Choosing Your Words in APA Style: Best Practices for Clear, Precise, and Inclusive Writing

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American Psychological Association
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Meet the style team

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Agenda

- Some important context
- About word choice
- Practical implementation
- Inclusive language word choice
  - Pronouns
  - Disability terms
  - Misleading euphemisms
  - Body size diversity
  - Pregnancy
  - Neurodiversity
- Word choices about APA Style
- Q&A

Some important context

Why listen to us about word choice?

- The American Psychological Association (APA) is the professional organization for psychologists in the United States, founded 1892, and the home of APA Style, founded 1929.
- APA Style is used by millions to write about people in science in many disciplines:
  - psychology
  - nursing
  - education
  - social work
  - and more!

Three principles of APA Style

Clarity

Precision

Inclusion

Goal: excellence in communication

Consider the audience you are writing for

Who will be reading your work?

Consider a global audience

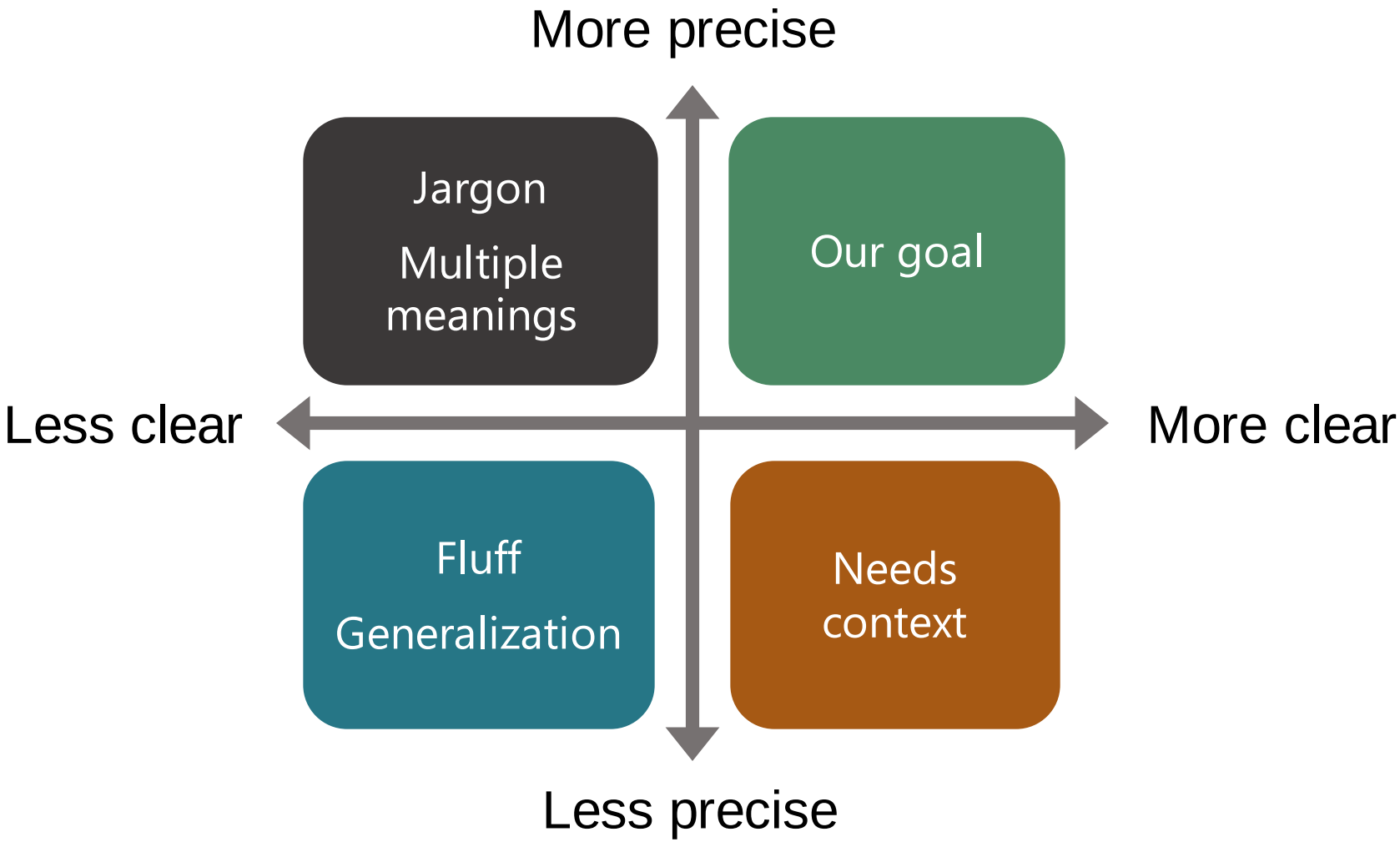
Don’t assume specialized knowledge

About word choice

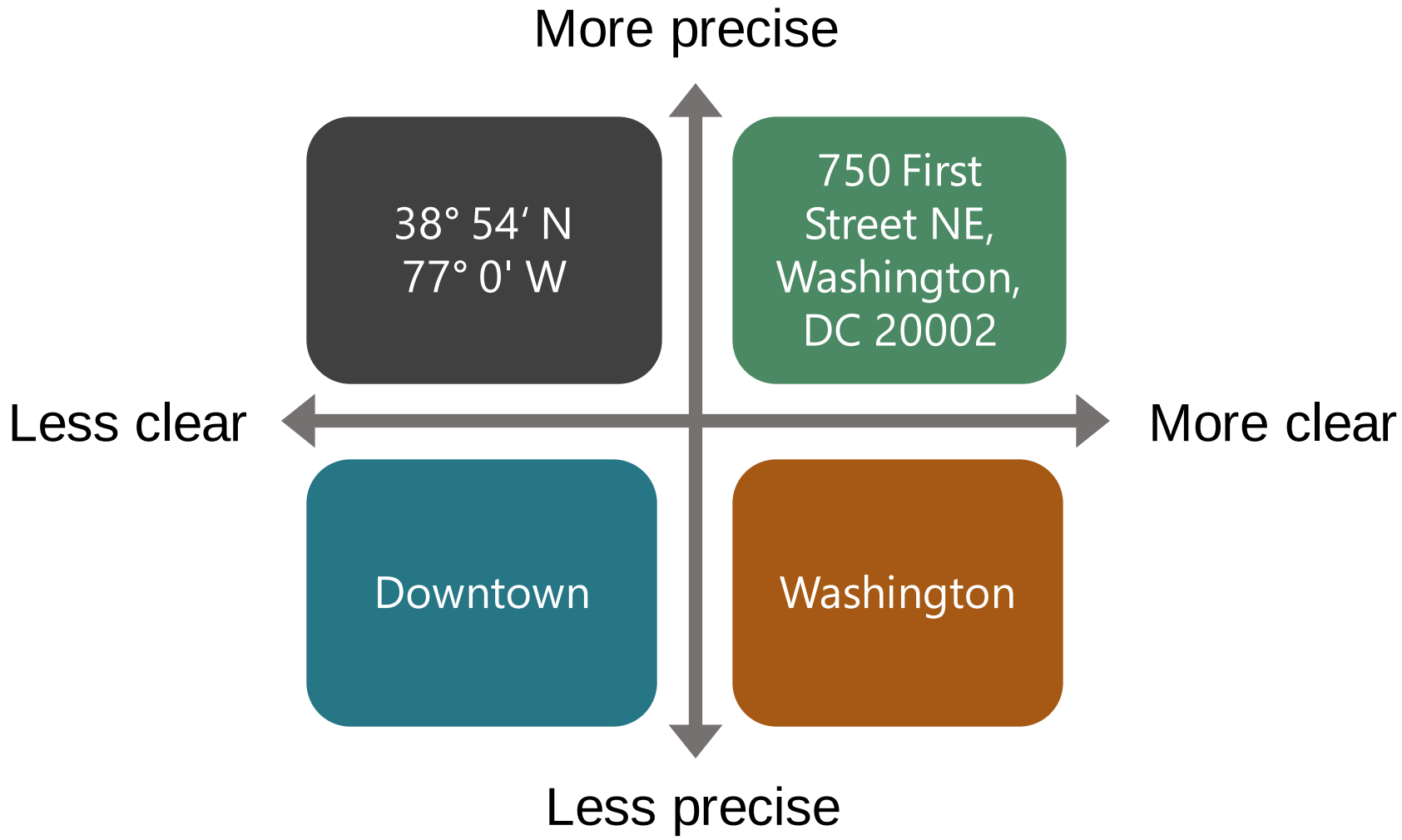
What is word choice?

