

Social Science Writing Style

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All writing must be in social science writing style. This is different from personal, motivational or literary writing. Social science writing style is impersonal, plain, and precise.

Follow these rules for social science writing and preparing social science papers.

Use standard margins of one inch on the sides and at the top and bottom of a page. Use standard 12-point, Times New Roman or 11-point Arial typeface and avoid boldfacing, underlining, creating boxes, or other graphics. Printing enhancements are like yelling, which is not acceptable in learned discourse. Use underlining or italics only for APA references, and follow the guidelines for when typeface changes are appropriate. (Note that when I underline things for you in instructions, etc., it is not yelling, but it is meant to draw your attention to the importance of the underlined material—usually due dates.)

Write in the third person. This means do not use "I," "my," "you," "we," "our," "us," "reporting officer," or "this observer." Do not use phrases like, "I think that," or "in my opinion," or "I do not agree that." Simply omit such phrases, and go ahead with your statement.

When relating factual information from sources, avoid such phrases as "we see in chapter four that" or "the authors tell us that". Simply omit such phrases and write what the author(s) said. If you quote directly, use APA; otherwise just provide the material.

Write short, complete sentences in paragraph format. Write in paragraphs with appropriate transitions. Many students seem unsure when to begin a new paragraph. A new paragraph is an indication that a new idea is coming. Therefore, start a new paragraph for a new idea or a new topic. Paragraphs should not go on for pages; they should be about four or five sentences; some might be only two sentences.

Do not write in shopping or laundry list style and avoid numbered items within paragraphs. Do not use slang, colloquialisms, or vulgarities. Avoid jargon or abbreviations such as P.D. or PO or USA. Use technical language sparingly.

Do not write the way you talk to friends on the street or in the bar. The more you get comfortable writing in a more formal—but not stilted—style, the more precise your spoken English will also become.

Some examples:

Do not use contractions, e.g., instead of "don't" use "do not." Particularly avoid "it's" or "its" since they are frequently confused. It's is the contraction of it is; a correct but informal use is "it's raining" in place of "it is raining." Its, on the other hand, is a singular possessive used when referring to a non-human possessing something. An example is a car's window, as in the idea "My car needs cleaning; its windows are dirty." Many people confuse these; one obvious reason why is that the possessive of one car [car's] requires the apostrophe, but

the substitution of the word "its" for "car's" omits the apostrophe."

Remember the distinction between people and things. Although many people no longer use "which" and rely solely on "that" it is still proper to use "who" for people and "that" for things. Most people, even non-native English speakers, soon get the feel for using that. An example is: "The paper *that* I submitted." Very few students would write: "The paper *who* I submitted." But when the subject is a person or people, writers and speakers have a tendency to get confused. Rather than write the incorrect "Police officers that came to my house.," try to remember to write correctly: "Police officers *who* came to my house..." This is something I correct frequently. If you see on your papers the notation "people who, things that" this is the rule I am pointing out to you. Will people understand you if you do this incorrectly? Most likely, but if you want to be recognized as an educated person, it can help to sound like one.

In your papers, avoid long quotations. A short quotation is appropriate in only two situations. It quotation is acceptable if it is exceptionally apt and eloquent. A quotation is also acceptable if it says something so questionable that a reader would demand the original statement. It is also appropriate to cite little-known facts, but there is no need to cite the obvious. A page reference must be given with a quotation unless you are citing a website or an item taken from the web, where this may not be possible. Use APA format to identify the sources of quotations and references.

Examples:

Police departments generally follow a paramilitary rank structure. This is well-known and does not require a citation.

Women make up about one percent of the police chiefs and sheriffs in the United States (Schulz, 2004). This is not generally known and requires a citation.

Write in the past tense when writing about past things, e.g., "Walker (1998) stated that," not "Walker (1998) states that," or "Schulz (2004) reported that women chiefs...", not "Schulz reports in her book that women chiefs..."

Past information should not be given as present information because it may no longer be accurate, e.g., not "crime statistics show that," but "1998 crime statistics showed that."

Social scientists refer to an author sparingly and by family name, e.g., "Martin," not "Susan Martin." Historians prefer to identify authors by their full names, but in this course we are all social scientists. Do not write "the author" when you know the author's name. Use the author's name and spell it correctly. Do not use titles, e.g., write "Jones," not "Mrs. Jones" or "Prof. Jones" or "Dr. Jones." Information is judged on the basis of the evidence for it, not on the credentials of who said it.

