

2.04 - PRECISION AND CLARITY

Word Choice

Make certain that every word means exactly what you intend it to mean.

Colloquial Expressions

Avoid them.

Contractions

Avoid them.

Pronoun Use

Use when appropriate. Ensure that *referent* is obvious and appropriate.

Comparisons

Avoid ambiguous or illogical comparisons (e.g., *Ten-year-olds were more likely to play with age peers than 8-year-olds.*)

Attribution

Third Person (e.g., *The researcher instructed the participants*)

Anthropomorphism (e.g., *The program was successful in raising the self-esteem of the participants*)

We (restricted to author and coauthors, royalty, and popes)

Use of Headings

Signposts to direction of manuscript.

2.05 - STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WRITING STYLE

1. ***WRITE FROM AN OUTLINE***

Use outline markers as research boundaries and manuscript headings.
An outline

1. helps preserve the logic of the research,
2. identifies main ideas,
3. defines subordinate ideas,
4. helps avoid tangential excursions, and
5. helps detect omissions.

2. ***WRITE***

There are no good writers; there are only good rewriters.
Write it poorly if necessary; trust your editing and rewriting.

3. ***INCUBATE***

Put aside the first draft and reread it after a delay.
Proofread carefully.

4. ***READ PAPER ALOUD***

5. ***ASK A COLLEAGUE TO CRITIQUE THE DRAFT***

Be prepared to accept the criticism.
Form collegial groups devoted to this task.

COMMON ERRORS IN GRAMMAR AND USAGE

Voice - Prefer the **active voice**

Poor--*The experiment was designed by Gould (1980).*

Better--*Gould (1980) designed the experiment.*

Verb tense - Use the **past tense** to express an action or a condition that occurred at a time in the past, as when discussing another researcher's work and when reporting your results.

Incorrect: *Bandura (1986) argues that high self-efficacy is beneficial to optimal functioning.*

Correct: *Bandura (1986) argued that high self-efficacy is beneficial to optimal functioning.*

Use the **present tense** to express a past action or condition that did not occur at a specific, definite time or an action beginning in the past and continuing to the present.

Incorrect: *Since that discovery, investigators used that method to reduce anxiety.*

Correct: *Since that discovery, investigators have used that method to reduce anxiety.*

Use **past tense** to describe your results (*anxiety decreased significantly*); use **present tense** to discuss your results and to present conclusions (*results of this experiment indicate that anxiety-reducing interventions . . .*).

Agreement in number of Pronoun and Antecedent

Incorrect: *When a boy was called on in class, they were usually given more time to answer.*

Correct: *When boys were called on in class, they were usually given more time to answer.*

Correct: *When a boy was called on in class, he was usually given more time to answer.*

When a sentence contains the pronouns *they* or *their*, be certain you have a **plural** antecedent.

REDUCING *BIAS* IN LANGUAGE

As an author of a manuscript you bring your own cultural lens, and potential biases, to your work. It is important that you be sensitive to the preferences and concerns of the people about whom you are writing. A number of suggestions for reducing bias in your language are outlined below; others are discussed in the APA manual (pp. 46-60).

To check for *bias* in your language, APA suggests that you

1. substitute your own group for the group you are discussing, or
2. imagine that you are a member of the group you are discussing.

If you feel offended, you need to revise.

Describe at the appropriate level of specificity

In scientific writing, *specificity* is desired. For example, if your sample consists of 10% Cuban Americans, 15% Mexican Americans, and 20% Puerto Rican Americans, you should report this rather than the less specific "45% Hispanic Americans." Similarly, using the term *man* when referring to people in general is less specific than *men and women*.

