teaching tips

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The Language of Scholarship: How to Rapidly Locate and Avoid Common APA Errors

Abstract
This article is relevant for nurses and nursing students who are writing scholarly documents for work, school, or publication and who have a basic understanding of American Psychological Association (APA) style. Common APA errors on the reference list and in citations within the text are reviewed. Methods to quickly examine and reduce these errors are shared.

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Nurses have been empowered by the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s (n.d.) Magnet Recognition Program to disseminate nursing knowledge through scholarly dialogue. Scholarly written communication requires the use of a clear, concise, uniform language. American Psychological Association (APA) style is most frequently used for scholarly nursing communication, and information about this style can be found in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2010).

The APA Publication Manual describes all elements of preparing a manuscript, including ethics, writing clearly and concisely, the correct use of punctuation, how to cite literature, and how to structure a reference list. Standards in the APA allow for a consistent writing style that eases reading comprehension and allows readers to quickly find and locate the key points of an article. When in-text citations and reference lists are written using APA style, readers can easily retrieve the publications used in researching the paper.

This article focuses on common citation and reference list errors and how to best identify and correct these errors. The authors believe that such errors account for the majority of the mistakes found in the papers and articles they have reviewed over the course of many years. Elimination of these errors will result in a more scholarly paper. Because nursing faculty and reviewers for peer-reviewed journals are familiar with APA style, they can spot errors before they begin to read the article. Papers written using flawless APA style appear more scholarly to the individual who is familiar with APA guidelines (Freysteinson, 2013). In the current article, we offer suggestions regarding how to quickly and efficiently locate commonly made errors. In addition, the authors offer a new lens, or a slightly different way of looking at these errors. Journal and book references are used as examples throughout this article. Key items within these examples are shown in boldface for clarity.

References

Authors are encouraged to ensure that all reference list entries are accurate and in APA format (see sections 6.22-6.32; APA, 2010). This article advocates for the use of several rapid reviews of the reference list. These rapidly focused reviews may ultimately save time and be more effective in identifying reference list errors. The four rapid reviews include reviewing title capitalization, italics, the ampersand, and the doi number.

Capitalization

One of the most common errors made on reference lists is related to the capitalization of article, book, dissertation, and report titles. Only the first word of the article or book title, subtitle, and proper names are capitalized (see section 6.29; APA, 2010). In addition, the titles of all journals are capitalized. To avoid inaccurate article title capitalization, review your reference list, looking only at the capitalization of journal article and book titles. Then, review the references again, looking only at the capitalization of journal titles. Examples of correct capitalization are in shown below in boldface.

Journal Article Title. Smart, D., English, A., James, J., Wilson, M.,...
Italics
Book, dissertation, and report titles and journal names are shown in italics (see section 6.29; APA, 2010). Conduct a quick scan of your reference list for italics to ensure that each entry has a book, dissertation, or report title italicized. An italicized item that is frequently overlooked is the journal volume number. The volume number is shown in italics, whereas the issue number is not italicized. However, the issue number is shown in parentheses after the volume number only if the journal is paginated separately by issue (see section 6.30; APA, 2010). Examples of correct italicization are indicated below in boldface.


Ampersand
The symbol for ampersand is "&." This symbol is used in reference lists instead of the word and. When two to seven authors of a journal or book are indicated, the ampersand is placed before the name of the last author (see section 6.27; APA, 2010). Conduct a rapid scan for the ampersand of every entry in your reference list with more than one author and up to seven authors to ensure an ampersand is present and that it is placed in the correct position. When a publication has eight or more authors, an ampersand is not used. Rather, only the first six authors' names are shown, followed by a comma, three ellipsis points (with a space inserted between each ellipsis), and the last author's name. Examples are indicated below in boldface.


Digital Object Identifier
The majority of journal articles have a digital object identifier (DOI), which is a unique identifier and a path to an article's location on the Internet. The DOI is typically found within each article or is readily obtained by searching for the article by typing the title in the search field of an Internet browser. For articles that do not have a doi, the URL of the journal website homepage can be used (see section 6.32; APA, 2010). Conducting a rapid scan for the DOI will ensure that all of your journal entries have a DOI number or URL. Examples of the DOI number or journal website homepage are indicated below in boldface.


