

## Professional Development

### “How to APA”: A brief introduction to APA style

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#### Abstract

Although research in the SLA field is generally said to follow guidelines published by the American Psychological Association (APA), many SLA researchers and even journals often fail to use APA style outside the references section. This article will first discuss briefly types of research covered by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, then highlight key elements of research articles prepared for publication according to APA guidelines. While not a comprehensive guide to APA style, it is hoped that this article may serve as a useful beginning point for future researchers in the field of SLA who are looking to improve their writing style in preparation for publication.

第二言語習得研究（SLA）関連の出版においては、アメリカ心理学会（APA）が発行したガイドラインに従うことになっている。しかし、SLA研究者、あるいは雑誌や紀要までもが参考文献以外の欄においてAPAスタイルを活用していないというケースは少なくない。ここでは、『Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association』が扱っている研究の種類を簡単に紹

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介し、APAガイドラインに従って出版用に作成された研究論文での重要な要素を確認する。この論文はAPAスタイルの総括的なガイドではないが、SLA分野において今後活躍する研究者が、出版にむけて執筆スタイルを改善する上で、参考になるものと期待している。

## Introduction

Many journals in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) require prospective authors to follow "APA style" or "APA guidelines" when submitting research papers for publication. However, a quick look through SLA journals such as *JALT Journal*, *Language Learning*, and *The Modern Language Journal* reveals striking discrepancies in the manner of reporting statistics, the appearance of tables and charts, the citation method of source references within the text, and even the use of punctuation marks at the sentence level. The existence of numerous reporting styles in SLA journals can thus be perplexing for the first-time SLA teacher-researcher, despite the insistence from journal editors that all submissions be in "APA Style." What is this mystical APA style and how does one go about using it in SLA research articles?

This article will introduce some basic points of APA style guidelines for College and University Educators' Special Interest Group (CUE SIG) members who may be new to the field of SLA and wish to report research results in future issues of *OnCUE Journal*. While it is not possible to cover all details concerning research methodology and APA guidelines in a brief article such as this, I hope that current CUE members will find this article a useful starting point. As the manner of reporting often depends on the type of research, some basic methods of research design and analysis will also be covered. Again, only main or key points will be covered; interested readers may refer to a list of helpful resources at the end of the article.

## Main Types of Research Using APA Style

There are five main types of research articles recognized by the APA: reports of empirical studies, review articles, theoretical articles, methodological articles, and case studies (*APA 5th Ed.*, p. 7-9)<sup>1</sup>.

### Empirical Research: The "Quan-Qual" Paradigm

As the section headings of the research paper depend on the type of research being reported, it is essential for prospective research authors to determine well ahead of time the type of research in which they

wish to engage. Moreover, researchers need to ensure that the design of their research upholds APA standards. Empirical research is usually categorized into either quantitative (i.e., statistical) or qualitative (i.e., ethnographic) strands of research, although recently mixed methods approaches have been proposed by researchers dissatisfied with the “false dichotomy” of the quan-qual paradigm (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative research is typified by one-time cross-sectional surveys and quasi-experimental conditions in order to control for specific variables and to generalize from a small sample size to a larger population. Qualitative research is typified by individual case studies and ethnographical studies that intend to provide an in-depth, “thick” descriptive analysis over a longer period of time in a more or less natural environment. Mixed methods approaches use both quantitative and qualitative methods of research inquiry either in sequential order (i.e., interviews then survey) or concurrently (i.e., triangulation of data through multiple sources).

“Action research,” though not officially recognized by APA as a kind of research method, is popular among language instructors and can also be categorized as a kind of empirical research. Action research studies typically involve a specific problem encountered by an individual teacher in her classes. Because most action research usually has no control group and involves an individual teacher’s students, such studies suffer from a lack of external validity due to (a) poor generalizability to larger populations because the sample N-size is usually small, and (b) an inability for outside researchers to reproduce or verify the research results because action research participants and their behavior are extremely situation-specific. Thus action research is generally poorly perceived by the academic community at large; however, action research can often serve as a pilot study that leads to larger, more comprehensive research study. Therefore it is to the benefit of the teacher-researcher to plan and design action research as best as possible according to APA guidelines.

### **Research Reporting: “Do’s and Don’ts”**

A major oversight committed by beginning SLA researchers (present author included) is the over-reliance on anecdotal evidence to support theories or hypotheses about language learning. Anecdotal evidence is a definite “don’t” for empirical research, because it is evidence that cannot be verified by outside researchers and thus lacks external

validity. Anecdotal evidence includes, but may not be limited to, unsubstantiated quotations from colleagues and students obtained orally outside an official interview context, written results that were obtained without systematic evaluation or analysis, and hearsay or conversational evidence obtained through casual contact in a non-systematic or happenstance fashion (see Nunan, 1992, for more on reliability and validity issues in SLA research).

