Writing for Psychology

General Writing Tips

- Use proper APA formatting. Even if the assignment does not explicitly call for it, using the APA format will help you become familiar with its ins and outs. Additionally, this will give you the option of including the assignment in your third-year writing portfolio.
- The Hacker book DOES NOT have the most current information on APA format; use a source such as the Purdue OWL instead.
- Unless the assignment says otherwise, your writing should be in the third person.
  - Incorrect: “In looking at these articles, I thought that Young et al. (1988) made a solid argument because…”
  - Correct: “The argument made by Young et al. (1988) is valid because…”
- Do not use contractions (such as “can’t” or “won’t”) in your writing.
- When discussing previous research, use the past tense to describe methods and findings, and the present tense to describe the author’s arguments.
  - Correct: “Jackson (1990) found a significant correlation…”
  - Correct: “Jackson (1990) argues that this finding supports…”
- Paraphrase; do not use direct quotes if you can possibly avoid it. In general, you should only use a direct quote if the specific phrasing of the source is important to you. If only the information is important to you, write it in your own words and cite accordingly.
- PROOFREAD. Spell-check is a wonderful invention, but it can lull you into a false sense of security. Here are some words that it’s particularly important to tell apart:
  - Affect vs. effect. Effect is a noun, meaning a result, consequence, etc. Affect is a verb, meaning to change or alter. It can also refer to emotion.
    - Correct: “The effects of the medication were observed…”
    - Correct: “Heart rate is also affected by fear.”
    - Correct: “Negative symptoms include flat affect.”
  - Elicit vs. illicit. Elicit is a verb, meaning to evoke or cause something. It is often use when writing about reactions to stimuli. Illicit is an adjective, meaning illegal or not permitted.
- Pay attention to plurals. The terms “media” and “data” are plural. “Stimulus” is singular; “stimuli” is plural.
  - Correct: “Adolescents absorb messages from many different media.”
  - Correct: “These data show that…”
- Try to keep your writing concise. Excessive wordiness can weigh down your writing and obfuscate your argument.
- Certain words, such as “factor” and “significant,” have very specific meanings in psychology (especially when discussing statistics). Make sure you are familiar with the definitions of terms such as these and that you are using them appropriately.
- Pay attention to the APA format’s guidelines for language use as well as those for citations, references, etc. In particular, be sure to avoid sexist or heteronormative language. Consult the Purdue OWL guide to APA format for more information.
Types of Writing

Précis
A summary of an article you’ve read. Should be concise (typically a page or two) while still presenting the original article’s argument in its entirety. Make sure to include the hypothesis and summaries of the methods, results, and discussion sections. It is especially important to be objective when writing a précis; you are being asked to summarize the article, not comment on or react to it.

Literature Review
In this type of assignment, you present the methods and results of multiple studies dealing with a common topic and analyze their conclusions. It is important that you go beyond merely summarizing the studies; you must think critically about them, and discuss how they pertain to each other and to the central topic. If certain findings seem to contradict others, offer some explanation as to why this might be. As a rule of thumb for literature reviews, you should have roughly one article per page; i.e., a fifteen-page paper will need about fifteen articles to give thorough coverage of your topic.

Experimental Report
This assignment calls on you to create a write-up of an experiment. An experimental report typically consists of the following sections, each with its own heading:
- **Abstract**: a short (250 words or so) summary of the experiment.
- **Introduction**: state the topic of your experiment, discuss previous research in this area, and describe how it contributed to your hypothesis. This section may include multiple subheadings if it covers a wide range of information. At the end of this section, clearly state your hypothesis.
- **Methods**: describe your experiment in detail. Be sure to include information on your subjects (who are they? How were they selected?), as well as your procedure. Describe in detail how the experiment was conducted, from start to finish.
- **Results**: give the findings of your experiment. Describe any data analysis (t-test, ANOVA, regression, etc.) conducted, and list the results.
- **Discussion**: discuss the implications of your findings. Do they support or contradict your hypothesis? Are they in keeping with previous research? What are possible directions for future research?
- **Conclusion**: summarize the hypothesis, methods, and results of your study, and briefly discuss their implications.
- **References**
- **Appendices**: if you have any charts, graphs or tables that were too large to include in the results section, you may include them here. Also, you may choose to include examples of testing material, stimuli, etc.

Research Proposal
This assignment is similar to an experiment report, except that you haven’t actually conducted an experiment. The Methods section of a research proposal will be written in the future tense. The Results section is left out, for obvious reasons. In the Discussion section, describe the results you would expect to find, based on the argument laid out in your introduction.