

How to Write

10

Psychology

Research Reports and Assignments



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Reasons for Writing in Psychology Units



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe the purpose of writing and presenting in the context of a psychology degree.
- Describe some of the different types of psychology assignment formats including laboratory reports, essay, reviews, and presentations.
- Identify the sections of this book that will help you to complete different types of psychology assignments.

1.1 Why We Write and Present in Psychology

IN ANY SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE, knowledge is created and added to, brick by brick, by well-reported studies on a very specific topic. Communication of research is how this is achieved. Specifically, the publication and public presentation (e.g., lectures, conferences) of studies allow findings to become known, understood, and used by people other than the original researchers, which progresses knowledge on a topic. In the case of psychology, this body of knowledge is what we know about how people think, feel, and behave. Some of you will go on to contribute to this body of knowledge as psychology researchers and academics; however, before that, you will become “members of the scholarly community” (APA, 2019, p. 3) as students of psychology. You will join this community with your first psychology assignment, which will require you to embrace the principles of our modern scientific discipline including the use of evidence, accurate reporting, use and acknowledgement of sources, and rigorous methods and practices. This book has been written to assist your understanding of these principles and to develop them into the practices you will need as psychology researchers and academics, if you choose that career path.

It is very likely you started studying psychology because you were interested in learning how to help other people, or because you were interested in understanding yourself better. If so, you may not have considered a professional life that involves conducting, presenting, or publishing research. However, even practising psychologists who do not publish their own studies read many scholarly reports while completing their training in psychology and maintaining their skills for practice. For this reason, learning the conventions of psychology writing and being able to critically evaluate research literature is essential. Specifically, developing these skills will allow you to decide whether the research is useful to your own area of work (i.e., if there is good evidence for a treatment). For example, you will need to understand how authors reached their conclusions and decide how applicable those conclusions are, and this will be much easier if you are familiar with the conventions of psychological reporting.

It is worth noting that the majority of students who start studying introductory psychology, or even complete a three-year degree with a major in psychology, do not become psychologists. To become a psychologist in Australia, you need to complete six years of training that include an accredited undergraduate major, fourth year (i.e., Honours year or a Postgraduate Diploma), and two more years, which may be a Masters degree or professional supervision and training. However, studying psychology offers a range of other career options. For example, most students with an undergraduate degree in psychology find themselves working in management, human resources, human services departments, market research, or even teaching after a little more study. This is because a degree with a major in psychology is well regarded in the professional world because of the quantitative and reporting skills that reflect excellent training in critical, disciplined, and concise researching and writing. So how do you get to this professionally desirable

endpoint? A big part of it is learning what and how to communicate as you are trained to do in your undergraduate psychology degree.

Three of the best reasons to learn to write good research reports are as follows:

- The first and most pragmatic reason is that you will complete many assignments as part of an undergraduate degree in psychology. It is something you need to know to complete your course successfully (and get high marks if that is what you desire).
- A second and better reason is that as a potential future psychologist, you need to appraise what other people have written and report to the community of scientists/practitioners and academics what you have learned from your research and study of human, or perhaps animal, behaviour.
- Third, even if you do not intend to become a psychologist, any occupation will have its own conventions for preparing and writing reports of the work you do. Learning the conventions of psychology demonstrates your ability to master the conventions of a discipline to potential employers. In addition, the generic skills of synthesising material requiring high levels of theoretical and conceptual understanding, as well as reporting your conclusions concisely and on time, are skills that will stand you in good stead in any professional career.

Many undergraduate psychology students also need to write essays, reviews, or other conventional forms (e.g., presentations, posters). Each of these requires slightly different skills (e.g., written communication, public speaking) and the conventions for each can differ. However, all of the writing you will do in your psychology studies will reflect a common foundation and demonstrate understanding of the standards of transparent and trustworthy science. These standards are upheld by practices such as assembling and summarising relevant information, critically evaluating it, coming to a considered conclusion about it, and communicating all of this in an accurate and succinct way.

1.2 What Is a Research Report?

Research report. A *research report* (sometimes called a *laboratory report*, or lab report for short) is a summary of a research project, presented in a specific form including: (a) why you undertook this particular research; (b) what you expected to find; (c) how you actually did the research; (d) what you *did* find; (e) what you think the results mean; and (f) the theoretical and practical implications of the conclusions you drew from those results.

Like most disciplines, psychology has conventions for the reporting of research findings. This allows readers who are familiar with these conventions to quickly and easily find the information they need and evaluate the quality of this information. From there a reader can decide whether they want to read the report in more detail. As a result, the

standardised format of psychological reporting is very useful to readers and can help authors communicate with their audience.

The reason there is some variability in the conventions used in psychology is that the research presented can differ in important ways (e.g., number of studies, number and type of samples, use of apparatus, analyses), which results in slightly different information being presented. Before you start writing, we encourage you to look through some of the major psychology periodicals in your library or browse through them on the web (and we encourage you to do so in the very near future), such as: *Australian Journal of Psychology*; *Brain and Cognition*; *Child Development*; *Journal of Experimental Psychology*; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; or *Psychological Science*. You will find some articles in formats that are somewhat different from what is usually taught in first- or second-year psychology, mostly because they use different and more complex designs or methods than you encounter in your first couple of undergraduate years. Another reason is that a journal article expects a greater familiarity with existing research in the area than that expected of an undergraduate report, which means some information may not be fully described, although you will likely need to describe it in your first- and second-year reports. However, by your third year you should be approaching a professional understanding of prior research, and your understanding of the conventions of presentation will conform more to the journal article standard.