- Word choice: Being thoughtful about which words you use
- Consider the audience
- Not about gatekeeping
- Ensure your choices align with your intentions for communicating

Clarity and precision matrix



Example matrix: Describing APA's location



Poll

- In what quadrant of the clarity–precision matrix do you most often see student writing?

Fixing fluff

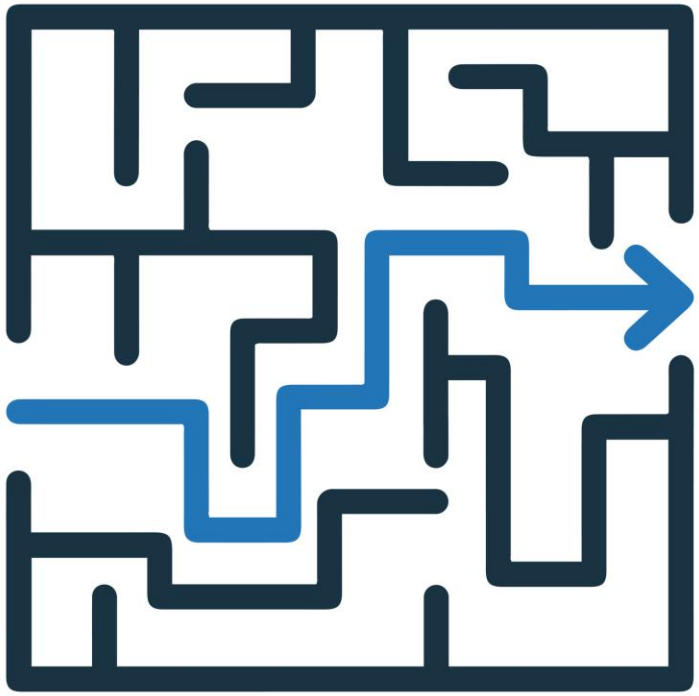
Symptoms

- Writing lacks coherence
- Unnecessary repetition
- Lack of engagement with the topic

Solutions

- Read more about the topic
- Talk about the topic with a peer
- Go to the writing center

Fixing jargon

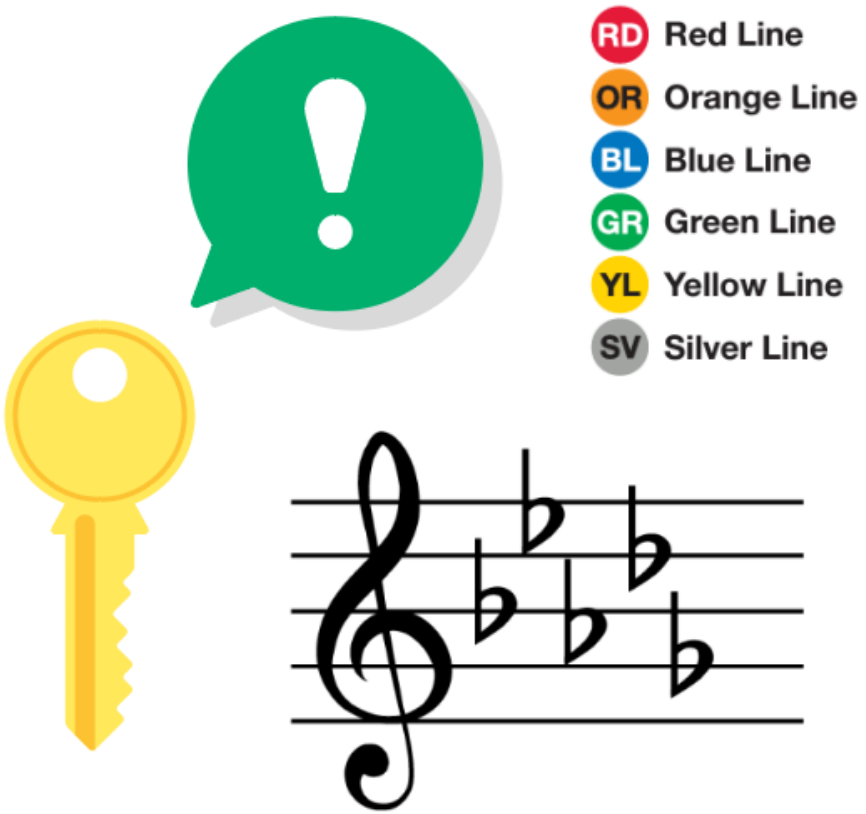


Symptoms

- Too many specialized words
- Too many abbreviations
- Overestimating audience knowledge

Solutions

- Define terms
- Define and/or spell out abbreviations
- Provide more foundational context

