



APA Format

A Quick and Easy Guide

Many students come into a college class having already written research papers in some of their previous English classes from earlier semesters of college or even in high school. Often, they've already learned the ins and outs of citing sources, but they learned those methods in the mostly English-class-specific MLA style. When they branch out into more diverse fields of study, however, they often find themselves having to write research papers and are told to format them using APA style. To the uninitiated, APA style – with its running headers, abstracts, and DOIs – can seem a bit daunting. If you take APA format step by step, however, it's no more difficult than any other citation style. Like any other format, the APA style can be reduced to three parts:

- How the paper looks
- How the sources are cited
- How the citations are documented

All of the rules for those parts are described in detail in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th Edition, 2020), but this little guide provides a brief overview to the parts most pertinent to the community college student.

Format (How the Paper Looks)

The APA style has a clear set of guidelines for how a paper should look. This is how you should format your paper in APA style:

- Type and print your paper on white, letter-sized (8.5 x 11-inch) paper.
- Set the line spacing of your paper to double-spaced. (Do not double-space your paper by pressing the enter key at the end of each line.)
- Use either the Calibri or Georgia typeface in size 11.¹
- Set all margins to one inch. (This is the default setting in Microsoft Word.)
- Indent the first line of each body paragraph by half an inch. Do this by setting the paragraph indent in your word processing software; do not use the spacebar to create an indent.

¹ This is a change from the 6th Edition. Your instructor may require you to use Times New Roman size 12.

- Do not create a running header.² Your header space should only have a simple page number in the upper-right corner of the page (create this by using the page numbering tools in the header space, not by typing a number at the top of each page).
- Type the title at the top of the first main page (after the title page and abstract, if present), centered.
 - Capitalize each word of the title except for articles (“a,” “an,” and “the”), conjunctions (“and,” “but,” etc.), and prepositions (“to,” “in,” “of,” etc.)
 - Use the same size and typeface for the title as the rest of the paper; do not use any special formatting other than centering the text.
- If your instructor asks you to include headings, type them centered, in title case, and in bold text. Subheadings should also be in bold text, but they should be in normal sentence case and aligned to the left.
 - If your instructor gives you specific guidelines for headings, follow your instructor’s rules instead.
 - Remember that a “heading” and a “header” are not the same thing; “header” refers to the title and page information at the top of each page, while “heading” refers to a title for a particular section of the paper.
- Only use italic text when you are writing the name of a book (or other complete work) or, in rare cases, for emphasis.

Front Matter

Unlike MLA format, APA format requires a substantial amount of front matter – that is, material that comes before the main paper. This includes two main parts: a title page and (in some cases) an abstract.

Title Page

The APA’s *Publication Manual* says that you should follow your instructor’s guidelines when you create a title page. However, the manual also provides a set of formatting guidelines that you can follow if your instructor doesn’t provide specific instructions. In the top half of the page, include the following elements in this order, each on its own line:

1. The title
 - a. The title should be centered, in title case, and in bold text.
 - b. There’s no specific length requirement for the title, but according to the *Publication Manual*, it should be “focused and succinct.”
2. A blank line (between the title and the byline)
3. Your first and last name
4. The name of the college

² This is a major change from the 6th Edition. Your instructor may still require you to use a running header. If so, follow your instructor’s format requirements.

5. The *full* name of the class (in other words, you should not just write “PSY 235”; instead, write the full name of the class: “PSY 235: Child Psychology”)
6. The name of your instructor (in your instructor’s preferred form)
7. The *due date* (not the current date) of your assignment, written month, day, year
 - a. Write the full name of the month instead of abbreviating (for example, instead of writing “Nov. 5, 2020” or “11/5/20,” write the date fully as “November 5, 2020”)

The title page should be double-spaced like the rest of the paper, and each line should be separated by a *soft return* rather than Word’s default hard return. To do this, instead of simply pressing the enter key at the end of each line, hold the shift key down and then press enter.

All the elements on the title page should be centered between the left and right margins. Do this by formatting the text as centered text; do not use the spacebar to center your text.

Abstract

Longer papers (more than five pages or so) typically require an abstract. At the community college level, an abstract is sometimes required and sometimes not. If you are unsure whether you need an abstract or not, ask your instructor. An abstract is simply a basic overview of the contents of your paper.

