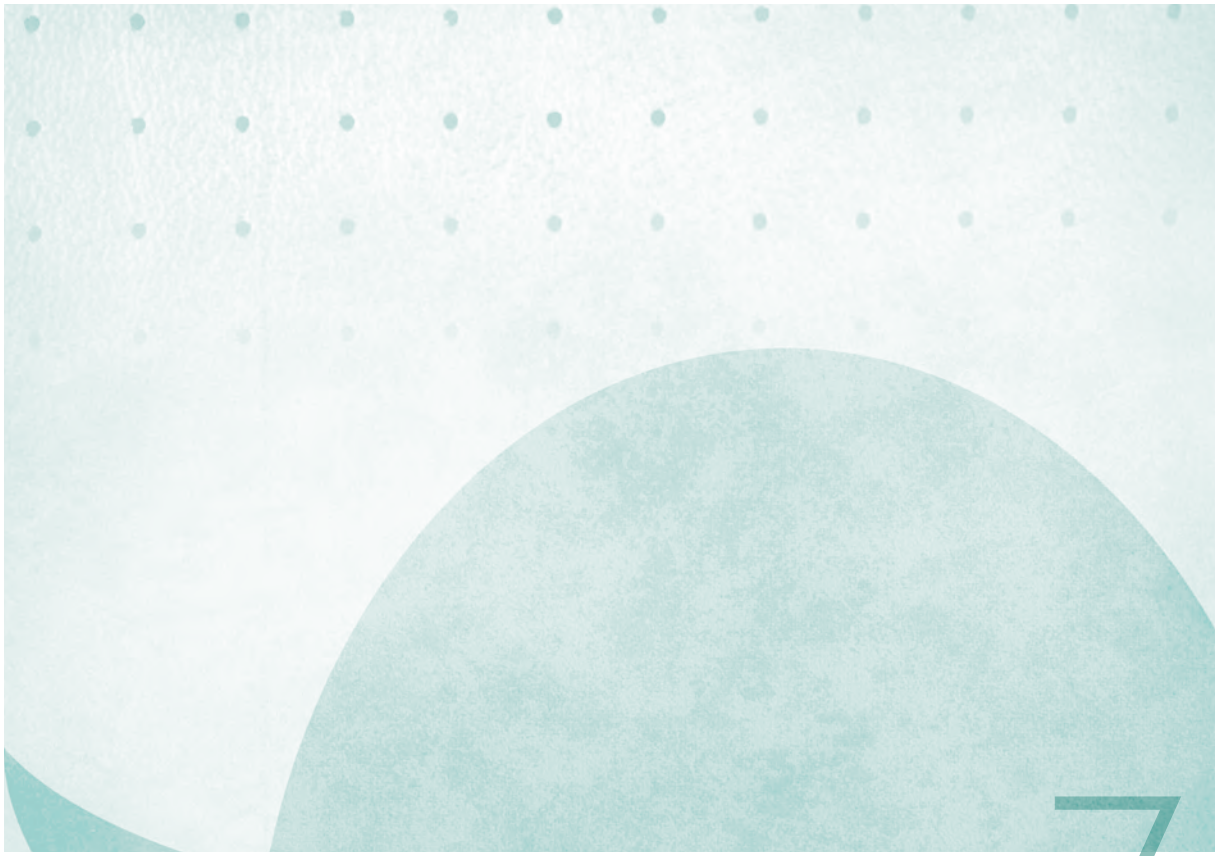
HOW TO WRITE PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH REPORTS AND ESSAYS



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Preface

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is pleased to continue its association with the publication of Bruce Findlay's *How to Write Psychology Research Reports and Essays*, now in its 7th edition.

Undergraduate psychology education aims to develop students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in six major areas. These graduate attributes include research methods, critical thinking skills, and communication skills. Undergraduate research projects and assignments are designed to help students master these skills; yet first- and second-year students may find writing research reports and essays quite daunting.

Findlay's book is designed to make these learning tasks less challenging for students. It uses easy-to-read and student-friendly language. The book is intended to complement undergraduate textbooks and the current edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychology Association* (APA). It will help students to plan and organise their research report, to express their ideas clearly, and to follow APA style. The book also alerts students to key issues such as referencing sources correctly and avoiding plagiarism. Flowcharts, checklists, and sample reports provide further guidance on psychological writing.

I am pleased to recommend the new edition of this book as a valuable resource to students throughout their undergraduate career. Students who are interested in psychology as a profession are invited to explore Psych Student Headquarters via www.psychology.org.au. The APS website also shows the diversity of careers in psychology, opportunities to meet and network, and professional resources provided by the APS to students and student subscribers. You can subscribe to the APS by visiting https://join.psychology.org.au.

Sabine Wingenfeld Hammond, PhD, FAPS
Executive Manager, Science, Education, and Membership
Australian Psychological Society

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Introduction

Introduction to Students

If you've picked this up to see what it's like – buy it! It'll save you a lot of hassles in your undergraduate psychology career.

Most psychology students do not go on to become the sort of psychologists who publish journal articles. Most psychology departments treat you as if you will! The research reports you will write as an undergraduate are different from those an academic would write, although they are designed to lead you towards that level. This book will give you all the information you need about how to prepare and write psychology research reports and essays in psychology at the undergraduate level, without overburdening you with all those extra touches that are needed for publication.