Be sensitive to labels

1. **Refer to groups with the terms that they prefer.** This may require asking members of those groups about their preferences.
2. **Avoid labeling people.** It is less precise and more dehumanizing to use the term *LDs* than *students with dyslexia*.
3. Bias may result when **one group is promoted as the standard against which others are judged.** For example, *Gay men were twice as likely as the normal population . . .*

Acknowledge participation

1. Replace *subjects* with *participants, students, individuals, or respondents*.
2. Use **active voice:** *Participants completed questionnaires* is preferable to *Subjects were given surveys*.
3. Avoid the word *failed*. *Seven students did not complete the survey* is preferable to *Seven subjects failed to complete the survey*.

Racial and Ethnic Identity - Ask your participants for preferences when possible.

- ▶ Racial and ethnic groups are proper nouns and should be capitalized. **No hyphens.**
- ▶ Be specific when possible. Naming countries of origin is preferable to more global labels (e.g., Korean, Japanese, and/or Chinese rather than Asian).
- ▶ American Indians and Native Americans are both acceptable. Black and African American are both acceptable. Asian is preferred to Oriental. White is acceptable and should be capitalized.

Gender

1. Words that are gender specific (*he, policeman*) may incorrectly imply that only men are being described; sexist bias also occurs when the pronoun *he* is used to refer to both sexes..
2. Options for the use of the generic *he* include
 - ▶ **rephrase** (e.g., When a student reads a book he tries to . . ./When one reads a book one tries to . . .);
 - ▶ **use plural nouns or pronouns** (e.g., When students read books, they try to . . .); and
 - ▶ **replace the pronoun with an article** (e.g., When reading *his* book, he . . ./When reading *the* book, the student . . .).

Replacing *he* with *he* and *she*, *he/she*, or *s/he* is cumbersome and should be done sparingly.

Sexual Orientation

- ▶ *Sexual orientation* is currently preferred to *sexual preference*.
- ▶ *Lesbians* and *gay men* are preferred to *homosexuals* when referring to specific groups.
- ▶ Include gender if it is not clear from the context (e.g., *gay men* rather than simply *gay*).
- ▶ Sexual behavior should be distinguished from sexual orientation; some men and women engage in sexual activities with others of their own sex but do not consider themselves to be gay or lesbian.
- ▶ Adjectives are preferred to nouns (*same-gender, male-male, female-female, and male-female sexual behavior*).

Disabilities - The guiding principle for “nonhandicapping” language is to maintain the integrity of individuals as human beings.

- ▶ Avoid language that **equates people with their conditions** (e.g., *neurotics, the disabled, paraplegics*); that has **superfluous, negative overtones** (e.g., *stroke victim*); or that is regarded as a **slur** (e.g., *cripple*).
- ▶ Use *disability* to refer to an attribute of a person - *handicap* refers to the source of the limitations.
- ▶ Challenged and *special* are often considered euphemistic and should only be used if participants in your study prefer those terms.

Age

- ▶ Age should be defined in the description of participants in the Methods section when describing the sample.
- ▶ Age ranges should be as specific as possible (e.g., *12-18* rather than *under 18*).
- ▶ *Boy* and *girl* should be used for people of high school age and younger.
- ▶ *Young man, young woman, male adolescent, and female adolescent* are acceptable when appropriate.
- ▶ *Men* and *women* should be used for people over 18 (or of college age and older).
- ▶ *Elderly* is not acceptable. *Older person* is preferred.

CHECK YOURSELF

The following passage contains a number of examples of language usage that are potentially biased. Find and correct them.

In this study we examined whether there were differences in the participation rates of white students and minority students in college science classes. In addition, we wanted to determine whether students who had been identified as having a learning disability differed from students with no identifiable learning disability. The subjects in the study consisted of 247 white students (120 men and 127 girls) and 250 minority students (125 men, 125 girls). The minority group included Hispanics, Orientals, and African-American students. Subjects were given surveys that included questions about how often they participated in class discussions. In each group, approximately 20% of the students had been identifies as Learning Disabled (LD). Fifteen subjects (7 white, 8 minority) failed to fill out their surveys correctly and were therefore not included in subsequent analyses.