- Create a page break (Ctrl+Enter) at the end of your byline to create a new page for the abstract. The abstract should be on the second page of your paper, after the title page but before the main paper.
- In bold, centered text, type the word “Abstract” on the first line of the page.
- Write a brief overview of your paper in no more than 250 words.
- Write your abstract as a single paragraph, and do not indent it.
- On a new line under your abstract, create a half-inch indent and write the label “*Keywords:*” in italic text, then give a list of keywords that can be used to quickly identify the points of your paper.
 - Think of keywords the same way you’d think of tagging posts on Instagram or any other image-sharing site: simple identifiers that can be used to find your paper quickly by subject.

Generally, it’s easier to write your paper first and then go back and do the abstract; since the abstract is an overview of your paper, it’s much easier to write if you already have a paper to summarize.

Inline Citations (How the Sources Are Cited)

Just like in MLA format, when you write a paper in APA format that requires you to cite sources, you must include inline citations. Inline citations are references to the sources you used for your paper; you’ll give them throughout the paper so your readers know what

information came from where, and then make a list of all your references at the end of the paper. Any time you use information from an outside source (whether you quote it directly or put it in your own words), you have to cite where that information was originally found. In the APA format, a proper inline citation requires the author's last name and the year of publication. If the citation is for a direct quote, it should also include a page number (preceded by "p."), or a paragraph number if it comes from a web source with no page numbers (preceded by "par.>").

- Each citation should include the author's last name and the year of publication, separated by a comma.
 - One author: (Smith, 2006)
 - Two authors: (Jones & Brown, 2012)
 - Three or more authors: (Davis et al., 2014)
- Sources authored by organizations should use the organization's name.
 - Government agency: (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019)
 - Group authorship: (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2017)
 - Organization: (American Psychological Association, 2020)
- If you can't find any authorship information for your source, you should find a better source. If no other sources exist and you cannot change topics, use the first few identifiable words of the title in quote marks (for articles) or italics (for complete works).
 - An article of unknown/unclear authorship entitled "How Technology Affects Our Brains": ("Technology," 2013)
 - A book entitled *Beowulf and Other Old English Poems*, whose author is unknown/not named by the publisher: (*Beowulf*, 1988)
- Citations at the end of a sentence should be given after the quotation marks (in a direct quote) and before the ending punctuation.
 - Example of a paraphrase: In spite of its earthquake preparedness programs, Japan was devastated by the quake, which destroyed thousands of buildings and killed tens of thousands of people (Stimpson, 2011).
 - Example of a quote: According to a researcher at the University of Virginia, Congress has been treating FEMA "like a patient in triage. [They] must decide whether to treat it or let it die" (Roberts, 2006, p.16).

Narrative Citations

Narrative citations are citations that occur when you give some or all of the citation information in the actual sentence instead of parenthetically. If you use a narrative citation, it's very important to remember that you still need to include all of the information you'd include in a regular parenthetical citation, and any information that isn't included in the text needs to be given parenthetically.

Congress has been treating FEMA, according to Patrick Roberts (2006) of the University of Virginia, like “a patient in triage” (pg.16).

In the above example, the author’s name is given in the actual text of the sentence, so there is no need to include it in a parenthetical citation. However, since APA citations also require a year, the year is cited parenthetically immediately following the author’s name. Since citations for direct quotes must also include a page number, the page number is cited parenthetically immediately following the quote.

In some narrative citations, however, you may not need any parenthetical information at all.

A 2006 report by Patrick Roberts of the University of Virginia states that Congress is struggling to make funding decisions for FEMA.

In this example, no parenthetical citation is needed; the year of publication and the author name are both given in the text, and since this example is summarizing the report instead of quoting it directly, there is no need for page numbers. Remember, however, that even though you don’t need a parenthetical citation for a sentence like this, you will still need to include this source in your reference list.

Reference List (How the Citations Are Documented)

Simply citing your sources in the text of your paper is not enough; you also need to have a list of references at the end of your paper. This list will include the full information about each of your sources. The formatting of the page is not too complicated:

- The reference list should be on its own page (or pages), not with the main text.
 - Don’t create a separate document for your reference list unless your instructor requires it. Use a page break (Ctrl+Enter) instead.
- The title “References” (or just “Reference” if you’re only using one source) should appear at the top of the page, centered and in bold text.
- The header, font, and line spacing should all match the rest of the paper.
- The entries on the reference list should be arranged alphabetically.
- Each entry should be treated as its own “paragraph” for formatting purposes, with a half-inch *hanging indent*.
 - Create the hanging indent with the paragraph tools or rulers in your word processing software. Never use the spacebar to indent text.