There is a glossary of those words that are on the tip of your tongue but whose meaning just escapes you at the moment. There is an index that will lead you to the help you need for any particular feature of a research report or essay that is bothering you. There are flowcharts of the processes involved in writing a research report and an essay. There are a couple of good examples of research reports that you can use as a sort of graphical index, and a couple of examples of badly written reports to show you what to avoid.

If you want some global advice for undergraduate writing in psychology, it is – learn to plan ahead! It will save you a lot of anxiety of the sort that occurs when your computer fails at midnight and the assignment is due at 9 o'clock the next morning. This book will show you how to learn this valuable skill.

Good writing! It's not nearly as difficult as you might think.

Introduction to Staff Members

Purpose of the book. This book is intended to address the need for a set of guidelines for writing undergraduate-level psychology research reports and essays. It is aimed at *first-* and *second-year* students. It is *not* a guide to writing for publication. It does, however, observe the conventions required by the 6th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) and it includes the rationale for those conventions, as well as the steps to be taken in producing and presenting psychological research reports and essays. A student who grasps these concepts and learns the conventions will have a sound basis for presenting research in a professional manner, and writing well-argued essays, so that the later step of writing for publication should be an easier one to take.

Why such a book is desirable. Increasing student numbers and proportionally dwindling resources in Australian universities often result in students spending less time in classes that teach how to write research reports and in getting less feedback on what they have written. This is particularly true at first-year level. In the past, most psychology departments produced handouts on writing research reports and essays, but they were often quite brief. They were also frequently produced by staff members who had been writing for publication for some time and who took for granted a good deal of information that first-year students, in particular, do not know. It has been my experience that many students find the conventions of psychological report writing especially difficult, since the requirements differ both from those of their other tertiary subjects and from their own previous experience. When students ask questions of staff members, they are often given ad hoc answers, and this leads to complaints from students about lack of consistency between staff members regarding what is expected in research reports.

Students will find this book useful because it is considerably more detailed than the typical departmental handout, but not as overwhelming as books advising on writing for publication, such as the *Publication Manual* of the APA. Some of the more advanced books are mentioned towards the end of Chapters 4 and 5.

Difference from the previous edition. Since the 6th edition of the *Publication Manual* of the APA was published in 2010, publishing in general has continued to change, especially in the accessibility and presentation of electronic resources. While the 6th edition of the *Publication Manual* updated some conventions to meet the changes in publishing, especially the use of the doi, the APA has also published, electronically, a more detailed style guide to electronic references. The latest edition of the current book includes some of this material.

The examples I use of opening sentences, summaries of prior research, and referencing examples contain fairly recent material from Australian and New Zealand academics.

I hope your students are tickled to see the names of academics they may know used as glowing examples. I updated the occasional urls I use as examples to ensure they are still active and relevant. Finally, I have added an extra good and bad example of a research report. The new ones are a bit less extensive than the already existing one, which, though I've retained it, is probably more than would normally be expected of a first research report. As ever, they are not there as templates but for students to use as a graphical index when they can't think of the word that would allow them to use the usual index.

In response to requests from third- and fourth-year students, who say they are finding the book useful in their higher years, I have also included some examples of more sophisticated tables and figures and how they should be reported in text.

You can save yourself some teaching time by recommending that students buy and frequently refer to this book. If you are using this book as an aid to your teaching and have any constructive criticisms to offer, especially about the newer sections, I would appreciate hearing from you.

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How to Use this Book

This book has a number of design features which I hope will make it easier to understand the information I want you to know. There are often good and poor examples cited. They will be in tables, because one of the conventions I want you to learn is that illustrative material belongs in tables. The format of the tables throughout this book is the format that you are expected to learn, but in addition there will be icons to remind you which are good and which are poor examples. They will look like this:

Good examples for you to follow will have this "tick" beside them.

Poor examples or formats that I want you to avoid using in your work will have this "cross" beside them.

Notes, which will often accompany tables, will have this little "notepad" icon beside them. Please read them carefully!

Finally, this icon will accompany comments or instructions that require even closer attention than usual. It will refer to things that are absolutely essential for you to be aware of.

Please be aware that the examples throughout the book illustrating the conventions you need to know about are not exhaustive. I would not like you to get the idea that these examples are the only way to express those particular conventions, but they are certainly acceptable ways. As you become more comfortable with writing in this style, you will be able to be more creative within the existing conventions.

At the start of Chapters 3 and 5 there are flowcharts that indicate the sequence of activities for the successful writing of research reports and essays, respectively. Those of you who are more visual in your learning styles may find them a useful summary of the process. There are also checklists for research reports and essays, at the ends of Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, that will help you to plan and mark off your achievements in your first few assignments. Feel free to photocopy them and use them to measure your progress.

There are good and bad examples of two research reports, starting on page 115. The first is a fairly straightforward one, such as you might expect in your first one or two

assignments. The second is rather more complex, but you might encounter one like it late in first or early in second year. They are not meant to be the only way you can write a research report, but they are acceptable ways; they can also be used as a sort of index, if you are looking for something but can't think of the word that would allow you to use the normal index. You can look at the part of the report where you expect to find advice, then be referred to the sections or page where that advice can be found. The bad examples include many of the errors that students make. Have a look at them, see if you can spot the errors, and check the answers on pages 133 and 158.

At the beginning of Chapters 2 to 5 there is a list of keywords. Before reading each chapter, look up these words in the Glossary at the back of the book. This will ensure that when you first encounter them in the context of the chapter they will already be a little familiar. Their meaning should become even clearer as you read through the chapter.