name and the year the source was published.

For example:

- As Smith (2009) stated....
- According to Smith (2009),...
- Smith (2009) argued...

Helpful Resource: [Avoiding Bias](#)

Use direct quotes sparingly; paraphrase instead.

Scholarly
Writing Standards

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.

Scholarly
Writing Standards

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.

Scholarly
Writing Standards

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.

Scholarly
Writing Standards

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.

Scholarly
Writing Standards

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.”