A "do" for empirical research, regardless of whether using quantitative or qualitative methods, is to draw up a plan of data collection before the onset of the study. Research planning thus is scientific in nature: first, researchers must define the problem either based on past literature in the field (traditional empirical research) or on past individual experience (action research), before deciding the methods that are best suited to gathering data about the problem. In designing their studies, researchers may rely on previous research results, hypotheses, or theories of language learning. Thus review articles, theoretical articles, methodological articles, and case studies are important for prospective researchers to read in order to establish a basis for their own empirical research design and data collection.

For the purposes of explaining the main elements of APA style, this article will focus on the reporting of empirical studies. As mentioned briefly above, empirical studies typically feature original research with data obtained from quantitative methods (e.g., statistical surveys and test scores), qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and conversation transcriptions), or mixed methods (e.g., surveys and individual interviews). Results of original, empirical studies are often called "feature articles" or "research articles" and typically are considered the most important kinds of publication by university hiring committees, as such articles represent work conducted by the researcher herself. Although there are often minor differences in terminology used for sections of articles, empirical research articles usually follow the pattern known colloquially as "IMRD" (introduction, method, results, discussion).

## **Main Elements of APA Style-informed Research Papers**

APA style specifies the general layout of research papers, including line justification, font faces and sizes, header location and font face, section names, and tables and figures. In addition, APA prescribes certain numbering, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and abbreviation conventions, as well as the non-use of biased words and terms. This

article will focus on the layout of APA and tables in particular.

## Sections

Empirical papers using APA style typically have the following sections: abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion, references, and appendices. Many researchers choose to add a separate section called “Conclusions,” while some place their conclusions into a sub-section under “Discussion.” Some researchers prefer to combine “Results” and “Discussion” into one section, while adding a separate “Future Directions” section just before the references.

Although some researchers—particularly those who consider themselves qualitative researchers—may complain that the “IMRD” style constrains their writing, it is important to note that the APA Manual does not prohibit researchers from expanding upon wording such as “Introduction” and “Method.” In addition, within the “IMRD” sections there may also be many sub-sections, which researchers often use to elaborate on the main section heading. However, APA expressly prohibits the lettering or numbering of sections (*APA 5th Ed.*, p. 113).

## Heading Levels

All headings in APA style have a “level” associated with them (see Figure 1). Journal editors sometimes prefer a slightly different font face—APA does not use bold face, for example—but if the researcher uses the appropriate heading level, it becomes easier for the journal editors and reviewers to understand the organization of the research being reported. For esthetic reasons *OnCUE Journal* does use bold face for main headings; however, papers that include properly APA-formatted headings are easier for the reviewers to read and easier for the layout staff to work with after the review process is concluded. APA lists five levels that are used for dissertations; however, most journals

Capitalize All Content Words in a Level 1 Header

*Capitalization of Content Words and Italicized Level 2 Header*

*Only the first word is capitalized for level 3 headers.*

*Figure 1.* The three levels of headers commonly used in APA-style journals.

use only two or three levels for typical research articles.

Note that no spaces are required between heading and the text that immediately follows it. However, space between separate levels of headings is acceptable.

## Tables

APA is very specific about how to construct tables. There are two basic kinds of tables, statistical tables and text tables, but both kinds follow the same structure (see Figure 2). Tables should be numbered consecutively throughout the paper, including those appearing in the appendix. Table names should be italicized, and all content words should be capitalized. Titles should be as specific as possible: "Descriptive statistics" is not a sufficiently descriptive table title, because it tells the reader very little about the content of the table. Both the "Table" label and title of the table should be flush left, not centered. There should be horizontal lines spanning the entire table at the top and at the bottom. Other main divisions of the table can also be separated by lines; however, there are no vertical lines between columns of data or text. Tables do not consist of boxes, and italicized or bold face characters are not normally used within the table itself, although there are a few exceptions.

### Some table "do"s and "don't"s

The number one "do" for tables is, "Do use tables when otherwise

Table X

*Give Your Table a Detailed Title to Present Your Data in a Succinct, Clear Fashion to Help the Reader*

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	Column Spanner		Often a Group name
Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Stats</i>
Item names here	3.20	1.00	Centered
Capitalize the first word	2.40	0.86	At the decimal point

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Notes: All notes should appear beneath the table. Notes may also include *N*-size, effect sizes, and *p* values. For reporting *p* values, single or double asterisks are also used.