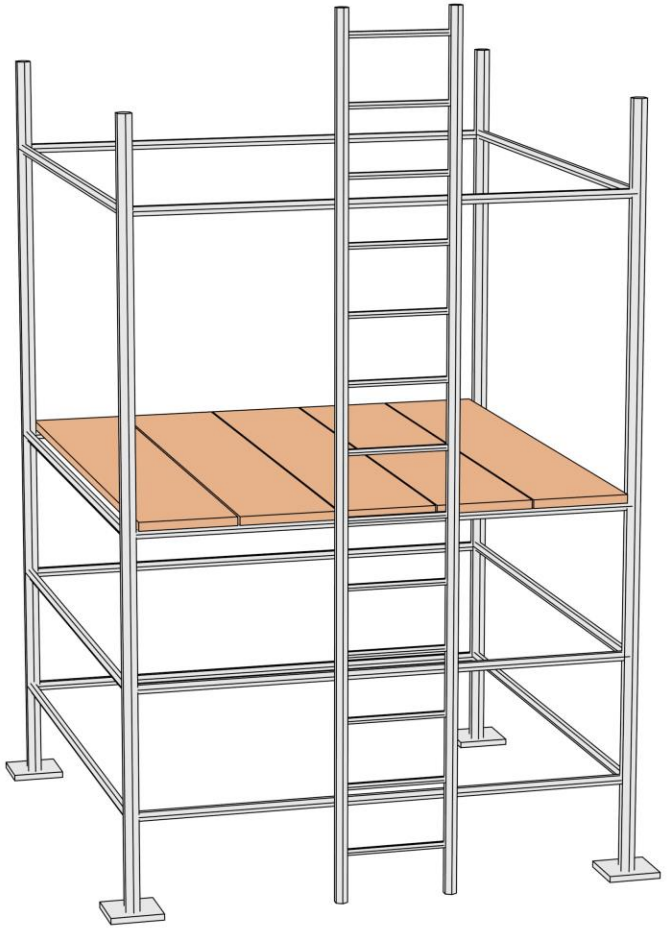
Fixing words with multiple meanings

Symptoms

- Multiple meanings create ambiguity
  - “significant”
  - “outstanding”
  - “key”

Solutions

- Specify your meaning
- Choose an unambiguous term
  - “statistically significant,” “important”
  - “excellent,” “remaining”
  - “important,” “house key,” “map key,” “musical key signature”

Fixing lack of context



Symptoms

- “Givens” or foundation not established
- Patchwriting – writing not customized to paper
- Too many quotations or specialized terms

Solutions

- Summarize foundational information
- Paraphrase instead of quote or patchwrite
- Refer to landmark studies or meta-analyses

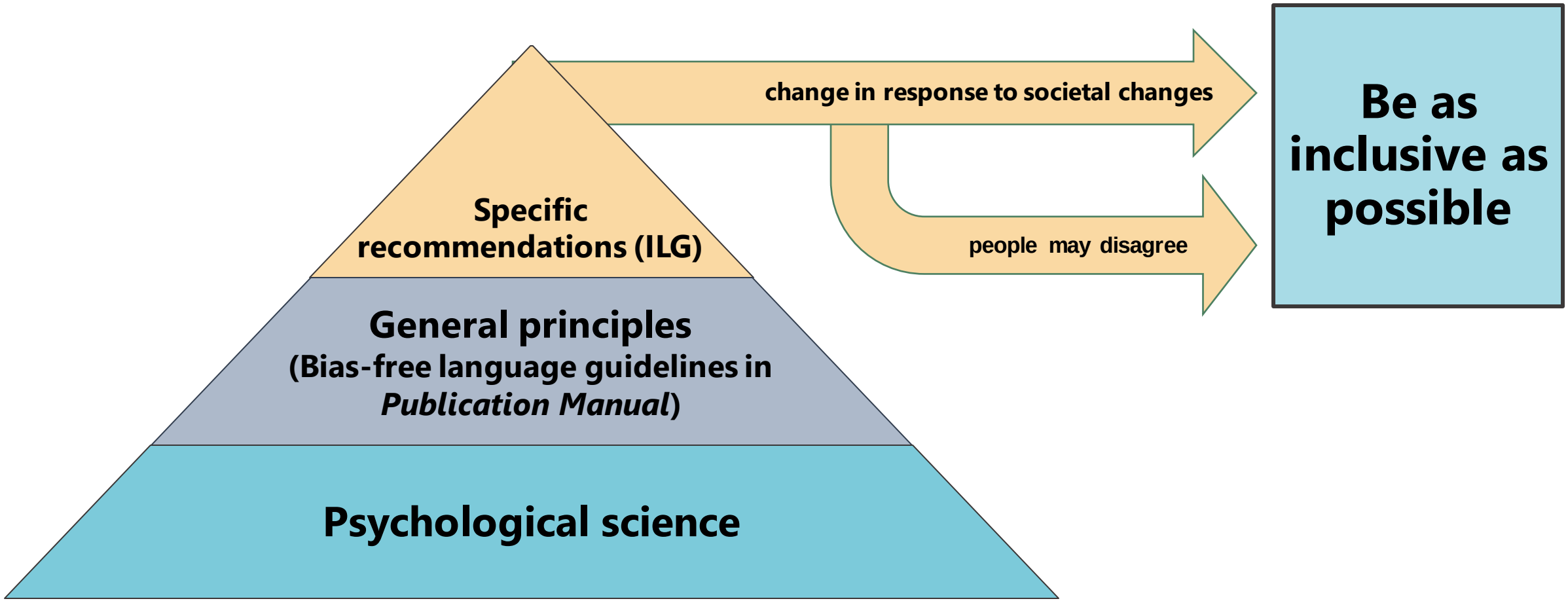
An inclusive language lens

- Inclusive language adds a third dimension to the clarity–precision matrix.
- When describing people, include *relevant* information.
- Use inclusive terms for generic people:
  - inclusive: they
  - not inclusive: he or she
- JARS-REC (journal article reporting standards for race, ethnicity, and culture) state what information to include in reports of original research.

APA inclusive language resources

- APA Style has the most robust, science-backed guidance for writing about people.
  - Bias-free language guidelines (7th ed.)
  - Inclusive language guide (2nd ed.)
- Get the guidelines for free!