CITATIONS WITHIN THE TEXT
Occasionally, there is confusion around the reference list and citing the references within the body of the text. For students and new authors, APA style may primarily be perceived as being all about the reference list. Accordingly, many may turn to reference management software to build the reference list. Several such programs are available and can be readily located by using the search function of an Internet browser. However, these programs are not useful to determine the citation format within the text of the article. Citations provide support for knowledge, facts, and figures that are not typically known and are required when a researcher uses references that influence the writing of a paper. Scanning your text for author citations using the word and, ampersands, the term et al., and reviewing direct quotations, which will require indication of the page number on which the quotation appears in the cited material, will eliminate the majority of citation errors.

When to Use "And" or "&"
When two to five authors are initially cited within the text, the ampersand symbol is used if the
authors are cited within parentheses. When authors’ surnames appear within the narrative of the text, place the word *and* before the final author’s name. Conducting a quick scan of your article, looking only for the ampersand and the word *and* in author citations, will aid in identifying this error. Note that although the authors’ initials are used on the reference list, only the surname of authors is used within the text (see section 6.12; APA, 2010). Examples are shown below in boldface.

Citing Authors Parenthetically. The best book about teamwork was written as a handbook for teams to use (Scholtes, Joiner, & Streibel, 2003).

Citing Authors in the Text Narrative. Scholtes, Joiner, and Streibel (2003) wrote the best book available if you want to know about how teams work.

When to Use "et al." The abbreviation "et al." is used in some author citations within the text. In works by one to five authors, all authors’ last names are cited at first mention in the text. For subsequent citations of three to five authors, use the first author’s last name followed by "et al." Work by six or more authors is cited at the first and all subsequent mentions in the text by the first author’s name and "et al." When a publication has two authors, both author names are always cited throughout the text. Table 6.1 in the *Publication Manual* (APA, 2010, p. 177) is an excellent resource for basic citation styles and the best quick guide for how to cite a reference the first time it appears and in subsequent citations; the difference between a parenthetical citation and an in-text citation is also demonstrated. Examples are shown below in boldface.

First Time Three to Five Authors Are Cited in the Text. Scholtes, Joiner, and Streibel (2003) wrote the best book available if you want to know about how teams work.

Subsequent Times Three to Five Authors Are Cited in the Text. Scholtes et al. (2003) wrote a great book on how teams work.

Each Time Six or More Authors Are Cited in the Text. Ross et al. (2013) wrote a book on simulation training.

QUOTATIONS

The use of quoted material does not make an article stronger or more factual. In scholarly written communications, direct quotations should be used sparingly and only when the information being relayed cannot be said in any other way. Referring to another person's work or paraphrasing that work is appropriate. Quotations of less than 40 words are placed within quotation marks, followed by the author(s) name(s), publication year, and page number (designated by the abbreviation "p.") in parentheses. The sentence punctuation mark (period) is placed after the closing parenthesis of the author citation. Quotations of more than 40 words are placed in a freestanding block of text. All quotations require the page number on which the quotation appears in the original work (see section 6.03; APA, 2010). Review your quotations for the correct use of quotation marks or block of text, and ensure every quotation has a page number indicated with the citation. In block quotations, the period follows the quotation, and the citation inserted without ending punctuation.

Quotations of Less Than 40 Words. "Authors do not present the work of another as if it were their own work." (APA, 2010, p. 16).

Quotations of 40 or More Words. Over the years, the [APA] Publication Manual has grown by necessity from a simple set of style rules to an authoritative source on all aspects of scholarly writing, from the ethics of duplicate publication to the word choice that best reduces bias in language. (APA, 2010, p. 1)

REFERENCE LIST AND CITATION CONGRUENCE

A common error found in papers is the spelling of author names in in-text citations that do not match the spelling of those names on the reference list. In a similar manner, the publication year cited may be different in the text, compared with the reference list. One way to correct this error is to use the “find” feature in a Word document, which is located under the Home tab. Using the find feature, highlight the name of the author in the text and each time the author’s name was cited in the text and on the reference list will appear on the screen. Use this opportunity to visually check all citations against the reference list. Whenever a discrepancy is found, check the reference against the original publication. As a bonus, this search will enable you to make sure that the et al. abbreviation discussed above was used correctly throughout the text.

CONCLUSION

Many schools of nursing and nursing journals have adopted the APA as its primary language of scholarship. This article aimed to address rapid review tools to ensure that the reference list and in-text citations are written in APA format. The language of the APA may be initially frustrating; however, when this writing style is learned, authors find papers easier to write, as they are not bogged down by wondering how to cite documents or develop a reference list.

REFERENCES


