What Is an APA-Style Essay?

APA (American Psychological Association) style is used mostly for writing in the social sciences, but especially in psychology courses. In documenting sources, APA style emphasizes authors and the dates their works were published. An APA paper, whether for publication or a class, usually has a title page, an abstract, then the actual paper, and finally a list of references, but instructor requirements may vary.

Title Page

For only the title page, in the top margin type “Running head:” followed by your paper’s title (shortened to no more than 50 characters) in all capitals. Use a right-aligned tab in the ruler to insert the page number 1.

Halfway down the page, center your paper’s full title (capitalize the first letter of all words of 4 letters or more), your name, and your school’s name.

Center the heading Author Note near the bottom of the page. On the next line, left aligned and indented half an inch, give the course name, section, and instructor name.

Figure 1. Example of APA Title Page (Type has been enlarged to show detail.)

Everything in your paper, including the title page, should be double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman.

Abstract

An abstract is a short summary of your paper, generally only 150 to 250 words, in a single, left-aligned, double-spaced paragraph. The first line is not indented. An abstract is often optional in student papers, but if one is part of your assignment, write it after you have composed your paper. Put it on page two, separate from the rest of the paper. Center the title “Abstract” at the top of the page.
Paper Format

The running header is just the shortened left-aligned title in all caps, with page numbers right aligned. Begin your paper with your full title, centered. Indent the first line of each left-aligned paragraph half an inch, with no extra space between paragraphs. Center the Method, Results, and Discussion section headings in boldface type, and capitalize the first and last words and all others except articles, prepositions that are four letters or fewer, and coordinating conjunctions. Subsection headings may be left aligned.

If you include any visuals in your paper, such as tables and figures (including graphs, charts, drawings, or photos), the formatting is different for each kind: above tables, put a label, e.g., Table 1, and on a separate line, a title; below the table, give the source information, starting with Note. For figures, put the label and caption below.

In-text Citations

APA style requires internal citation, always giving the author’s or authors’ last name(s) and the date of publication. However, unlike MLA style, you only need to include a page number when you use a quotation. You can cite your sources 3 ways in your text, but you should use signal phrases as much as possible, especially if you use quotations from sources without page numbers.

For one or two authors*, you may begin the sentence with the last names and the date in parentheses:

Kahn and Shahili (2002) indicated that the partying styles of college students had a causal relationship with their grades.

Or, you can write both the name(s) and the date within the sentence:

In 2002, Kahn and Shahili demonstrated that the partying styles of college students had a causal relationship with their grades.

If neither of those, you can place the authors’ names, the date, and the page number (if you use a quotation) in parentheses at the end of the sentence:

Researchers even went so far as to assert that the partying styles of college students “had a direct effect on grades” (Kahn & Shahili, 2002, p. 1513).

For long quotes of more than 40 words, indent the entire passage half an inch, use double line spacing and no quotation marks, and put the page number in parentheses after the period at the end of your quote.

*For guidelines on 3 or more authors, please see APA (2010) section 6.12, p. 175.
List of References

Beginning on a separate page after your essay, center the title “References” at the top, then list your resources alphabetically by author last name. Double space all entries, but with hanging indents of ½ inch. (A hanging indent is when the first line of a paragraph is against the left margin, but subsequent lines are indented.)

Figure 3. Example of References Page

To create a hanging indent, type out your references list, highlight the text and move (the bottom two portions of the slider) ½-inch to the right on the ruler, leaving the top part in place like this:

For works by two or more authors, all names are surname first, then initials; separate the names with just commas, and put an ampersand (&) before the last author. For works by many authors, list up to seven of them; if there are eight or more, list the first six, then follow with an ellipsis ( . . . ) and the last author’s name.

References