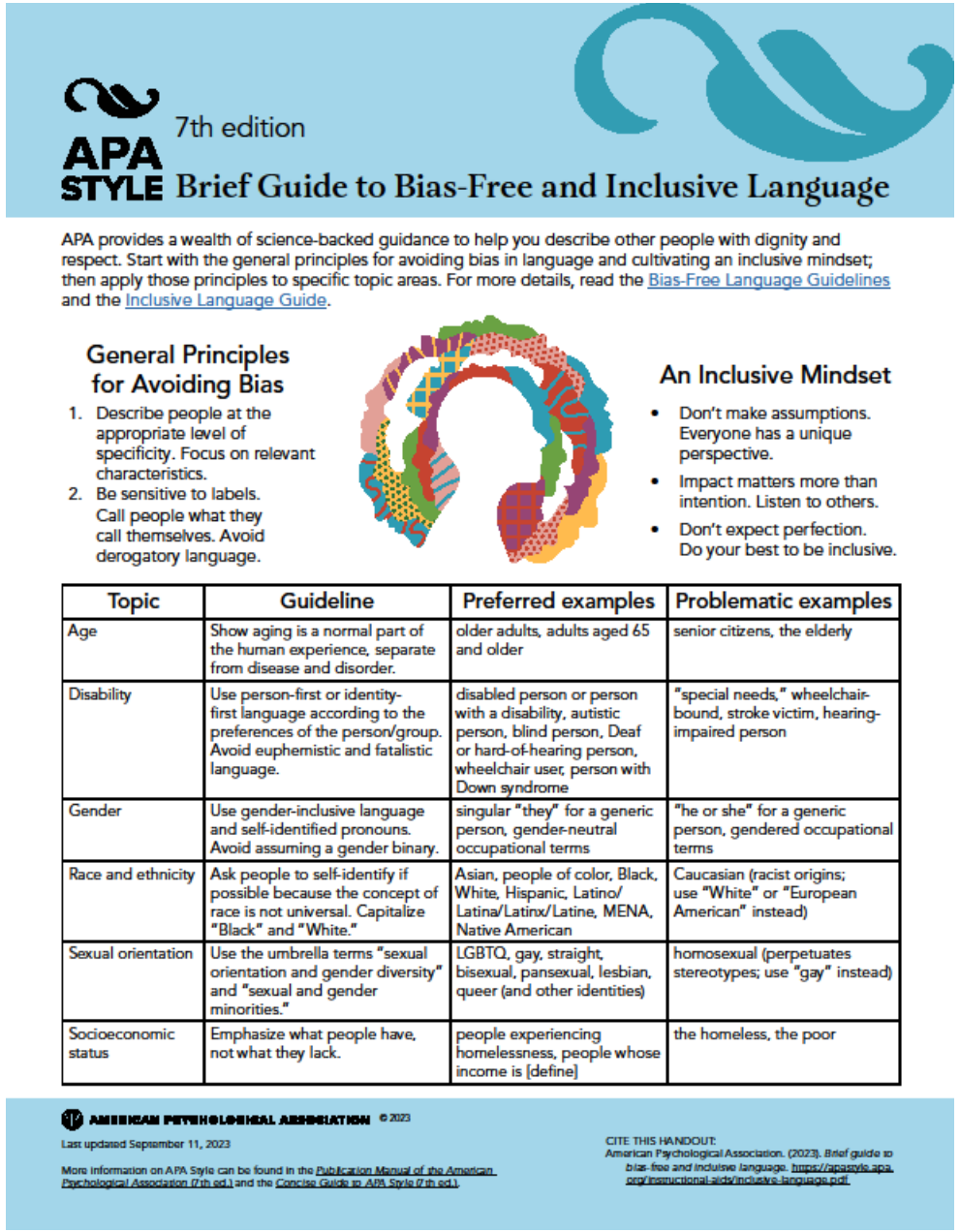
Structure of inclusive language guidance



ILG = *Inclusive Language Guide* (2nd ed.)

Introduce inclusive language

- Introduce students to inclusive language with the free instructional aid, Brief Guide to Bias-Free and Inclusive Language
  - general principles
  - examples of topics areas in
    - age
    - disability
    - gender
    - race and ethnicity
    - sexual orientation
    - socioeconomic status



APA STYLE 7th edition

Brief Guide to Bias-Free and Inclusive Language

APA provides a wealth of science-backed guidance to help you describe other people with dignity and respect. Start with the general principles for avoiding bias in language and cultivating an inclusive mindset; then apply those principles to specific topic areas. For more details, read the Bias-Free Language Guidelines and the Inclusive Language Guide.

General Principles for Avoiding Bias

1. Describe people at the appropriate level of specificity. Focus on relevant characteristics.
2. Be sensitive to labels. Call people what they call themselves. Avoid derogatory language.

An Inclusive Mindset

- Don't make assumptions. Everyone has a unique perspective.
- Impact matters more than intention. Listen to others.
- Don't expect perfection. Do your best to be inclusive.

Topic	Guideline	Preferred examples	Problematic examples
Age	Show aging is a normal part of the human experience, separate from disease and disorder.	older adults, adults aged 65 and older	senior citizens, the elderly
Disability	Use person-first or identity-first language according to the preferences of the person/group. Avoid euphemistic and fatalistic language.	disabled person or person with a disability, autistic person, blind person, Deaf or hard-of-hearing person, wheelchair user, person with Down syndrome	"special needs," wheelchair-bound, stroke victim, hearing-impaired person
Gender	Use gender-inclusive language and self-identified pronouns. Avoid assuming a gender binary.	singular "they" for a generic person, gender-neutral occupational terms	"he or she" for a generic person, gendered occupational terms
Race and ethnicity	Ask people to self-identify if possible because the concept of race is not universal. Capitalize "Black" and "White."	Asian, people of color, Black, White, Hispanic, Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine, MENA, Native American	Caucasian (racist origins; use "White" or "European American" instead)
Sexual orientation	Use the umbrella terms "sexual orientation and gender diversity" and "sexual and gender minorities."	LGBTQ, gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, queer (and other identities)	homosexual (perpetuates stereotypes; use "gay" instead)
Socioeconomic status	Emphasize what people have, not what they lack.	people experiencing homelessness, people whose income is [define]	the homeless, the poor

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Last updated September 11, 2023

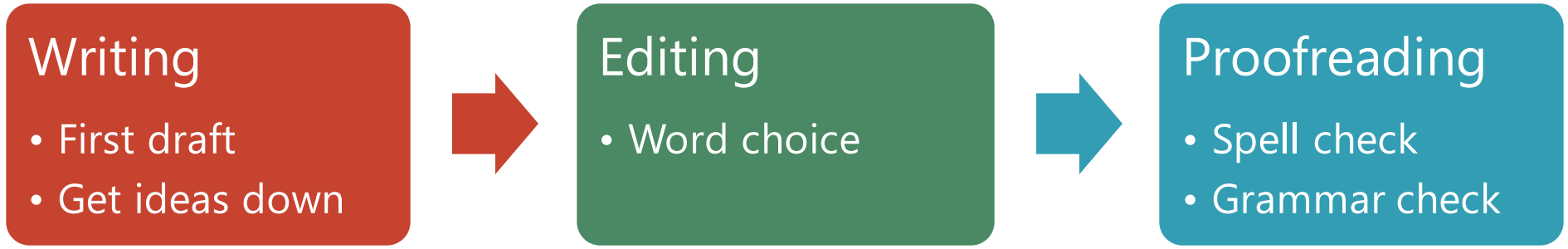
More information on APA Style can be found in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.) and the Concise Guide to APA Style (7th ed.).

CITE THIS HANDOUT:
American Psychological Association. (2023). *Brief guide to bias-free and inclusive language.* https://apastyle.apa.org/instructional-aids/inclusive-language.pdf

Practical implementation

Developing student awareness

- Help students locate where they are in the writing process.
- Recommend checking for word choice as an explicit step.