Every source that you cite in your paper (including those in narrative citations) needs to have a matching entry on your reference list. Concurrently, every entry on your reference list should be cited somewhere in your paper. In other words, don’t include sources on your reference list unless you’ve actually used them in your paper.

The purpose of a reference list is not only to give credit to the people whose information you used, but also to give your readers the ability to find that same information and see it

in its original context. Listing your sources in a reference list helps them do that by giving them all the information they need to find that same source themselves.

There are four essential parts of a reference:

- Author (the creator of the work)
- Date (when the work was published)
- Title (the name of the work)
- Source (the location where the work can be retrieved)

The author name should be written as a last name, followed by the first *initial* (that is, use “Smith, J.” in your reference list as opposed to “Smith, John”) and their³ middle initial (if known). Separate multiple authors (even if there are only two) with commas and ampersands (for example, “Smith, J. M., & Johnson, B. L.”). Never use “et al.” on an APA reference page; you should list all of the authors.

The date should be given as specifically as it is in the source, in the order of year, month, day. In other words, if the date of publication lists the publication date as “April 23, 1991,” the date in your reference list should be “1991, April 23.” If a month or season is given but no specific day, the year should still come first (for example, “1991, Spring”).

The titles of works that are part of a larger work (for example, journal or magazine articles and articles published on a webpage) should be written in sentence case and with no quotation marks or italics. The titles of complete works (such as books or *entire* webpages) should be written the same way, except they should be italicized.

How you format the source depends on what kind of source it is. There are many possible types of sources, and describing the appropriate way to cite all of them is beyond the scope of this resource, but the three that you will encounter most often are peer-reviewed journals, books, and web articles.

Peer-reviewed journal:

Last Name, F. M. (Date). Title of article: Capitalize the first word of the title and subtitle. *Title of Journal*, *volume*(*issue*), pages. URL.

Marcoux, J., & Létourneau, L. (2014, March 19). Examining the Canadian government’s resistance to including socioeconomic concerns in genetically modified seeds regulation: A policy transfer and multilevel approach. *Review of Policy Research*, *31*(2), pp.105-124.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12057>.

Notice in the above example that the date is given as year, month, day as noted above. Notice also that the digital object identifier (DOI) is given as a URL beginning with

³ The use of “they” (and its other forms) as a singular pronoun is both endorsed and encouraged by the 7th Edition of the *Publication Manual* (p.120). This is a change from previous editions.

“<https://doi.org/>.”⁴ The volume number of the journal is italicized, but the issue number is not. There should not, however, be a space separating the issue number from the volume number.

Book:

Last Name, F. M. (Date). *Title of book: Capitalize the first word of the subtitle.*
Publisher.⁵

Wiley, M., Gleason, B., & Phelps, L. W. (1996). *Composition in four keys: Inquiring into the field.* Mayfield Publishing Company.

Web article:

Last Name, F. M. (Date). Title of article: Capitalize the first word of the subtitle.
Name of Website in Title Case. [Include *volume*(issue) here if present.]
Retrieved from URL.

Borunda, A. (2020, September 17). The science connecting wildfires to climate change. *National Geographic Science.* Retrieved from
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/09/climate-change-increases-risk-fires-western-us/>

Keep these things in mind on any of your references:

- Pay close attention to capitalization. Counterintuitively, most titles in APA references use sentence capitalization instead of title case (that is, capitalizing only the first word of the title instead of capitalizing each word of the title).
- Don't write the author's first name; include their first and middle initial instead.
- When you include a web address (a URL), you need to give the *complete* address to the *specific article* you're referencing, not just a link to the homepage. The *Publication Manual* encourages the use of URL shorteners (such as bit.ly or tinyurl) for long URLs.

⁴ The DOI should be given as a URL instead of just given with “DOI:” as was the case in previous editions.

⁵ The location of the publisher (city, state) should not be listed. This is a change from the 6th edition.