Instructional Strategies to Improve College Students' APA Style Writing

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The purpose of this study was to identify areas of APA formatting that college instructors view as most problematic in student writing. Using a Likert-style survey, the greatest areas of reported concern were problems with documentation, specifically, citations, references, and quoting; of lesser concern were various style and formatting errors in student work. Respondents included 135 primarily undergraduate faculty members at institutions where APA style is the required documentation style across disciplines. While the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association is the definitive source, there are a number of tools, resources, and strategies that may facilitate students' mastery of APA style guidelines. In addition to identifying instructors' concerns, we offer a number of instructional aids (i.e., teaching strategies, support resources, feedback bank, and a sample rubric) to help faculty address the main areas of concern.

College instructors grapple with identifying the most effective strategies to teach students APA format. Seemingly despite numerous resources and even after lessons detailing the nuances of APA, students make frequent and repetitive errors writing in APA style. It is challenging for instructors to both keep up with the changes and revised guidelines of APA style and, more importantly, to identify strategies to effectively teach the format to their students (Jorgensen & Marek, 2013; McDonald, 2011; Smith & Eggleston, 2001; Stellmack, Konheim-Kalkstein, Manor, Massey, & Schmitz, 2009).

Writing in APA style seems like a straightforward task. In some ways documenting and listing references can be conceptualized as similar to figuring out a math problem: plug the correct information into the correct spots and you have a correct answer/reference listing. As such, and in light of myriad resources available like citation generators, web resources, or the *Publication Manual of the APA* itself, instructors often take for granted that students know how to use APA in their papers. But this seemingly *straightforward task* turns into a *frustrating experience* for students and confounds instructor expectations (Van Note Chism & Weerakoon, 2012). The challenges undergraduate students face to adhere to APA style writing guidelines is highlighted in research by Landrum (2013) that finds that students struggle to support claims with citations and are unable to effectively proofread their writing.

While our research survey focused on instructors teaching a primarily undergraduate population, it is worth noting that there is much literature on documenting errors at more advanced levels of scholarship. Errors have been found in a range of published research from social work where close to half (41.2%) contained citation errors (Spivey & Wilks, 2004); Faunce and Soames Job (2001) surveyed reference pages in several experimental psychology journals and found that around one-third of them contained reference errors. In a survey of doctoral student dissertation proposals, one in three citations contained some sort of error (Waytowich, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2005). There is also a correlation between doctoral students' self-efficacy, as indicated by their rating of their own performance on the first day of class, and the amount of errors they made on the reference page, meaning those that felt less competent, in fact, were (Waytowich, et al., 2005).

Given that at the professional and doctoral levels there are significant problems with APA formatting, it is not surprising that instructors at various levels have attempted to analyze and ameliorate the problem. Franz and Spitzer (2006) did a mixed-factoral, quasi-experimental study where students enrolled in psychology lab sections were variously provided with one of three resource combinations: an APA template, a checklist, or a template *and* checklist. They found that students improved with all resources, but the support of both template and checklist was most valuable to improvement.

Direct instruction in APA along with resources and practice seem to be most impactful. Luttrell, Bufkin, Eastman, and Miller (2010) found that implementing a one-hour course in scientific writing helped students gain efficiency with APA style, although students who worked through self-mastery had some gains as well. This points to the idea that just working with the style is helpful in increasing familiarity, but the more formal teaching of the style augments those gains considerably. Similarly, Fallahi, Wood, Austad, and Fallahi (2006) incorporated writing instruction in four skill areas—grammar, mechanics, style and referencing—in introductory psychology courses. They reported that instruction in referencing using APA style had the most obvious and significant effect on student writing. This is important to note because direct instruction in APA does not require the ability to teach complex grammar rules or addressing organizational issues that non-writing teachers may feel uncomfortable with. Van Note Chism and Weerakoon (2012) found that in new doctoral learners the failure to work methodically and

repetitively along with miscategorizing of sources were the largest contributors to citation errors. They also point out that some students' struggles are rational and deal with consistency (e.g., sometimes an "and" is used between authors' names; other times an ampersand is needed). Attentive practice was noted as the greatest factor in improving citation performance (Van Note Chism & Weerakoon, 2013) again, proving that exposure, meaning teaching, and practice are the keys to strengthening students' facility with APA and ability to cite correctly. Direct instruction seems to be a strong mitigating factor in student performance in APA. Froese, Boswell, Garcia, Koehn, and Nelson (1995) recommend direct instruction early in a freshman's introductory courses to reinforce correct use of style. Similarly, Jorgensen and Marek (2013) found that students attending workshops on APA style guidelines for grammar, mechanics, or references increased their proficiency in identifying APA style errors both immediately following training and after a time delay.

