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

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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:
  o psychology
  o nursing
  o education
  o social work
  o 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

- Jargon
  - Multiple meanings
- Fluff
  - Generalization
- Our goal
- Needs context

Less clear  More precise
Less precise  More clear
Example matrix: Describing APA’s location

More precise

38° 54’ N
77° 0' W

750 First Street NE,
Washington,
DC 20002

Less clear

Downtown

Less precise

Washington

More clear
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!

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

New in 2023!
Structure of inclusive language guidance

- Be as inclusive as possible
- Change in response to societal changes
- People may disagree

Specific recommendations (ILG)

General principles (Bias-free language guidelines in *Publication Manual*)

Psychological science

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
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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Too much quotation and detail</th>
<th>Good summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Patchwriting</th>
<th>Paraphrase</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“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).</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
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.
**What does it mean to write “professionally”?**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Promote</th>
<th>Don’t worry about</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• colloquialism, slang, and idioms</td>
<td>• impartial and neutral language</td>
<td>• split infinitives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• contractions</td>
<td>• full sentences</td>
<td>• beginning sentences with conjunctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• cliches</td>
<td>• sentences of varying lengths</td>
<td>• ending sentences with prepositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• judgmental language (“failed” vs. “did not”)</td>
<td>• transitions</td>
<td>• first-person pronouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• run-on sentences</td>
<td>• punctuation</td>
<td>• second-person pronouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sentence fragments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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).
  o Use “I” for one author.
  o 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.
  o When people experience a disability as integral to who they are, they are more likely to use identity-first or nounding language.
  o Be careful with nounding language to ensure the usage is not offensive*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person-first language</th>
<th>Identity-first language</th>
<th>Nounding language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• people with low vision</td>
<td>• autistic people</td>
<td>• autistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• people with cancer</td>
<td>• blind people</td>
<td>• the blind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• people with alcohol use disorder</td>
<td></td>
<td>• alcoholics*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• people with autism*</td>
<td></td>
<td>• cancer survivors*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The use of asterisked terms indicates additional context or caution is needed.
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:

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

I was thinking how trailers are kind of a blessing and a curse. On one hand they are cool and get you hyped and gives you an idea of what you are going to watch but on the other hand specifically movies about life I feel like would be better to watch going in blind not knowing what is about are what's the conflict in this person's life. So that being said what are some of the best movies to watch going in blind not watching the trailer or reading the plot synopsis

EDIT: Lowkey forgot I posted this but thank you for all the replies.

EDIT #2: BEST MOVIES TO WATCH GOING IN BLIND. I have FULL vision sorry for the confusion.
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.
  o 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

CAUTION
PREGNANT WOMEN SHOULD NOT ENTER

SPA IS FOR THOSE 18 YEARS AND OLDER
PREGNANT WOMEN AND THOSE WITH MEDICAL CONDITIONS
SHOULD CONSULT THEIR PHYSICIAN BEFORE USING
LONG EXPOSURE MAY RESULT IN HYPERTERMIA, NAUSEA,
DIZZINESS OR FAINTING PLEASE LIMIT YOUR TIME

Gender-neutral alternatives

CAUTION
X-RAY IN USE
If you are pregnant or unsure, notify staff immediately.

SPA PRECAUTIONS
PERSONS WHO ARE PREGNANT,
TAKING MEDICATION, OR HAVE ANY
HISTORY OR CARDIOVASCULAR
DISEASE SHOULD CONSULT
A PHYSICIAN BEFORE ENTERING
HOT WATER
DRUGS AND ALCOHOL ARE PROHIBITED

Guests with the following conditions are prohibited from riding:
RECENT SURGERY
HEART TROUBLE / HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE
NECK TROUBLE
BACK TROUBLE
PREGNANT OR ANY PHYSICAL CONDITIONS THAT MAY BE AGGRAVATED BY THIS RIDE.
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.

... and more
Word choice about APA Style
How to talk about APA Style

• Call them “guidelines,” not “rules.”
• “APA Style,” not “APA format.”
  o Our writing style is more than formatting!

• **Reference type** is a category/kind of work:
  o journal article
  o book
  o report
  o 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)
Contact the APA Style Team

APA Style website: https://www.apastyle.org
Email: StyleExpert@apa.org