

Discipline-Specific Writing Guide: Psychology

Emphasized Writing Skills and Typical Assignments

Literature reviews and lab reports are standard assignments and require students to **summarize** and **synthesize** previous empirical research. Lab reports require students to **interpret and analyze** their own research and **connect** it to the findings in their literature review. They must also **make recommendations** for future research.

Some Key Questions to Guide Writing

Psychologists study human and animal behavior. Key questions include:

- How does biology influence behavior?
- How does the environment influence behavior?
- How can behavior/functioning be improved?

Patterns of Organization and Use of Headings

Students in psychology classes should follow APA guidelines on the use of headings and subheadings. Many papers, especially lab reports, will follow standard organization for APA research articles. Standard headings/subheadings are:

Running head: TITLE	#
Repeat Your Title Here	
Text of the lit review goes here.	
Organize by topic, not author, unless the latter is required by the professor.	
Method	
Methods intro may appear here.	
Participants	
Who. This should all be double-spaced, by the way.	
Materials/Apparatus	
What	
Procedure	
How	

Running head: TITLE	#
Results	
This section contains the data.	
Discussion	
Here, the student explains what the previous section means and its import.	
Conclusion	
The conclusion may be combined with the discussion.	
References	
Reference information goes on a new page according to APA format. These entries should be alphabetical.	

Preferred Style or Tone

- Typical psychology papers should be **formal, impersonal, and objective**.
- APA writers should use the **active voice** and only sparingly use first-person, if necessary, but should be careful that first-person statements do not interfere with their objectivity.
- **Previous research** should be discussed in **past** or **present perfect tense** (*have/has + verb form*, e.g., “Smith’s study *has changed* perceptions”).
- **Results** should be discussed in **present tense** (e.g., “the results of the experiment indicate that”).

Important Notes about Terminology

- Psychology papers should not contain the term “prove”—standard terms are “support” and “refute,” or possibly “reject” and “fail to reject.”
- APA currently refers to humans as “participants” in studies and to animals as “subjects.”
- Rather than stating “the study was *done*,” students should write “the study was *conducted*”—or, even better, “the researcher(s) conducted the study.”

Favored Research Methodologies

The favored research methodology in psychology is **empirical investigation**. This includes observation, experiment, archival research, correlational research, content analysis, and others.

Authoritative Sources/Evidence

In the field of psychology, **empirical research articles published in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals** are authoritative sources. The more scientific the study, the more authoritative it is as evidence, particularly if the study has been replicated. Expert opinion without the facts to support it is not considered authoritative.

Documentation Style

APA (American Psychological Association)

Samples of a Gen Psych lab report and Senior Psychology portfolio are available for review in the Writing Center.