Quote less, paraphrase more

- Too many details and quotations can be difficult to understand.
- Encourage students to paraphrase/summarize and to eliminate unnecessary details.
- Save quotations for when it is important to replicate how something was said, in addition to what was said (e.g., definitions).

Too much quotation and detail

Researchers "experimentally examined the effects of *reducing* smartphone social media usage on appearances and weight esteem in youth with emotional distress" (Thai et al., 2023, p. 1). A total of 220 participants were in either an "intervention (social media limited to 1 hr/day) or control (unrestricted access to social media) group" (Thai et al., 2023, p. 1). Thai et al. (2023) monitored social media usage via screen time trackers and found significant increases in both appearance and weight esteem.

Good summary

When teens with emotional distress reduced their social media usage to only 1 hr per day, they felt better about their appearance and weight compared to teens who had unlimited usage (Thai et al., 2023).

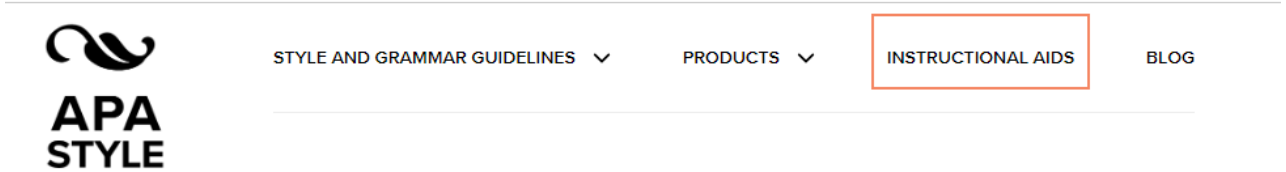
Transform patchwriting to paraphrasing

- Patchwriting retains sentence structure and substitutes synonyms.
- Paraphrasing presents ideas in a different way, while retaining important key words from the original.

Quotation	Patchwriting	Paraphrase
"The present study experimentally examined the effects of *reducing* smartphone social media usage on appearances and weight esteem in youth with emotional distress" (Thai et al., 2023, p. 1).	Thai et al. (2023) experimentally researched the impact of lessening smartphone social media usage on looks and body weight evaluations in young people with emotional problems.	Thai et al. (2023) studied whether young people with depression and anxiety would feel better about their appearance and weight if they engaged less with social media on their smartphones.

Practice summarizing research with the Research Article Activity

- Step-by-step activity to help students
  - find reputable research articles
  - cite articles in the text and reference list
  - analyze research
  - paraphrase research



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Research Article Activity

This activity will help students learn how to find, cite, analyze, and summarize a scholarly research article. For each step of the activity, type your responses directly into the text fields provided, or copy the questions into your preferred word-processing program and answer them there. Complete this activity multiple times to help you write papers such as literature reviews.

Notes for each part indicate where to find more information in the seventh edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Seventh Edition* or on the APA Style website.

Step 1: Finding a Research Article

The best place to find a reliable research article is in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal accessed from a research database or platform, such as APA PsycNet, ProQuest, OvidSP, or EBSCOhost. Check with your university library to see which platforms and databases your school has access to and which ones are recommended for your subject area. APA journals are a good starting point for students of psychology.

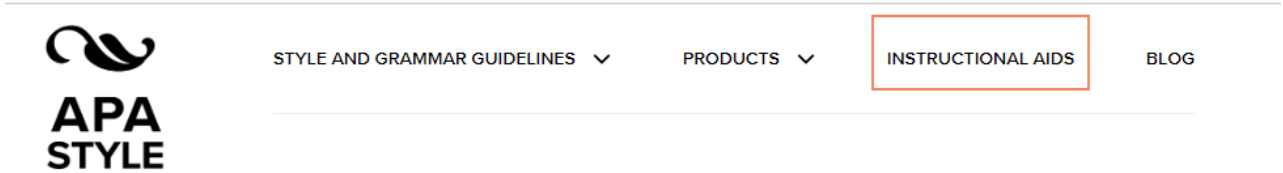
Many types of research articles are published in scholarly journals, including quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and mixed methods studies. In general, research articles have the following characteristics:

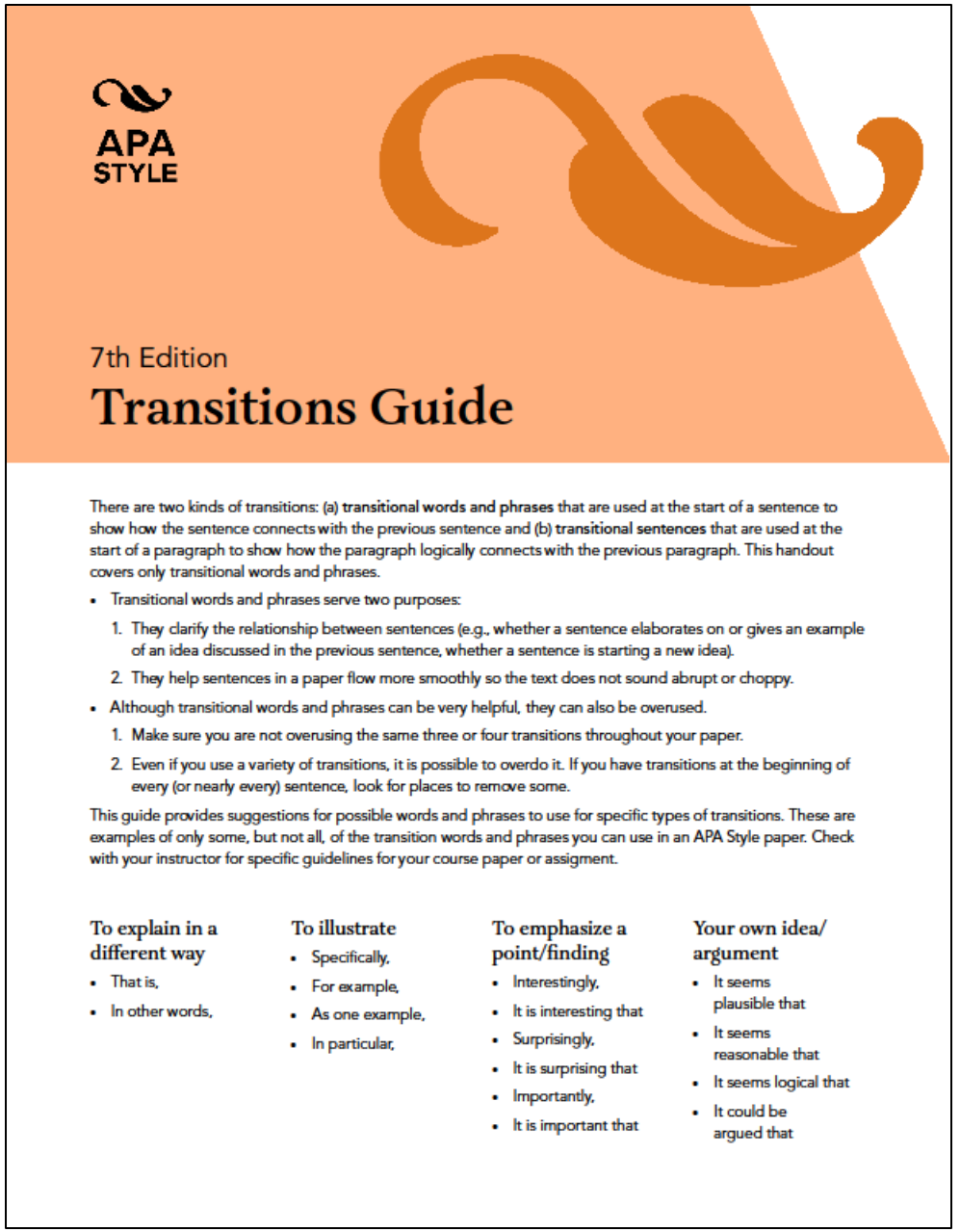
- report original, or primary, research
- include distinct sections that reflect the stages of the research process, usually the following sections in the following order:
  - Introduction: description of the purpose of the investigation and the issues being reported, review of the background literature, and study objectives and/or hypotheses
  - Method: full description of each step of the study, including the materials used, procedures followed, research design, and flow of participants
  - Results (quantitative article): report of the results of statistical analyses conducted
  - Findings (qualitative article): report of the findings using natural language
  - Discussion: summary of the study, including any interpretation, limitations, and implications of the results or findings and next steps