Respect the difference between "a" and "the." The indefinite pronouns "a" and "an" denote "any" rather than a particular person or thing. The definite pronoun "the" refers to a particular or definite person or thing.

Example: "a police department" means any police department, but "the police department" means a particular police department, most likely the one you just previously referred to. Do not assume that what is true in a particular case is true in all cases.

Most of what you will read is not about the New York City Police Department. Accept each department on its own terms; avoid assumptions based solely on what goes on in New York City.

Respect the difference between common and proper nouns. When you refer to police departments generally, this is a common noun and does not require capital letters. Common nouns are general; proper nouns are specific. One reason students have trouble distinguishing common and proper nouns is that textbooks use capital letters as a lazy way to make something is more important than it really is.

Examples:

Police departments generally follow a paramilitary rank structure. There is no need to capitalize the word departments; police is capitalized only because it starts the sentence.

But: Officers in the Nassau County Police Department are among the highest paid in the nation. Here, Nassau County Police Department is a proper noun, it is a specific entity.

Use sex-neutral language when referring to a person who could be female or male. Try to avoid "s/he" or "he/she" or "he or she." Although some grammarians allow the use of "they" or "their" when referring to a person who may be female or male, your professor does not. She wants you to learn to write properly.

If you have trouble with personal pronouns, change the sentence. If you are writing about general issues, an easy way to avoid sex-specific pronouns is to use plural rather than singular nouns.

Example: Police officers think their departments..., rather than a police officer thinks (oh no, do I use his or her?) department....

If you are referring to a particular officer whose sex you know, don't keep it a secret, e.g.: The police officer said her department is unfair.

Write with precision. Do not use vague words like "some" or "many" or "sometimes" or "often" or "people." Specify how many, how often, exactly when, or which people.

Avoid parentheses. If something is essential, say it without parentheses. If it is not essential, omit it. If you use parenthesis, be sure the reader understands what is being explained or supplemented.

Avoid rhetoric. Social science writing is intended to inform, not to persuade. Write statements, not questions. Avoid superlatives and exaggerations. Eliminate words which suggest mindless credulity, such as "obviously," "clearly," "certainly," "no doubt." Instead use words like "possibly," "probably," "apparently," or "evidently," depending on which is most accurate. The way to avoid this is to remain objective. If you become too involved with your topic or select a topic on which you have strong opinions, it will be more difficult for you to maintain objectivity.

Avoid preaching by avoiding words such as "should," "ought," or "must." Do not write "the police should create programs to help our youths," but rather "departments have programs aimed at creating better relations with juveniles" or something similarly factual rather than emotional.

Some of these rules may seem difficult or arbitrary, but if you try to follow them you will acquire a more grown-up and more intelligent-sounding way of expressing yourself.

The Evolution of Language

While some of these rules may seem arbitrary, thinking clearly has been shown to be related writing clearly. You cannot think critically about something that is written in such a garbled manner than you are actually unable to understand what it is about.

Students often ask me what the best way is to improve their writing—there are two answers, specifically, to read more and to write more. Reading, though, must be of well-written material. It need not be intellectual or peer-reviewed, it must only be written clearly, with proper grammar and tenses, and avoid misspellings and incorrect use of words. The reason reading this type of material helps your writing is that you unconsciously begin to have a greater familiarity with language. After a while, things you read—and things that you write—that are incorrect will sound incorrect to your ear.

Over the past few decades—particularly since the popularity of email, texting, tweeting, etc.—language has become more informal, but there are still rules that indicate to readers and listeners that you are well-educated and that you choose your words carefully.

Writing and speaking precisely, free of rhetoric, vagueness, and meaningless phrases and generalities, helps you to think more clearly.

Think for a minute of whether a phrase such as one heard frequently in the street—I mean, you know, whatever—conveys any real information. You might understand what your friend means from the context of your conversation, but if you consider only the words, absolutely no information is being exchanged. Other examples are "she has issues" or "whatever" or "I hear you." The last one may be factually correct, but does it say I understand what you said or merely that the sounds you made reached my ears?

When you re-read and edit your essays—something I want to presume you do and get you used to doing if you do not already do it—think about whether the words say what you want them to say. Have you used the word correctly, including spelling and tense? Is it the correct word for what you are trying to express? Have you actually said anything or merely strung together a bunch of words that seem like a sentence but convey no useful information?

Even if you do not remember all these rules, pick at least a few to become really expert at recognizing and save others for later semesters. The earlier you begin to recognize the importance of precise writing and thinking, the easier it will be for you to improve over time.