The purpose of the current study is to determine what instructors view as the greatest challenges that students have with APA style writing in order to develop effective instructional supplements and strategies to assist students in gaining competence with APA style.

Methodology

Participants included 135 faculty teaching primarily undergraduate courses at a medium-sized, teaching-oriented institution that offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. All faculty respondents report teaching at the undergraduate level with 23% indicating simultaneous teaching assignments at the graduate level. Faculty respondents teach in both face-to-face (66%) and online (34%) modalities and represent a range of academic rank (38% adjunct, 36% assistant, 18% associate, and 8% full professor). Respondents teach across a range of academic disciplines with 31% social science, 6% sciences, 28% liberal arts and humanities, 21% business, 12% education, and 2% other.

At the target institution, APA style is the required writing style for all undergraduate courses regardless of discipline. Faculty participants were asked to rate the extent to which they saw each of the following APA style errors in their students' writing using a 1- 4 Likert-type scale, (1= never, 2= some, 3= often, 4= frequently):

- Format of in-text citations
- Use of in-text citations
- Format of references on reference page

- Format of direct quotes
- Use of direct quotes
- Proper use of headings/subheadings
- Precision of writing
- Writing style
- Format of title page
- Use of active/passive voice
- Clarity
- Organization
- Format of header
- Overall page set-up
- Tone
- Bias-free language
- Format of appendices

The list of APA style errors was generated based on a theme analysis of instructor comments on 50 sample papers (representing 10 randomly selected papers from each of the following disciplines: social science, sciences, liberal arts and humanities, business, and education). Randomly selected papers that had already been graded by the course instructor were analyzed to determine common themes in APA style errors. Instructor comments were grouped into similar themes resulting in the 17 categories of errors included in the current survey.

Results and Discussion

Aligned with previous research (Faunce & Soames Job, 2001; Landrum, 2013; Spivey & Wilks, 2004; Waytowich, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2006), responses indicate that instructors saw frequent errors in students' use and format of in-text citations and direct quotes. These areas, along with format of the reference page and listed sources, were reported as most problematic in student writing. Approximately half (between 43.7 and 52.99%) of instructors surveyed reported that these documentation related areas are the most frequently occurring problems they see in students' use of APA style. Similar to the findings of Landrum (2013), while instructors did report inaccuracies in other areas of APA, such as style, tone, and use of headings, those areas did not garner the same response as the frequency of documentation issues. Table 1 highlights the frequencies of errors as indicated by faculty.

Discussion of results are aligned to the corresponding chapters in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* for organizational and reference purposes. Of greatest concern to instructors, receiving an average score of 3.16 or above (a 4 indicating that the error was seen frequently), were the areas covered in the chapter entitled "Crediting Sources" in Chapter 6 in the *Publication Manual*; these areas include format of in-text citations (3.39), use of in-text citations (3.33),

Table 1
Frequencies of Error

	Never	Some	Often	Frequently	Average Rating
Format of in-text citations	0%	14.18%	32.84%	52.99%	3.39
Use of in-text citations	0%	17.78%	31.85%	50.37%	3.33
Format of references on reference page	0%	21.64%	25.37%	52.99%	3.31
Format of direct quotes	1.49%	22.39%	30.60%	45.52%	3.20
Use of direct quotes	0.74%	25.93%	29.63%	43.70%	3.16
Proper use of headings/subheadings	2.96%	36.30%	26.67%	34.07%	2.92
Precision of writing	0.76%	36.36%	42.42%	20.45%	2.83
Writing style	0.74%	39.26%	36.30%	23.70%	2.83
Format of title page	3.76%	39.10%	29.32%	27.82%	2.81
Use of active/passive voice	5.26%	40.60%	30.83%	23.31%	2.72
Clarity	2.27%	40.91%	41.67%	15.15%	2.70
Organization	1.55%	45.74%	35.66%	17.05%	2.68
Format of header	9.09%	43.18%	28.03%	19.70%	2.58
Overall page set-up	4.48%	53.73%	23.88%	17.91%	2.55
Tone	7.09%	57.48%	21.26%	14.17%	2.43
Bias-free language	9.23%	58.46%	22.31%	10.00%	2.33
Format of appendices	33.08%	43.08%	11.54%	12.31%	2.03

format of references on reference page (3.31), format of direct quotes (3.20), and use of direct quotes (3.16).