Chapters 1 and 3 of the *Publication Manual* provide descriptions of research articles and the sections often included in them, respectively.

Use the Transitions Guide to learn about transitions

- Choppy writing often lacks transitions words and phrases:
  - therefore,
  - however,
  - although
  - furthermore,
  - as an example,
- Use our free transitions guide to provide examples.





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Transitions Guide

There are two kinds of transitions: (a) **transitional words and phrases** that are used at the start of a sentence to show how the sentence connects with the previous sentence and (b) **transitional sentences** that are used at the start of a paragraph to show how the paragraph logically connects with the previous paragraph. This handout covers only transitional words and phrases.

- Transitional words and phrases serve two purposes:
  1. They clarify the relationship between sentences (e.g., whether a sentence elaborates on or gives an example of an idea discussed in the previous sentence, whether a sentence is starting a new idea).
  2. They help sentences in a paper flow more smoothly so the text does not sound abrupt or choppy.
- Although transitional words and phrases can be very helpful, they can also be overused.
  1. Make sure you are not overusing the same three or four transitions throughout your paper.
  2. Even if you use a variety of transitions, it is possible to overdo it. If you have transitions at the beginning of every (or nearly every) sentence, look for places to remove some.

This guide provides suggestions for possible words and phrases to use for specific types of transitions. These are examples of only some, but not all, of the transition words and phrases you can use in an APA Style paper. Check with your instructor for specific guidelines for your course paper or assigment.

To explain in a different way	To illustrate	To emphasize a point/finding	Your own idea/ argument
• That is,	• Specifically,	• Interestingly,	• It seems plausible that
• In other words,	• For example,	• It is interesting that	• It seems reasonable that
	• As one example,	• Surprisingly,	• It seems logical that
	• In particular,	• It is surprising that	• It could be argued that
		• Importantly,	
		• It is important that	

What does it mean to write “professionally”?

- “Professional” is often subjective, culturally bound, and dependent on context.

Avoid

- colloquialism, slang, and idioms
- contractions
- cliches
- judgmental language (“failed” vs. “did not”)
- run-on sentences
- sentence fragments

Promote

- impartial and neutral language
- full sentences
- sentences of varying lengths
- transitions
- punctuation

Don’t worry about

- split infinitives
- beginning sentences with conjunctions
- ending sentences with prepositions
- first-person pronouns
- second-person pronouns

Inclusive language word choice

Choosing words for people

- Call people what they call themselves.
  - But be respectful.
  - Some language people use among themselves is not appropriate for outsiders.
- Use language others will understand and see themselves in.
- People are in charge of language; language changes people/society changes.
- No group is a monolith; people disagree.
- Explain your choices as needed.

Pronouns: “I” to refer to yourself

- It is professional to use “I.”
- Do not refer to yourself in the third person as “the author” (overcorrection).
  - Use “I” for one author.
  - Use “we” for coauthors/group projects.
- Overuse of “I” or “we” is a writing problem, not a problem with pronouns.

Pronouns: Singular “they”

- For people who use “they” as their pronoun
- For generic or hypothetical people where gender is unknown/irrelevant
- Many ways to write a sentence

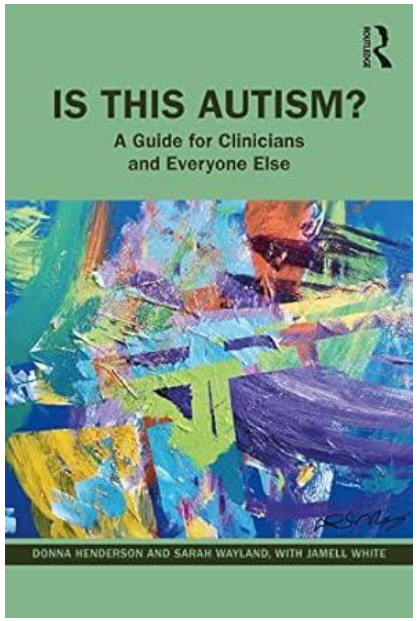
Disability terms

- Several approaches to disability language; explain your choice if needed.
  - When people experience a disability as integral to who they are, they are more likely to use identity-first or nouning language.
  - Be careful with nouning language to ensure the usage is not offensive*.

Person-first language	Identity-first language	Nouning language
• people with low vision • people with cancer • people with alcohol use disorder • people with autism*	• autistic people • blind people	• autistics • the blind • alcoholics* • cancer survivors*

Example of explaining language

- The authors of *Is This Autism?* explain various perspectives on language to refer to autistic people and why they chose their terms.



Reference:

Henderson, D., Wayland, S., & White, J. (2024). *Is this autism? A companion guide for diagnosing*. Routledge.

Person-first language vs. identity-first language. In the general community of people with medical disabilities, there has been a shift toward identifying an individual as a *person first*, with their disability representing only one aspect of their profile (i.e., a person with diabetes, versus a diabetic person). Person-first language was conceived to ensure that people with disorders or diseases were not defined by their challenges.

However, many autistic people argue that autism is lifelong, integral to who they are, and pervades every aspect of their lives. Their identity cannot be separated from their autism. Moreover, the use of person-first language implies that the descriptor is a disease or disorder, and many autistics argue that autism is neither of these. Thus, they prefer to refer to themselves with their *identity first* (i.e., as an *autistic person*, versus a *person with autism*).