The results of the study indicated white and minority students did not differ in their rate of participation in science classes. However, there were differences in the observed consequences of participation by group. For the white group, participation was not associated with higher grades. When a minority student participated actively in class, his grade was higher. In addition, results indicated that LD students participated less frequently in class discussions than normal students, but when the LDs did participate their grades were higher. The results of this study should be of interest to department chairmen.

ON WRITING THE MANUSCRIPT

A manuscript that is important enough to write deserves thoughtful preparation. You should evaluate the content and organization of the manuscript just as you evaluated the investigation itself. The following questions may help you assess the quality of your manuscript.

1. Is the **introduction** clear and complete?
2. Are the **purpose and rationale** of the paper clearly identified?
3. Is the **literature** available adequately reviewed?
4. Are the **citations** appropriate and complete?
5. Are the **conclusions** clearly stated and well supported?
6. Is the **discussion** thorough? Does it stick to the point and confine itself to what can be concluded from the significant findings of the research reviewed?
7. Is the paper **concise**? (Make a paper just perfect and then cut twenty percent)
8. Are the ideas presented in an **orderly** manner (continuity and transition)?

Scientific prose need not be wordy or obscure. Its aim is clear and logical communication.

In addition, a good manuscript

1. defines and clarifies the topic or question to be investigated;
2. summarizes previous investigations in order to inform the reader of the state of current research;
3. identifies relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature; and
4. suggests possible next steps in solving the problems involved.

When reviewing literature . . .

Make every effort to avoid beginning a paragraph or sentence with

Smith and Wesson (1894) found that young people are strange as a rule.

If you buy the conclusions of the researcher, write

Young people are strange (Smith & Wesson, 1894).

If you are a bit tenuous about the conclusion, try

There is evidence to suggest that young people are strange (see Smith & Wesson, 1894).

If you disagree with the researcher's conclusions, try

Some researchers have reported that young people are strange (Smith & Wesson, 1894), but (**and here you state the reason why you disagree with the conclusion, for example**) the data on which this conclusion has generally been based were collected primarily from adolescents. Consequently, it has not yet been established whether toddlers and small children are strange as well.

When you can, group researchers under one conclusion or theme

Growing evidence suggests that young people are strange (e.g., Pajares, 1994; Smith & Wesson, 1894; Wilbur, 1994).

When you specifically want to discuss a study, try this

There is evidence to suggest that young people are strange. For example, Smith and Wesson (1894) interviewed 230 early adolescents and discovered that . . .

Make every effort to avoid saying

Smith and Wesson's (1894) study showed that . . . [this is an example of *anthropomorphism*]

Instead, use the authors to make the point

Smith and Wesson (1894) showed that . . .

Do not animate inanimate concepts—don't *personify* [*anthropomorphism*]

Instead of "The study assessed a number of motivation constructs," write "Researchers assessed a number of motivation constructs." *Study* and *research* are the concepts most typically personified.

Remember—group citations under the point you wish to make. State that point up front, cite the appropriate references, and provide one or two relevant (and especially representative) examples.

Think hard about the verb you decide to use.

There is a difference in nuance, and sometimes in meaning, between verbs such as

Smith and Wesson (1894)

examined . . . studied . . . explored . . . investigated . . . looked at . . . analyzed . . . researched . . .
suggested . . . concluded . . . noted . . . insisted . . . reasoned . . . wrote . . . argued . . . maintained
observed . . . found . . . reported . . . discovered . . . inferred . . . stated . . . showed . . .

Other tips regarding writing using APA guidelines.

1. **Do not contract** in formal writing.

Wrong: "I can't agree with the author on this point."
Right: "I cannot agree with the author's point."
Preferred: "I cannot agree with the author because . . . "

2. Work to **avoid superlatives** and most *ly* adverbs.

Do not write

Write

"The article was incredibly well written"
"I completely disagree."
"That is utterly incorrect."

