UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DARTMOUTH WRITNG & READING CENTER

**WRITING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

This page is designed to take you through the stylistic choices that go in to writing a social sciences essay. To learn more about APA guidelines and to view a sample References page, please visit the APA Citation Handout.

**WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL SCIENCES?**

The term ***social science*** is used to refer to the academic fields that take as their focus the study of society and/or human behavior. Academic fields that fall under the category are sociology, anthropology, archeology, criminal justice, law, political science, economics, education, library science, and international studies. As is always the case with the academic disciplines, some overlap does occur. Certain fields within the humanities, such as women's or African-American studies and history, are sometimes considered social sciences. Psychology is primarily considered a social science although certain branches are included in the sciences (biological psychology, neuropsychology). Environmental science has application in social sciences, and nursing and other medical fields have aspects that are both social and scientific.

Students in the social sciences rely on two different types of research: **primary** and **secondary** research. **Primary** research consists of first-hand accounts of a particular occurrence or event (newspaper articles, journal entries, government records, surveys, data collection from experiments). **Secondary** research is written about, and interprets, primary research. For example, a study on care practices in nursing for terminally ill patients would count as primary research; a review of the same study by an outside group or groups would count as secondary research.

**Primary research** in the social sciences includes quantitative and qualitative research. Both ***quantitative*** and ***qualitative*** studies involve *empirical* (or measurable) data that the student collects through observation or experimentation.

***Quantitative research*** can be measured through surveys, questionnaires, or other forms of data-gathering. ***Qualitative research*** is based on response and it can be measured through a close examination of a few respondents. A survey designed to measure student reaction to an increase in tuition fees would be an example of quantitative, or number-based, research. A nursing student's case study examining how a small group of patients reacts to a certain kind of treatment would fall under the category of qualitative research. Quantitative studies usually involve larger sample sizes (for example, a survey could have 100 respondents). Qualitative research usually involves a smaller sample (3 or 4 "case studies") since it involves close attention to the responses of the participants.

Regardless of content, the guidelines for social science papers are designed to emphasize certain information:

* A clear focus, or thesis, that unifies the paper
* Evidence to support that thesis, which must logically connect to the main argument
* An introduction and a conclusion

Often, a social science paper also includes an **abstract**, or summary of the paper, before the introduction. In addition, a writer in the social sciences might be required to provide a detailed discussion of his or her methodology, research, and results, in addition to an analysis. For more on format and structure of a social sciences paper, see **APA Documentation and Style: a Brief Reference**.

**STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

The word ***style*** refers to the choices writers make in presenting their work to an audience. Style refers to the author's voice, tone, word choice, and presentation. Although style is subjective, certain disciplines require that writers adhere to guidelines concerning stylistic choices. The following is a series of convention styles that are typically used in the social sciences.

**ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE VOICE**

In active voice, the subject of the sentence is acting. In passive voice, the subject is being acted upon.

**Active Voice:** *Our findings suggest* that a majority of respondents are more likely to follow orders if they believe they will be rewarded for doing so.

**Passive Voice:** *Respondents were observed* to follow order when the believed there was some incentive or reward for doing so.

In the first example, the subject ("findings") is doing the main action of the sentence ("suggest"). In the second example, the subject ("respondents") was being acted upon ("were observed"); the writers - those who were conducting the study - were the ones to observe.

In APA style, active voice is preferred to passive. The use of third person (he/she/it) should not be mistaken for passive voice.

**Preferred**: Participants' behaviors tended to benefit the well-being of the community over that of the individual.

**Not Preferred**: Participants' behaviors were observed to favor the well-being of the community of that of the individual.

While grammatically correct, passive voice often adds unnecessary wordiness to the sentence, or confuses the meaning. Try to avoid passive voice whenever possible.

**POINT OF VIEW**

Third person objective ("the subject," "the study," "the experiment") should be used instead of first person ("I") most of the time. First person is rarely used in a social science paper. Instead, the author should refer to a third person subject: *The study revealed*, *the experiment showed*, etc. To learn more about point of view, please see the UMD handout,  **Point of View: Writing with Consistency.**

**Third Person (Correct)**: Participants were asked to respond to the campaign ad they found most appealing. The results seem to suggest that participants were most attracted the advertisements that avoided negative attacks and were instead more goal-oriented.

**Third Person (Incorrect)**: I asked participants to respond to the campaign ad they found most appealing.

There are only three times where the use of the first person is permissible in social science writing. Of these, the most common is when an essay have more than one author. In this case, the personal plural "we" is often used for maximum clarity: *We observed*, *our study showed*, etc.

Well-known or respected writers can also get away with using first person, although young writers aren't often encouraged by their professors to do so. Finally, when writing to an audience of general interest rather than to a field of peers or experts, first person is permissible.

**LITERARY DEVICES, PERSONAL WRITING, AND EDITORIAL STYLE**

Writing in APA style goes beyond following the intended format. APA includes a number of stylistic choices that differ from the conventions practiced in other disciplines. For starters, devices that might work in a creative discipline - metaphor, evocative imagery - will only clutter up a social science essay.

**Metaphor/Simile (Incorrect)**: The participants were like oysters: while their insights were as valuable to use as pearls, they were too close-lipped to be of any use.

**Overly descriptive imagery (Incorrect)**: In sixty years, Nora Townsend has never cast a vote. Now, for the first time, the seventy-eight year-old mother of four and grandmother of nine, has finally arrived at the Fairport town hall, a gothic structure that looks more at home in medieval England than in a New England town. Her fingers, gnarled with age, shake as she takes the ballot from the cheerful volunteer working the desk. She appears nervous as she enters the cubicle, barely able to contain herself, yet when she emerges ten minutes later, she is beaming.

This isn't to say that writers in the social sciences can't use descriptive details. As in any essay, the writer(s) should pay attention to details that will help clarify their position to the reader or the intended audience.

**Necessary Details (Correct)**: Participants were divided into two groups: the first were self-described "older citizens" (50 years of age or over) who had never voted; the second group consisted of eighteen-year-olds who had voted for the first time in the 2008 primary election.

This information is pertinent; without it, we would not know how the author(s) distinguished the two groups, nor would we be able to follow the authors' interpretation of the findings.

APA Style does not use other conventions that are more commonly reserved for more personal or creative writing: **Do not use personal anecdotes**. **Do not editorialize**. A social science essay is not an opinion piece and treating it as such will do little to establish the author's ethos, or credibility.

**Personal Anecdote (Incorrect)**: Recently, after serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine, I have come to appreciate the necessity of having a free and democratic system in which all citizens have a voice.

**Editorial Style (Incorrect)**: We conclude by asking the reader: how is it not possible to appreciate the American electoral system.

Social scientists are concerned about evidence. By providing this, an author can earn credibility.

**Evidence and Interpretation (Correct)**: Of the participants in the second group, 75% said they would return to the polls for the November election. However, of those 75%, only 30% did return. These results suggest that only a small percentage of first-time voters return to the polls for a subsequent election.

Analysis should not only provide the author's interpretation of the evidence; it can also open up additional lines of inquiry. The results of one study may open the doors for others to follow:

**Inquiry**: The question remains, why do voters lose interest?

(For more on APA style, please visit the Claire T. Carney Library ENL 102 module or the Purdue OWL Formatting and Style Guide.)

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