

IST594 Writing Style Guide

Scholarly research writing is quite formal, and very different than any other writing style. Below are some guidelines to help students get started.

A. Organization of text

- a. Research writing reflects professional writing standards and should be well organized.
- b. Use MS Word tools, such as Styles (e.g., Normal, **Title**, *Quote*), Table of Contents, Page Numbers, Captions, Cross-references
 - i. Penn State's MS Office for students: <https://webapps.psu.edu/>
- c. Section headers should not be orphaned at the bottom of a page. Insert a "manual page break" so the section header appears on the next page with the following paragraph.
- d. Do not leave any blank pages, especially as the last page

B. Vocabulary and grammar standards

- a. Do not use contractions, idioms, parenthetical expressions, grandiose claims (i.e., claims that cannot be cited), adverbs/adjectives, first/second person (including "one"), pronouns (e.g., "who is 'they'?"), rhetorical questions, etc.
- b. Use **short sentences** that include only one thought.
 - i. Avoid word or thought repetition (i.e., redundancy) in the same sentence.
- c. Avoid making strong claims (e.g., "must", "absolutely"),
 - i. ALL specific claims must be supported by an in-text citation.
 - ii. Avoid "**strong**" claims or claims of a "**fact**" (e.g., "must," "requires"), as they cannot be supported by a citation without major reservations by the reader.
 1. In general, never use the words "fact" or "proves" in scholarly writing, or you may discredit yourself.
 - iii. Scholarly writers avoid the need for some citations by using a "**soft**" claim (e.g., "might," "could").
 1. Alternatively, simply deleting the un-cited strong claim makes the writing more effective.
 2. "Strong" claims with a citation should be "softened" such as "Research suggests..." or "Some researchers believe/claim..." This acknowledges that every point can be contested and debated.



- d. Most scholarly papers define early in the paper **key terms** that are being used, often by citing another source.
 - i. You are advised to do the same because the reader needs to understand the meaning of the term as you intended.
- e. Small **numbers** should be written in English. However, fractions and large numbers must be written as numbers with decimals and commas.
- f. Write in the present **tense**, unless specifically describing an event that occurred in the past.
 - i. Example 1: “This research investigates...” (i.e., not “will”).
 - ii. Example 2: “On 9/11, planes crashed into...”
- g. Never use the word “**average**” in your paper, unless referring to an arithmetic mean calculated from the data.
 - i. If your intent is to describe “average” users, refer instead to a specific group. Example 1. The researcher could survey a sample group of adults, managers, or employees.
 - ii. Next, during data analysis the researcher needs to create data segmentation subgroups from the sample. Example 2. Adult computer users can be sub-grouped by experience (i.e., hours per week working on the computer), or age (i.e., under 12, 12-17, 18-24, and so on).
 - iii. Reuse, where possible, segmentation best practices by finding subgroups in existing survey questions.
- h. Do not **trivialize** your research in your writing! Your research is important, even if your sample seems “small.”
- i. Also, do not challenge or insult your reader! Specifically, do not use words such as “clearly,” “obviously,” or “easily.”

C. Quotations

- a. Do not use **direct quotes**, especially long quotes that can be distracting to the reader. The author is responsible to use **paraphrasing** to synthesize the readings for the reader, as well as improve the flow of the research paper to the reader. Long direct quotes simply bog the reader down. Another reason to avoid direct quotes is that the in-text APA citation requirements become more complicated.
 - i. Limit use of brief, direct quotations to those that “powerfully” add to your paper (and be sure to make the appropriate in-text APA citation adjustment).
- b. **Long quotes** are quite rare in scholarly writing, since they are disruptive to the flow of the writing.

D. Tables and figures

- a. Use the MS Word “Caption” tool (right click on the item, or go to the Insert menu), and click Caption.
- b. A complete caption is numbered, includes a descriptive caption, and ends with the in-text APA cite of the source, if not original (including the page number of the source, or paragraph number if a web source).
 - i. Figures and tables need a numbered yet descriptive caption (e.g., “Figure 1. Research Project Gantt Chart”).
 1. Each figure and table should be page width. This means that paragraph text will appear above and/or below the item, but not adjacent to it.
 2. Similarly, do not place multiple figures/tables side-by-side.
 3. Leave a blank line above and below image or table to separate from the paragraph text.
- c. Figures and tables, such as the Gantt chart, needs to be cross-referenced by number and described in the preceding paragraph (e.g., “**Figure 1** shows...”).
 - i. Cross-reference is another MS Word tool option (Insert>Cross-reference)
 - ii. This also means that at least one paragraph must separate each table or figure.

E. References

- a. Students are expected to find and use scholarly sources. Note that some readers first peruse the end-of-text reference list to determine whether the research merits further reading!
 - i. Consider searching using PSU’s *LionSearch* at <http://libraries.psu.edu>, and/or <http://scholar.google.com>.
 1. Within *LionSearch*, consider using filtering options “full online text” and “journal articles”
 2. Within *LionSearch*, consider searching specific databases such as [Gartner Reports](#), [Forrester Research](#) (Forrester requires [VPN](#)), [ACM Digital Library](#), and [IEEE Xplore](#), among others.
 - ii. Although general web sources (including Wikipedia) are a useful starting point, these resources often lack peer review, and do not list sources. Scholarly sources, on the other hand, also provide insight into research writing as well as useful research methods.
 - iii. Consider seeking advice from the [IST 594 Research Consultant](#)
- b. Note that the end-of-paper reference list begins on a new page, and uses the Word paragraph option “hanging indent.” Each source is single spaced, with double spacing between sources.

- c. Do not number end-of-text references. The APA citation style sorts these references by author's last name, if available, or brief title (i.e., reference the complete APA style guidelines).
 - i. You may use the free citation manager [Mendeley](#), and use Mendeley's associated Word add-in to format in-text cites, and automatically generate the end-of-text reference lists in the APA style.
 - ii. It is important that the reference is cited sufficiently for the reader to look up the source.
 - iii. Minimize, where possible, sources without dates or without authors. These detract from your credibility.
 - iv. Verify that every source listed as an end-of-text reference item also appears as an in-text citation.

F. Writing review

- a. As a rule of thumb, allow a day or two after composition to rest from writing (i.e., "incubation period"). Upon returning, the author can re-read more critically, fixing mistakes and improving the writing.
 - i. Fresh eyes make the needed writing improvements more visible.
- b. Take advantage of the online **Graduate Writing Center** [<http://student.worldcampus.psu.edu/academic-support-resources/graduate-writing-center>] and get some useful feedback to improve your writing if needed.
- c. Another option is to request that the instructor assigns a voluntary *pre-submission* peer (i.e., another student or a friend) to review drafts for comprehension and writing style. These are not graded.
 - i. *Graded* peer reviews are occasionally assigned. These assignments direct students to answer specific questions regarding another student's already submitted project. Graded peer reviews should include a header title with the reviewers name/email ID, as well as the name/email ID of the student being peer reviewed. Each question should be numbered, and included before the response.

G. Resources

- a. Consider seeking advice from the [IST 594 Writing Consultant](#), graduate writing centers, instructors, and librarians