The issue is complicated by the fact that while some autistic people prefer to use identity-first language, there are others who prefer person-first language. We feel strongly that people should get to choose the way in which we refer to them. Based on our interactions with the autistic community, and particularly the type of individuals for whom we are writing this book, we are choosing to use identity-first language. We hope that our readers understand this dilemma and know that there is no perfect solution.

Similarly, we sometimes use the word *autistic* as a noun (instead of writing *autistic person*). Because we were unsure how this would be taken, we did online polls with two autistic communities. Both clearly indicated that the vast majority of participants were comfortable or agnostic regarding this usage.

Misleading euphemisms

- Avoid idioms that use disability terms (confusing and potentially disrespectful)
- Clearer to choose other words
  - go in blind → go in without preconceived ideas
  - tone deaf → insensitive
  - OCD → particular, fastidious

Body size diversity

- Use neutral, nonjudgmental language based on facts, actions, or physiology.
  - higher weight, lower weight, a weight of X
  - limitations of body mass index (BMI)
- "Fat" reclaimed as a neutral descriptor for some.
- Body neutrality often a goal, rather than body shaming or body positivity.

Pregnancy

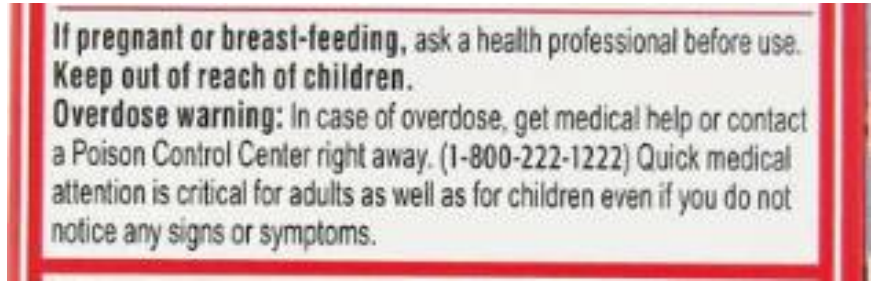
- Context matters—use language people see themselves in.
- "Pregnant people" includes all people who are pregnant.
  - But: pregnant women have specific experiences too and may be your audience.
- Avoid overly medicalized terms ("menstruators," "uterus owners") outside of medical contexts.

Rewriting gendered language

- Many ways to write a sentence to be inclusive, such as second person (“you”).

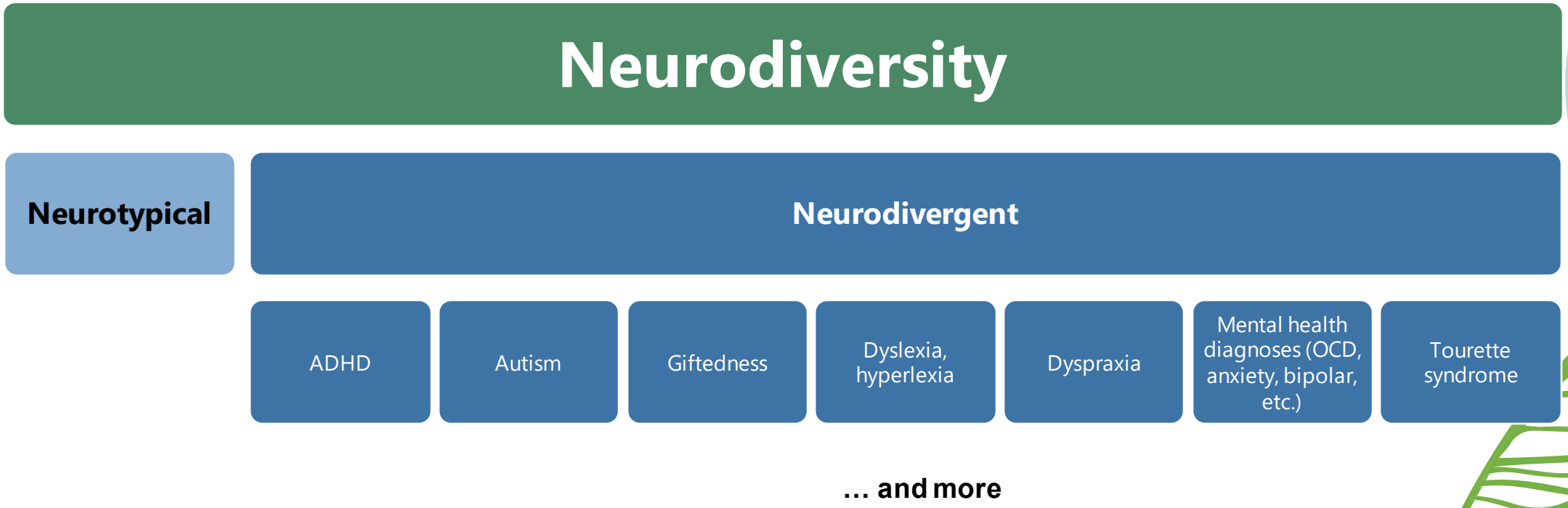
Unnecessarily gendered language

Gender-neutral alternatives



Neurodiversity

- No “normal” brain—neurodiversity is a spectrum on which everyone sits.
- No official list of what qualifies as neurodivergent other than that is it not typical.