*Figure 2.* Sample table created according to APA guidelines.

writing data results in the text will be confusing or overwhelming for the reader." Tables are meant to display the researcher's data in a clear, organized fashion so that readers can easily grasp the results. Another "do" rule is, "Do explain all abbreviations in the table." Common abbreviations such as means (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) do not need to be explained, but abbreviations specially-created by the researcher should be explained in the note underneath the table.

The number one "don't" for tables is, "Don't use tables merely as 'filler' or for superficial purposes." Many beginning researchers tend to use a large number of unnecessary tables that detract from the results and confuse the reviewers. Thus, the first question regarding tables a researcher should ask herself is, "Is this table necessary?" (*APA 5th Edition*, p. 175). The second biggest "don't" is, "Don't mix different analyses in one table." Many researchers mix dichotomous data (i.e., "Yes" and "No" answers) with Likert scale data (i.e., "Strongly agree," "strongly disagree," etc.) within the same table, leading to confusion at the review stage and disaster at the layout stage. If the researcher has used a survey with multiple answer key styles, the results should be segregated into separate tables accordingly. Other "don't"s include: (a) do not write "see table x below" or "see table x above," as there is no way for the researcher or even the editor to know the location of tables relative to text prior to layout; (b) do not leave empty cells (use a dash to represent missing values); and (c) do not use more than two "decked heads," i.e., do not stack three or more table column heads (instead, make new categories within the same table or make a new table).

There are of course many different kinds of tables, particularly for quantitative research results. Word tables, most commonly used in qualitative research, should be used only if the description in the text seems cumbersome or confusing. In many cases, poorly constructed word tables can actually impede rather than facilitate understanding. Nicol and Pexman (1999) provided example APA-style tables for a range of quantitative statistics. Please refer to the "Recommended Further Reading" or "References" section at the end of this article for other useful APA-style reference materials.

### **Citing References: Sample Do's and Don'ts**

The last APA-style element to be discussed in this article is the complicated issue of references. APA referencing can be quite cumbersome, particularly since many SLA journals that claim to

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use APA style for referencing source materials actually fail to follow APA at all. Additionally, many SLA author-researchers in Japan come from other academic backgrounds such as hard sciences or literature and may be accustomed to other referencing styles such as Modern Language Association (MLA). There are two locations for references in APA-style articles: in the "References" section at the end of the paper and within the text itself.

### **Citing References within the Text**

The first "do" rule for citing references in the text is "only list references that you needed for the research." That is, APA referencing style only lists sources cited in the text and does not contain books used by the researcher as general background reading. The first "don't" rule is "don't liberally quote sources for the purposes of creative writing." APA does not encourage starting a paper or a section of a paper with a block quote, and indeed, unless there is a very good reason block quotes should be avoided if possible to give precedence to the methods and data of the study (see *APA 5th Ed.*, p. 117-122, for more on using quotations).

Other "dos" and "don'ts" for citing references in the text include: (a) using double quotation marks (not single marks), (b) listing authors in alphabetical order by last name (not by date), and (c) prefacing page numbers with a single lower case "p" plus a period (not by semi-colons or two "pp"s).

### **The "References" Section**

References cited in the text must match the references listed in the "references" section of the paper. A first "do" rule for the references section is that all reference entries must have a "hanging indent." That is, the first line of each entry should be flush left, and all other lines in the same entry should be indented between three and five spaces. A first "don't" rule is, "Do not use the return key and space bar to accomplish hanging indents!" Authors should use the tab function at the top ruler bar of the word processor window. Most word processing programs have a quick and easy way of changing margins and tabs; inserting carriage returns and using the space bar not only ensures that each reference entry will not line up with another, but also causes problems when the paper reaches the layout stage of publication.

Other "do"s and "don't"s for APA style references include: (a) using initials for author first and second names (not the entire first or second name),



(b) using the ampersand (&) symbol in the reference section and between parentheses for multiple authors (not the word “and,” which is only used in a sentence in the text), (c) writing of non-English titles in Roman letters followed by the translation of the titles in brackets (not using the original Chinese characters or other non-Roman alphabet characters), and using the phrase “Retrieved from...,” with an access date for referencing web sites or other online materials that do not have page numbers.

