Guidelines for General Writing Style

The following guidelines are partly based on the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001, 5th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Please refer to this book for further details. NB. If there is any contradiction between these guidelines and the requirements set out by your lecturer or tutor, then you should always follow the requirements set out by your lecturer or tutor.

Structure

Structure is the key to good writing. You should try to provide a clear and meaningful structure for (a) the words in each sentence, (b) the sentences in each paragraph, (c) the paragraphs in each subsection, and (d) the subsections in each section.

1. Sentences

(i) Write in sentences: Please write in sentences. Make sure that each sentence actually makes sense. The best way to do this is to read through your work. You will soon realise which sentences do not make sense.

(ii) Sentence construction: Go through each word in each sentence and check for preciseness, conciseness, and clarity. (a) *Preciseness*: Is it the right word or is another word more accurate? (b) *Conciseness*: Does the word need to be in the sentence or can it be deleted? (c) *Clarity*: Is the order of words arranged in the most direct and unambiguous manner possible? Prefer simple, clear, straightforward sentences (Bem, 2004).

(iii) Avoid long sentences: Readers can easily get lost half way through a long sentence. They will then either become irritated while because they have to go back to the beginning of the sentence or worse, not understand the sentence and move on. In general, start to consider sentence length when you get to the end of the third line of text. Another rule of thumb is to reserve one point or idea for each sentence. Do not try to discuss two or three different ideas in the same sentence. To rectify, (1) consider cutting some words or clauses out of the sentence to make it shorter and/or (2) consider splitting the sentence into two or more separate sentences.

2. Paragraphs

(i) Use paragraphs as mini-sections: Paragraphs are a tool to be used, rather than a meaningless convention. A paragraph can be used to package a series of points that relate to the same topic or issue For example, a paragraph might contain a summary of a research study, a suggestion for future research, or elaborate on a point in an argument. Make sure that your paragraphs deal with one clear theme, issue, or idea, rather than a collection of unrelated points.

(ii) Introductory sentence: In general, you should start new paragraphs with an introductory sentence that introduces the reader to the theme of the paragraph. (NB. This is a guideline, not a rule! There will be cases in which you do not need to do this.)

(iii) Topic sentence: In general, you should include one sentence that sums up the key point that you are trying to make in that paragraph. (Guideline, not rule).

(iv) Supporting sentences: In general, you should also include supporting sentences that qualify, explain, or illustrate the topic sentence. (Guideline, not rule).

(v) Concluding sentence: In general, you should end each paragraph with a concluding sentence, summarizing the key point that you have made. (Guideline, not rule).

(vi) Position of sentences within paragraphs: Consider the position of each of your sentences within each paragraph. Can they be re-arranged to make the paragraph clearer? In general, you should always consider: Where should I introduce this idea? Is it too early or too late? What information does the reader need to know in this paragraph, and at what stage does the reader need to know it?

(vii) Links between sentences: The reader needs to be able to clearly discern the link between one sentence and the next in a paragraph. As the writer, you are biased in your perception of how well one sentence links with the next because you are aware of links that are not written on the page. You need to make these links explicit for the reader. You should help the reader to understand the logical links between sentences by using introductory or transitional words or phrases at the beginning of sentences. Examples include time links (e.g., “then”, “next”, “after”), cause-effect links (e.g., “therefore”, “consequently”, “as a result”), addition links (e.g., “in addition”, “moreover”, “furthermore”, “similarly”), and contrast links (e.g., “but”, “conversely”, “nevertheless”, “however”, “although”, “whereas”). Further examples of transitional words are available in the Transitional Words and Phrases handout on the Learning Support Program’s Blackboard website. NB1. Be very care how you use transitional words. Incorrect use can be more confusing than omitting them entirely. NB2. Avoid starting paragraphs with transitional words unless it is very clear which idea they are referring to in the previous paragraph. NB3. An alternative to the use of transitional words is to include additional linking sentences between sentences.

(viii) Number of paragraphs per page: As a very general guideline (not a rule!), have at least two paragraphs on each page of A4 when typing in double-spaced 12-point font.

3. Subsections

It is often useful to divide the main sections of your work into subsections. In a short six-page lab report, the subsections are predefined as Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, and References. For longer honours research reports, the Introduction of a research report might include subsections with headings like “Theoretical Background”, “Previous Research”, “Research Rationale”, and “Summary of Hypotheses”. Similarly, the Discussion of the report might include subsections with headings like “Summary of Results”, “Relation to Previous Research”, “Limitations and Alternative Explanations”, “Future Research”, and “Implications”.