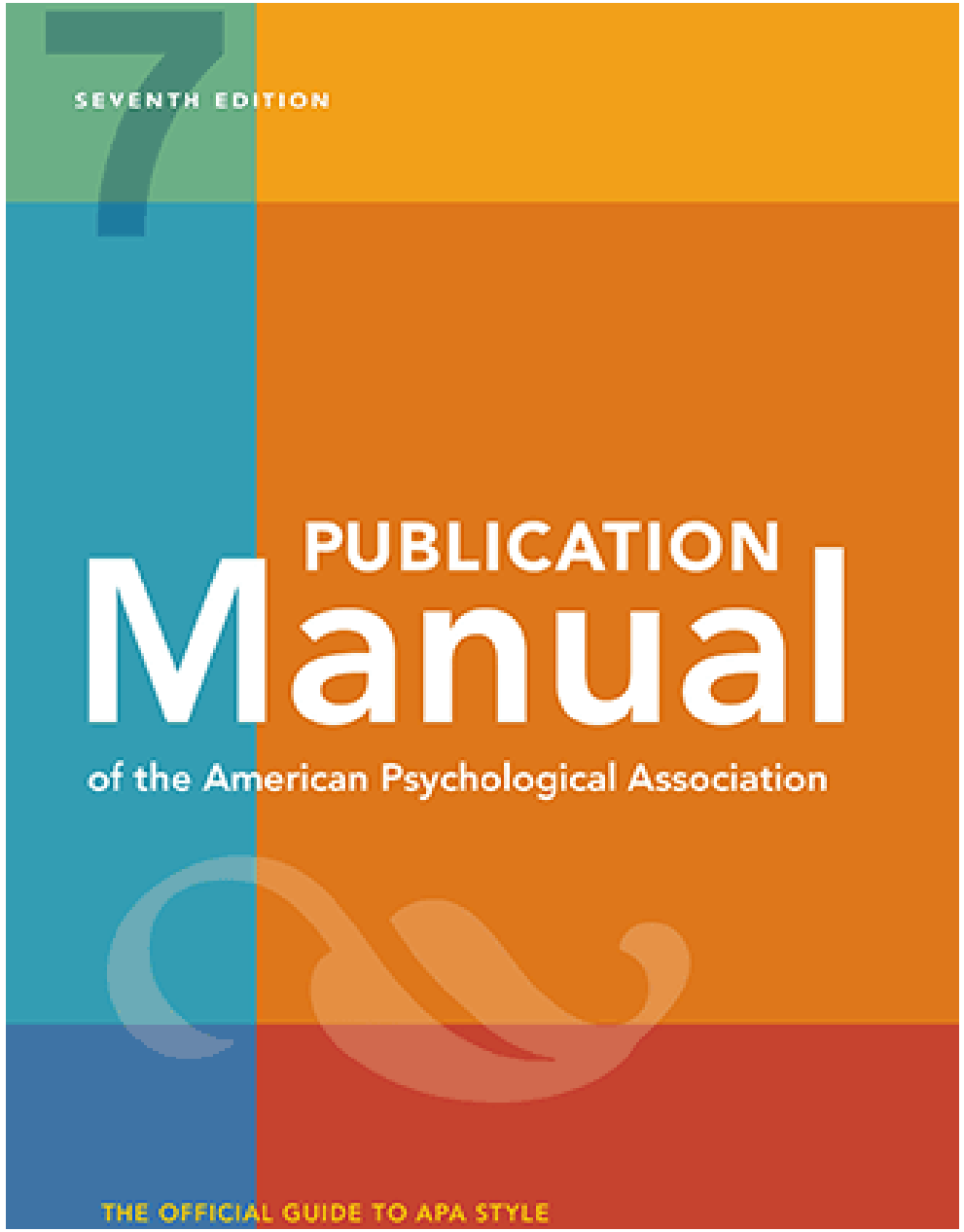


Word choice about APA Style

How to talk about APA Style

- Call them "**guidelines**," not "rules."
- "**APA Style**," not "APA format."
  - Our writing style is more than formatting!

- **Reference type** is a category/kind of work:
  - journal article
  - book
  - report
  - webpage, etc.
- **Source** is a specific work being cited, or a part of a reference list entry.



Helpful resources

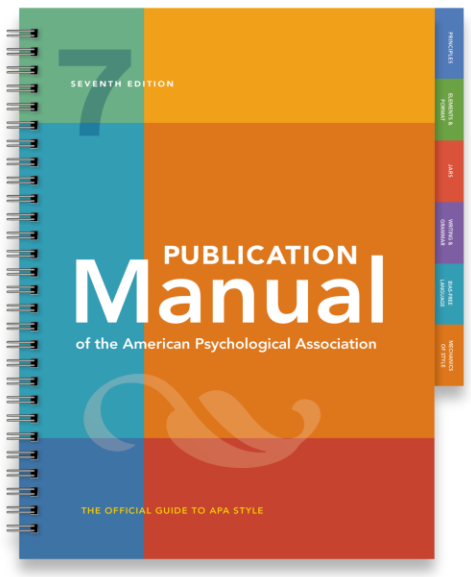
- APA Style for Beginners landing page
- Free instructional aids
- APA Style blog
- Basics of APA Style free tutorial
- Style expert email (StyleExpert@apa.org)

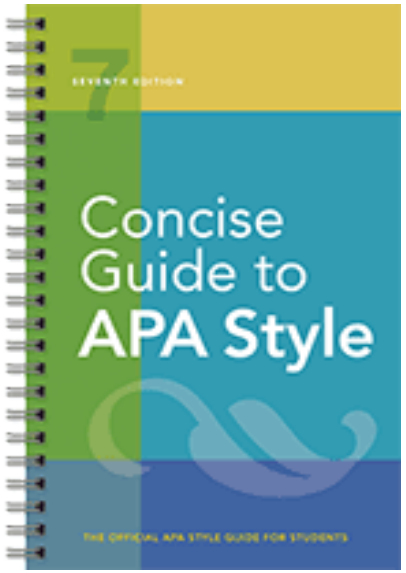
Q&A

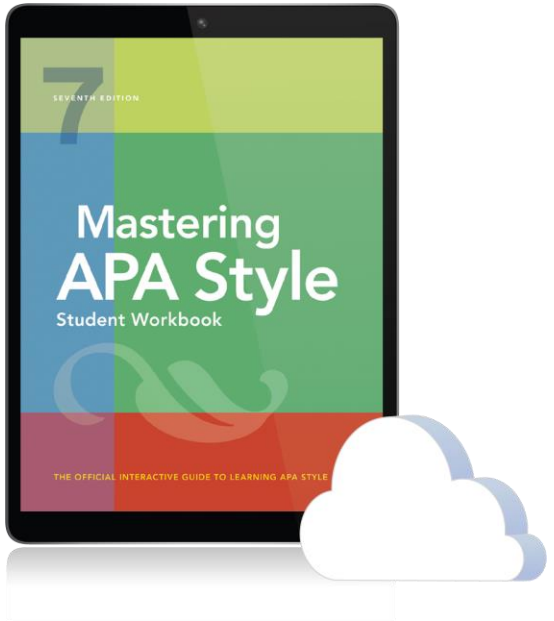
Contact the APA Style Team

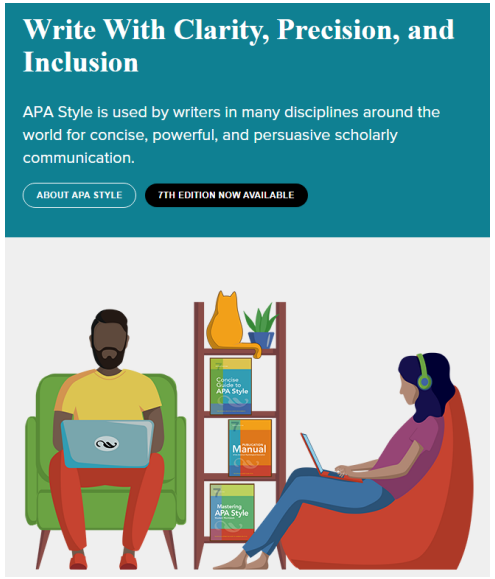
APA Style website: https://www.apastyle.org

Email: StyleExpert@apa.org









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