

Putting the Style in APA Style

The American Psychological Association (APA) has created a specific set of rules for writing and formatting documents—a documentation style. This documentation style, generally called APA style, is set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* and is often used in the social and behavioral sciences.

Documentation style is often defined too narrowly: we only think about in-text citations, bibliographies, and page layout, but APA style is more than just a citation style. It also has rules about specific sentence-level choices, and following these rules will both 1) make sure that your paper adheres to APA guidelines and 2) help you present your research as clearly and unambiguously as possible. This handout will teach you how and why to follow APA guidelines regarding first-person pronouns, verb tense, synonyms, and acronyms.

All the examples in this handout come from a real article in APA style, “The relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for adolescents with intellectual disabilities,” which was written by Amy S. Gaumer Erickson, Patricia M. Noonan, Chunmei Zheng, and Jennifer A. Brussow and published in 2014 in the academic journal *Research in Developmental Disabilities*.

First-Person Pronouns

APA style recommends against the use of the “editorial we.” When you use “we,” “us,” or “our” to refer to people everywhere, to an unspecified subset of people, or to humankind as a species, you are using “the editorial we.” Instead, use specific nouns that describe the people or organizations you are discussing.

Example: “As increasing attention is given to college and career readiness for all students, **we schools** should consider self-determination instruction alongside the academic curriculum and provide opportunities for students to exercise their self-determination skills.”

In the example above, the pronoun “we” was replaced with the specific noun “schools” because readers have no way of knowing who is included in “we.” Does “we” include only the authors? Does it include readers? Does it include people everywhere? Does it include only people who work in education? What about parents of students with developmental disabilities? As you can see, the “editorial we” creates a great deal of ambiguity, and one of the primary goals of scientific writing is to be clear and unambiguous. It is especially important to identify who is included in “we” in this instance because the sample sentence is a recommendation for action. How can people act if they are unaware that they are being asked to do so?

Unlike some other documentation styles, APA encourages the use of first-person pronouns to report the methods, actions, and conclusions of the author(s) of the paper. This means that,

unless your professor says otherwise, you should refer to yourself as “I,” or to yourself and your fellow authors as “we,” instead of saying “the author” or “the researchers.”

Example: “Given this limitation, ~~the authors~~ **we** cannot predict whether the linear relationship identified by this analysis would have been consistent if the full version of the Arc Self-Determination Scale had been administered.”

Using first-person pronouns helps you avoid using wordy constructions like “the authors of this study” or wordy and potentially awkward passive constructions like “it cannot be predicted whether the linear relationship identified by this analysis would have been consistent...” Once again, this stylistic recommendation prompts you to state directly and clearly who is doing what.

Verb Tense

APA style has very specific rules for the use of the past, present perfect, and present verb tenses. For more information about how to construct these verb forms, please see the SJSU Writing Center Homegrown Handout “[Verb Tenses: Telling Time](#).”

Past tense should be used to discuss completed past events. This will likely include most of your introduction, literature review, and methods because research that is being written about is almost always complete (and that includes *your* research). The following example is from the methods section of the study I have been quoting throughout.

Example: “The analyses within the current study ~~focus~~ **focused** on three of the six domains (reading, math and self-determination). These assessments ~~are~~ **were** administered by trained personnel, typically school psychologists or teachers, who ~~are~~ **were** hired and supervised by NLTS2 staff.”

Present perfect tense should be used to discuss an action that began in the past and is still relevant in the present, or an action that did not have one specific start and/or end time, such as research conducted by many different people independently.

Example: “Academic achievement, typically defined as proficiency in reading and mathematics, ~~was~~ **has** consistently **been** identified as a predictor of post-school success, including social inclusion, economic self-sufficiency, and overall quality of life.”

Present tense should be used to discuss ongoing research, to introduce a quote or report speech, to make generalizations, and to discuss the implications of a study or make conclusions about a study. This will likely include most of your conclusion and some of your discussion and literature review sections. The following passage is from the study’s conclusion and illustrates how to switch between past and present as appropriate.

Example: “While the current study **identified** *[past—discussing results]* a substantial positive relationship between self-determination and achievement in reading and mathematics, additional research in natural settings **is needed** *[present—making a conclusion]* to evaluate the directionality of the relationship. Though the model used in this study **treated** *[past—discussing methods]* self-determination as a predictor variable, findings only **determined** *[past—discussing results]* the correlations between levels of self-determination and levels of reading and mathematics achievement.”

Synonyms and Acronyms

Precise word choice is crucial in scientific writing. For example, suppose you are writing a paper about scanning electron microscopy. If you get tired of typing out the phrase “scanning electron microscopy” or decide that your reader must be tired of seeing it, you might decide to replace it with “microscopy” with some other similar term. However, making that replacement may confuse or mislead your readers, since the two terms are not interchangeable: scanning electron microscopy is a specific type of microscopy.

Rather than using synonyms to reduce repetition of long phrases like “scanning electron microscopy,” APA style recommends that you write out the whole phrase the first time you use it, write its acronym in parentheses after it, and from that point on, refer to it by its acronym.

Example: “This study is based on the data from Waves 1 and 2 of the **National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)**. **NLTS2** was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, **Office of Special Education Program (OSEP)** in order to catalog the home and school experiences, academic performance, and post-school outcomes of a national sample of students with disabilities over a period of 10 years.”

Be careful when deciding to use an acronym, however. You might confuse your readers if you use an acronym that already has another meaning, if you create acronyms for terms that are used only a few times in your paper, or if you create so many acronyms that your readers have trouble keeping track of them all.

Activity: Revising a Results Paragraph

The following sentences are from the same study we have been examining throughout the handout, but errors have been introduced, and your job is to find them all. Remember to check for both first-person pronoun errors and verb tense errors.

1. Academic achievement, typically defined as proficiency in reading and mathematics, was consistently identified as a predictor of post-school success, including social inclusion, economic self-sufficiency, and overall quality of life.
2. By providing pre-service and in-service training that includes content and strategies for teaching self-determination, we could encourage their teachers to integrate self-determination theory into their instruction.

3. The current study incorporates structural equation modeling to investigate the direct relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for students with intellectual disabilities.
4. Working within theories of human agentic behavior, Wehmeyer and Little (2009) described a self-determined person as the “origin of his or her actions, [who] has high aspirations, perseveres in the face of obstacles, sees more and varied options for action, learns from failures, and overall, has a greater sense of well-being” (p. 868).

Answer Key for Activity

1. Past tense “**was...identified**” should become present perfect “**has...been identified.**” The main clue that present perfect is the correct tense is the word “consistently.” It implies that many different people performed this action at different times.
2. The ambiguous editorial “**we**” should become the specific noun “**schools.**” Just like in the earlier example sentence, it is important to identify who is being asked to act.
3. Present tense “**incorporates**” should be the past tense “**incorporated.**” This sentence is reporting the methods used in the study. The study is already complete, so all methods are now past actions.
4. Past tense “**described**” should become present tense “**describe.**” The authors are quoting someone directly, which requires the present tense. You may find it helpful to remember that the quoted material, the text on a page or screen, is eternally current or present.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2009). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Sixth ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Erickson, A. S. G., Noonan, P. M., Zheng, C., & Brussow, J. A. (2014). The relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 36*, 45-54.
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