The qualitative difference between journal articles and undergraduate research reports is that a student research report is primarily an exercise in communication and only secondarily, if at all, a contribution to research. Scientific communication differs from other types of writing and can take some time and practice to develop. It is important that the information you communicate to your marker reflects your knowledge and understanding of the topic, and this includes the standard format. Once you are completely in control of this form of communicating, then you can decide whether it is appropriate to “bend the rules” in particular cases.

Research reports are the most common form of assignment in undergraduate psychology training and the most different from the writing you will have done in other subjects. For this reason, many courses approach this by having first-year students complete only *parts* of a report, or completing full reports around some instructor-supplied elements (e.g., hypotheses and *Results*). This is intended to give you a chance to become familiar with idea that different pieces of information belong in different parts of the report, and allows you to focus on the information and section of interest (e.g., constructing an argument from previous research in the introduction). By third year, you will be completing research reports from *Title Page* to *References* or *Appendices*, so make the most of your early opportunities to really understand what goes where and how each section contributes to the whole without repetition.

Research proposals are like completing part of a research report, as you will complete sections essentially the same as the earlier parts of the report but will not have data to present. However, there are important differences between the two. For example, where a research report allows assessment of students’ understanding of the topic, critical thinking and writing conventions, research proposals are often used to focus students’ learning on

hypothesis development or research design. If you decide to do fourth year studies (e.g., Honours), it is likely you will have the opportunity to complete both a research proposal and a research report on your own topic, bringing together and highlighting the value of both forms and demonstrating your confidence with the full range of conventions. However, until then, you will spend a large proportion of your undergraduate studies learning to write research reports. For this reason, and because reports have the most prescriptive structure, we have dedicated a full chapter to research reports (the chapter Research Basics).

1.3 Writing Psychology Essays

An essay in psychology is no different in basic structure to the essays you would write in other tertiary humanities subjects, such as literature or sociology. Unlike research reports, essays are not usually divided into prescribed sections, although in longer essays you may use headings to guide your reader through the material. In general, the standard essay has an introduction, a body or discussion that presents the majority of the information and argument, and a conclusion. In psychology, essays may also need a *Title Page*, *Abstract*, and *References*.

Essays at tertiary level are somewhat different from those many of you will have written at school. The basic difference is that at university you will be expected to be more critical of the material you present as well as more systematic in your approach to creating an argument or viewpoint. Psychology essays typically ask you to review some research, to compare and contrast theoretical perspectives, or to critically evaluate some findings and evidence on a particular topic.

The chapter Essays in Psychology describes what is required by each of these sorts of instructions, but in essence, you are expected to read people's work with a critical eye and assess the strengths and weaknesses of a body of work. What is needed of you as a psychology student is that you demand particular standards of evidence for the assertions that researchers make before you give any weight to those assertions. This requires critical thinking on your part, and we describe some ways in which you can apply critical thinking to psychological articles in the chapter Getting Started.

1.4 Other Types of Assignment

The APA *Publication Manual* (7th ed.) acknowledges students as scholars in training and as members of the community who will take the skills they learn during their training into the professional world. The value of this is not to be underestimated in the current climate of fake news, clickbait, and unreliable sources. However, what it means in practice is that there has been a relaxing of APA requirements for students compared with academics, as well as a discussion of a broader range of communication types. Following suit, we have likewise extended the scope of this textbook to support students completing other forms of assignments.

Research reviews are a common and very useful form of reporting both in psychology and beyond, and can take a variety of forms; for example, summarising a single journal article (also called a *précis*) or reviewing a number of journal articles individually, which might be described as an *annotated bibliography*. Research reviews that involve reviewing a number of articles to answer a research question are also very common in psychology. Reviews allow authors to gather, critically evaluate, and draw conclusions based on evidence and are consequently of value in almost any profession. We review approaches to these assignments in the chapter Literature Reviews.

Other assignment types may use different forms of communication. For example, as a psychology student you are likely to undertake a *presentation* or *poster* in one of a wide variety of formats including online, recorded, and face-to-face versions. We discuss many of these, and their considerations, in the chapter Proposals, Presentations, Posters, and Groupwork in Psychology.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

The following chapters will deal with:

- (a) where to look for appropriate references, information on critical evaluation of earlier research, and the process of producing an assignment – these elements are common to all assignments (the chapter Getting Started),
- (b) the conventions of referencing (citing) in-text and formatting the References (the chapter Citations and References),
- (c) the basics of report writing and what you do to get started when assigned a research report (the chapter Research Basics),
- (d) detailed instructions on what sort of material goes in each section of a research report, and the conventions for presenting it (the chapter Research Reports in Psychology),
- (e) advice about essay writing for psychology (the chapter Essays in Psychology),
- (f) a description of approaches to conducting research reviews (the chapter Literature Reviews), and
- (g) brief summaries of the skills needed for doing proposals, presentations, and posters (the chapter Proposals, Presentations, Posters, and Groupwork in Psychology).

Examples of good and poor assignments are provided as an electronic resource (see the Appendix for how to access these). You may find them useful if you are looking at specific aspects but can't think of the word that will allow you to look it up in the normal index.