### **A word about Internet-only journals**

Online resource references in particular have greatly expanded since the *APA 4th Edition* was printed in 1994. Indeed, although the *APA 4th Edition* had only four pages detailing reference formats for electronic media, the *APA 5th Edition* first published in 2001 included over twelve pages and noted “by far the most popular and familiar [way of sharing information] is the graphical interface of the World Wide Web” (*APA 5th Ed.*, p. 269). One of the clearest indicators that a researcher has an out-of-date edition of APA is in fact the format of Internet resource references; researchers who use the term “accessed” and fail to use “http://” are easily spotted as using *APA 4th Edition* rather than the updated *APA 5th Edition*. Moreover, some online journals tell researchers to use what they term “modified APA” when referring to electronic articles; however, *APA 5th Edition* does not recognize any form of “modified APA.” The current accepted format for Internet-only journals is as follows:

Sussex, R. (1994). TESL-EJ: Conception and potential of an electronic journal. *TESL-EJ*, 1(1). Retrieved March 29, 2008, from <http://tesl-ej.org/ej01/a.1.html>

It is critical that the URL link provided be a functioning, active link; even if the journal in question claims that articles have “static” (i.e., permanent) URLs, there is really no such thing as a “permanent” anything on the Internet. *APA 5th Edition* suggests (p. 271) that authors check all URL links three times: before the initial submission to journal editors, before sending in the final revision, and before sending the final proof for publication. If readers find that the article in the references section has moved or no longer exists, the omission may cast serious doubt on the validity of arguments proposed by the researcher. Although web-based references doubtless will increase due to the increasing

popularity of online journals and digitizing of old paper journals, at this time it seems wise for researchers to rely minimally, at best, on online resources. This is particularly true in the Japanese context, as many university committees do not look favorably on Internet publications, believing such research to be poorly reviewed and thus untrustworthy. Prospective researchers are advised when possible to refer to paper versions of Internet-based journal articles; safer still is to avoid such resources unless no other resources can be found to support a line of reasoning or argument within the paper.

## Conclusion

This short article was intended to assist beginning teacher-researchers in Japan with a description of some of the intricacies of APA style. By no means is the frustration with APA style limited to researchers in Japan; in fact, the assertion "We use APA-style" in many SLA journals can be misleading for authors and researchers who are new to the SLA field or to SLA research in general. In addition to many journals applying "APA-style" only to references, as McCrostie (2007) pointed out, certain journals require authors to "adhere to their own byzantine citation standards" (McCrostie, 2007, p. 75). Citation and reference programs such as Bookends or Endnote can greatly facilitate the referencing process<sup>2</sup>; however, APA style is more than just correct citation and referencing. Many researchers may find APA writing style guidelines to be somewhat cumbersome or frustrating, but those who use APA will greatly improve the overall look and feel of their research results in the end. Proper manuscript preparation according to APA guidelines makes a researcher's work look more professional, well-organized, and appropriate as an addition to and advancement of the field of SLA.

## Recommended Further Reading

Although most researchers rely on journal articles, books, articles or chapters in edited books, and web pages, there are nearly a hundred types of reference materials available for researchers, far too many of which to give samples in this article. Please refer to the *Publication Manual of the APA, 5th Edition*, for a complete listing of approved reference formats. The web sites and books listed below are meant to provide a useful starting point for beginning researchers; please see other resources as well for more information and samples of materials created according to APA guidelines.

## Web Sites

### APA Style Home Page

This web site offers writing tips and FAQs about the “why’s” of APA style. However, it only gives brief samples of reference styles and does not provide complete guidelines, instead directing readers to order personal copies of the *APA 5th Edition*.

URL: <http://www.apastyle.org/>

### APA Formatting and Style Guide

This is a comprehensive web site provided by the Writing Center at Purdue University, Indiana, U.S. The web site also lists helpful links to books and other web sites about APA style.

URL: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

## Articles

### A brief guide to APA style

Ford (2003) gave detailed sample APA style references in this compact article from *OnCUE Journal's* predecessor, *OnCUE*. The entire issue containing this article can be downloaded from the URL listed below.

URL: <http://jaltcue-sig.org/node/36/>

## Books

### *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*

Commonly referred to as “the APA Manual” or “APA Guidelines,” this book is now in its 5th edition and is regarded as the “Bible” of social science researchers. It is a must for any SLA researcher’s library.

### *Displaying Your Findings*

This book is subtitled “A practical guide for creating figures, posters, and presentations,” but focuses primarily on APA-style graphs. Graphs listed include bar graphs, line graphs, scatter plots, flow charts, structural equation models (SEM), as well as suggestions for using photographs, drawings, and presentation slides.

### *Presenting Your Findings*

A companion book to *Displaying Your Findings*, this book is subtitled “A practical guide for creating tables.” Nineteen different statistical analyses tables are presented, including a “Play It Safe” table version and several alternative forms of tables. All tables conform to APA style, making this a “must have” book for quantitative researchers.

## Notes

1. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th Edition*, will be represented in text citations as *APA 5th Ed.* for the purposes of saving space.
2. Researchers who use reference software such as Endnote are asked to "Unformat citations" before submitting manuscripts to *OnCUE Journal*, as embedded citation codes in the text may interfere with the layout process.

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