Below the highest scoring, dominant concerns related to citing and references, concerns about writing style, and general formatting were interspersed. Concerns from Chapter 2 in the *Publication Manual* entitled "Manuscript Structure and Content" surveyed here included (and listed in order of magnitude of concern as demonstrated by average rating): proper use of headings/subheadings (2.92), format of title page (2.81), format of header (2.58), overall page set-up (2.55), and format of appendices (2.03). Concerns related to writing style, topics covered in Chapter 3 entitled "Writing Clearly and Concisely," were: precision of writing (2.83), writing style (2.83), use of active/passive voice (2.72), clarity (2.70), organization (2.68), tone (2.43) and bias-free language (2.33).

It is apparent from this survey that documenting and citing is the area where students struggle. It is also clear from the literature that students benefit from direct instruction and practice with APA style (Fallahi, Wood, Austad, & Fallahi, 2006; Jorgensen & Marek, 2013; Luttrell, Bufkin, Eastman, & Miller, 2010; MacDonald, 2011). But the reality of most undergraduate programs is that there is limited time to dedicate to generalized APA style lectures, workshops, and activities that are supplemental to the target course content. Thus, while dedicating class time to direct instruction on APA style may be effective, it may not be practical within the time constraints of most academic programs. To help instructors to address common APA style errors, we offer a number of strategies and resources that instructors can utilize within existing class assignments and feedback.

Smith and Eggleston (2001) note that among the variety of studies that have looked at ways to engage and teach students correct APA style, very few of them actually incorporate work with the actual *Publication Manual*. At the undergraduate level in schools where APA is the standard documentation style it may not make sense to have all entering freshman purchase the *Publication Manual*, given the fact that only a fraction of them are actually social science majors. While Smith and Eggleston (2001) found a correlation between digging into the manual and grades, and while this might prove a valuable strategy for psychology graduate classes, this might not be the most practical solution for college-wide documentation learning. Below we provide some practical alternatives to generalized directives that require students to simply follow the APA style manual. Recognizing that the manual is the ultimate authority, we offer a number of supplemental resources from which instructors can pick and choose to meet their needs. The following resources are widely accessible and provide a user-friendly means of fostering proper APA style within existing course structures, assignments and activities.

Teaching Strategies

At the undergraduate level spending course time on APA style is valuable. Introducing and explaining APA style as a function of specific assignments is an effective way to get students focused on and accountable to the topic (McDonald, 2011). Most college students have some familiarity with documenting but often used MLA style in their high school English research papers, so while the concept of citing may not be totally foreign to them, it should not be taken for granted that they are able to transfer their knowledge from one discipline to another. Some methods that could be adapted to work and individually or in small groups might be:

- Employing Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs; Angelo & Cross, 1993), such as KWLs, allows students who are not complete novices identify what they know (K), would like to know (W), and have learned at the end of the lesson (L), giving instructors a gauge for where students are at and what APA information is still murky to students. Likewise, instructors can assemble lists of common challenges – and their associated correction – for their unique student population to provide a customized guide that is tailored to students' current level of understanding.
- Providing students with a sample APA paper with mistakes to go through and correct the errors. This sample can be tailored to the errors most common for that particular assignment to simultaneously provide students with an example and practice in focusing on the necessary details of APA style.
- Providing students with a list of various types of sources and having them generate a correct reference list. This assignment can be particularly useful when coupled with a topical assignment for the class. For example, students studying a particular theory can be asked to locate a relevant book, journal article, blog, and video resource that informs that topic; then they submit their findings as an APA style reference page utilizing correct formatting. This assignment can be coupled with the previous activity to create a peer-review activity in which they compare resources and identify APA style errors in their peers' lists.
- Utilizing peer review on student papers, focused exclusively on APA style. This approach is particularly useful when combined with an APA style rubric that identifies key issues and highlights correct APA style. For an example of an effective APA style rubric, see Stellmack, Konheim-Kalkstein, Manor, Massey, and Schmitz (2009).
- Giving an open book/open internet quiz (for credit or just as a class exercise) on various aspects of APA documenting; for example, see APA style at http://www.niu.edu /writingtutorial/style/quizzes/APA.htm.