Make sure that your paragraphs are arranged in a logical order within each subsection so that each makes its point in a logically progressive fashion. As a general rule, the first paragraph in each subsection should introduce the topic, question, or problem that that particular subsection is dealing with. The final paragraph should summarize the key points that have been made in the subsection and provide a conclusion for that subsection.

General Writing Tips

1. Assume a professional but nonexpert readership: Write as if you are a professional psychologist who is writing for an audience of other professional psychologists who are *not* experts in the area that you are discussing. In this situation, you would not need to explain what a *t* test is or other such basic information. However, you would need to carefully explain terms and issues that are specific to the particular area that you are discussing.

2. Avoid fancy words: Fancy words may impress the reader, but if they do, then this will mean that the reader is too busy being impressed by your vocabulary to attend to the message

that you want to convey. Recent research suggests that people may even regard the use of long words as a sign of a lack of intelligence on the part of the writer (Oppenheimer, 2006). So, the best advice is to use short and simple words rather than fancy words (e.g., Say “thought” rather than “postulated”).

3. Do not include obvious and redundant statements or phrases: E.g., "The data were analysed so that the results could be ascertained", "The dependent variables were what we measured", etc.

4. Do not include unnecessary information: Do not lead the reader off in directions that, although interesting in their own right, are not essential. By including unnecessary information, you use up valuable space that you could be using to elaborate on the key information. As Bem (2004) explained, “omit needless concepts, topics, anecdotes, asides, and footnotes. Clear any underbrush that clutters your narrative. If a point seem peripheral to your main theme, remove it. If you cannot bring yourself to do this, put it in a footnote. Then when you revise your manuscript, remove the footnote” (p. 14).

5. Clarify ambiguous pronouns: Pronouns like “this”, “that”, “these”, and “those” can be ambiguous. Explain what the pronouns refer to in each sentence (“this test”, “that trial”, “these participants”, “those reports”).

6. Do not use sexist word: E.g., “mankind”. Say “people” instead.

7. Do not use contractions: E.g., “isn’t”. Say “is not” instead.

8. Do not use slang or colloquialisms: E.g., “One participant *freaked out* during the pretest”. Say “one participant was upset during the pretest” instead.

When to Make Citations

Question: How many citations should I include? Answer: As many as you need! There are four main reasons to make a citation in your text:

1. To indicate the source of a direct quotation: E.g., As Rubin and Hewstone (1998) noted, “it would seem as if intergroup discrimination leads to an increase in self-esteem but is not motivated by a need for self-esteem” (p. 56).

2. To indicate the source of paraphrased material: E.g., Intergroup discrimination seems to increase self-esteem but does not appear to be motivated by it (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998).

3. To indicate the source of another writer’s idea that you have expressed in your own words: E.g., It is doubtful whether the need for self-esteem motivates social discrimination and prejudice (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998).

4. To support factual statements that are not common knowledge: E.g., Several studies have investigated the link between self-esteem and discrimination (for a review, see Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Note that you do not need to provide citations to support factual statements that represent common knowledge (i.e., facts that most people already know). For example, you do not need to provide citations for the factual statement: “the sky is blue”.

Read Through Drafts

“You should *never* submit the first draft of any written piece of assessment for marking if you are serious about your work. The chances of producing even a sentence that is well written the first time are vanishingly small, let alone an entire report” (Bem, 2004, p. 13; Findlay, 2006, p. 44).

This advice is as true for present-day students as it was for the very first psychologists: When complimented on his writing style, William James said, "if there is aught of good in the style, it is the result of ceaseless toil in rewriting. Everything comes out wrong with me at first; but when once objectified I can torture and poke and scrape and pat it till it offends me no more."

So, the moral of the story is that the key to good writing is not in the writing, but in the reading, and the re-reading, and the re-re-reading of lots and lots and lots of drafts! Good students do not simply write good work in their first attempt and then go to the beach! They write average work and then edit this work as they read drafts to improve its quality (see also Bem, 2004). You should read through and correct at least four or five drafts of any work that you hand in.

Useful Resources

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O'Shea, R. P., Moss, S., & McKenzie, W. (2007). *Writing for psychology (5th. ed.).* Melbourne: Thomson Australia.

Smyth, T. R. (2004). *The principles of writing in psychology.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Taines, C. (2007). *A practical guide to writing for psychology.* New York: McGraw Hill.

References

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