"I found the article well written."
"I disagree because . . . "
"I believe he is in error because . . . "

3. Be **modest in your assertions**, and do not be dismissive of authors. As William James wrote, "*You may not follow me wholly . . . and if you do, you may not wholly agree with me. But you will, I know, regard me at least as serious, and treat my effort with respectful consideration.*"

The authors whom we read are serious, and we must treat their effort with respectful consideration. Careful with your tone.

Poor: "His stance strikes me as completely absurd."
Better: "I find his contention problematic because . . . "

4. **Quotation marks follow periods and commas** – [,"] and [."] . . . never [,"] or [."]

Examples: On the whole, we tend to "believe what we read."
There were connections between this article and "Lies of the Mind."
People often seek "simple solutions," and good for them.

5. There should always be **three ellipsis points** and they should have a space between them—e.g., "he asked . . . what I wanted."

6. On the use of *he/she* – Replacing *he* with *he or she* or *she or he* should be done sparingly because the repetition can become tiresome. Combination forms such as *he/she* or *(s)he* are awkward and distracting. Alternating between *he* and *she* may be distracting and is not ideal; doing so implies that *he* or *she* can in fact be generic, which is not the case (APA Guidelines, p. 51). APA suggests (a) replacing with *individual* or with *person*, (b) using plural nouns, (c) replacing the pronoun with an article, or (d) dropping the pronoun altogether.

7. Cite authors with year of publication and provide page numbers when quoting text. Example: As Smith (1996) explained, "we are always falling in love with the wrong person" (p. 45).

Notice in the example that

- the **page number is enclosed by parentheses**,
- there is a **space between the period and the number**, and
- **punctuation comes after the closing parenthesis**.

8. Never use full justification. Only use **left justification**.

9. Typically, use **only authors' last names**—e.g., "According to Dewey (1949), reality is . . . " Do not write John Dewey (unless you really *mean* it).

10. One of the most common errors in writing is the incorrect use of **pronouns and their antecedents**. Remember that pronouns and antecedents must agree in number.

Wrong: An individual is expected to have a certain amount of basic knowledge about their field so as to create good hypotheses . . .

Problem – individual/their field

Right: Individuals are expected to have a certain amount of basic knowledge about their field so as to create good hypotheses . . .

Wrong: In a well-written piece that shows a person's dedication for their work, . . .

Problem – person/their work

Right: In a well-written piece that shows one's dedication for one's work, . . .

11. Avoid trite terms such as *In conclusion* . . . simply conclude.

12. Verbs are vigorous, direct communications. Use the active rather than the passive voice, and select tense or mood carefully.

Poor: "The experiment was designed by Gould (1994).

Better: "Gould (1994) designed the experiment.

Do not get into the habit of referring to citations in present tense. Past tense is preferred to express an action or a condition that occurred at a specific, definite time in the past, as when discussing another researcher's work and when reporting your results. [peruse pp. 32-33 APA guidelines with some care]

Wrong: "Dewey (1932) writes that individuals should strive for democracy."

Right: "Dewey (1932) wrote that individuals should strive for democracy."

On a related point, **authors do not speak or say**. Authors write.

13. In APA, every item in an ordered list is followed by a comma—e.g., "I went to the store and bought apples, oranges, and bananas."

14. Careful with sexist language—e.g., *man's behavior* s/be *human behavior* or *people's behavior*.

15. When referring to race, Black and White should be capitalized.

16. Avoid *upon* and *in order to*. Use *upon* only when you are writing a fairy tale; instead of *in order to*, simply say *to*.

17. *We* is reserved for popes, kings, and coauthors. Stay away from *we* or *us* when you mean human beings.

Wrong: "We live in a difficult world."

Right: "The world is difficult."

Wrong: "Such a philosophical viewpoint would harm us irreparably."

Right: "Such a philosophical viewpoint would harm individuals irreparably."

18. Use exclamation marks only once every two years, pick the spot carefully, and mean it.

19. **Proofread your manuscript with care** (and more than once) and run the spellchecker. If you have a grammar program, run that as well. Disregard for the presentation of a manuscript surely betrays disregard for the class and professor.