Internet Resources

Often college and universities have their own documentation style sheets available to students. They can generally be found either in a writing center or student resources center link within the learning management system or on the library's website. In the absence of these resources or in the case where they might only discuss basics, students can be referred to several reputable online sources. Purdue University oversees perhaps one of the best and definitive writing and APA resources on the web in their Online Writing Center, or OWL (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/ owl /resource/560/01/), as it is commonly known. While university style guides are often internal only, Purdue's expansive electronic resource is free and available to the public. In addition to an exhaustive list of references and citations, it also includes a sample APA paper, complete with title and reference page, information about style, and guidelines to address the majority of student writing questions.

If the expansiveness of the OWL website is overwhelming for students, the APA style blog (http://blog.apastyle.org, an official blog of the American Psychological Association) provides a more focused resource. Like OWL, the APA style blog provides answers to questions that commonly crop up in college courses but are not addressed in the actual style guide (for example, how to cite a YouTube video); similarly, the blog provides clarification on APA style issues that arise between updates of the official APA Style Manual. Using the search function on the blog home page will undoubtedly lead to strong and definitive answers to pressing and obscure documentation questions.

Provision of Detailed Feedback on APA Errors

One effective way for students to better their command of APA is to actually learn from their errors in their own work. An instructor might choose to allow students a revised grade or some small extra credit points if students go back and correct the errors on papers. One way to do this for an introductory composition or 100 level class would be through detailed comments inserted into the document which

identify errors and provide correction. Since there are some errors that are made repeatedly, this grading task can be made easier through the use of pre-set comments and/or word auto-correct codes. Detailed information on how to create these comments can be found through Microsoft Office Help (http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/word-help/autocorrect-spelling-and-insert-text-and-symbols-HA010354277.aspx). Appendix A provides a table of codes and comments that help identify common errors and provide some instruction for correction.

An alternative method for spurring students who are in later courses to develop fluency with APA is to simply highlight errors within their work rather than provide comments on what they did incorrectly. By simply highlighting the error students are then accountable for digging into the resources and figuring out both what is incorrect and how to best correct it. This kind of processing helps to ensure their responsibility and prompt active learning to avoid that error in the future.

Rubrics

When grading assignments that incorporate APA style, it is best practice to use a rubric to ensure consistency and fairness in grading. Rubrics have also been proven to be effective in student learning outcomes and in their development of skills (Andrade, 2000); additionally, well-done rubrics complement effective in-text feedback (Stellmack, Konheim-Kalkstein, Manor, Massey, & Schmitz, 2009). Waytowich, Onwuegbuzie, and Jiao (2005) suggest that using a rubric to assess their doctoral students would be beneficial to use consistently throughout their program rather than just in the proposal process. Being held accountable through grades throughout their graduate work might make for better adherence and attention to correct documentation. Clearly building this accountability for correct documentation from the outset at the undergraduate level would only strengthen student's grasp of APA.

To encourage students to take APA style seriously and to spend time on perfecting it in their work, it is optimal to include a rubric section on documenting sources and utilizing correct APA format. Some areas that might be listed under that rubric might include: correct in-text citations; correctly formatted reference page; correctly formatted title page, headers, margins and font; consistency between in-text citations and the reference page; and correct use of quotation marks. Ideally this section should carry enough weight that students see APA as an integral part of the writing process; a weight of 15-20% of the overall grade should impart that message to students. Reviewing the rubric in class and stressing, in particular, the weight given to correct APA format is another way for instructors to

drive home the importance of student attention to this area. Appendix B provides a sample rubric for this section which can be adapted to individual course needs.

Conclusion

If at the professional and doctoral level citation errors are commonly reported, it is not surprising that undergraduate instructors find abundant APA errors in student work. As the most common and consequential errors reported by instructors revolve around in-text citations and the reference page, using multiple resources to aid students within introductory and even higher level courses is a best practice for encouraging student fluency and mastery with correct documenting style. In addition to direct instruction, providing additional resources for students to use, followed by the use of explanatory feedback and rubrics on assignments to identify common APA errors in submitted work, are ways instructors can ensure students are learning and integrating correct APA style in their work.

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