

DSC Setting Up Your Document to Avoid Common Errors

This resource aims to help new and experienced Rossier doctoral students improve first drafts and minimize later revisions (in addition to headaches and editor costs). It contains four sections: software for writing, setting up your Microsoft Word document, understanding critical writing, and avoiding common errors. Please email rsoedsc@rossier.usc.edu with questions and check out the [DSC Academic Tips Doc](#) for more info.

Software for Writing

The DSC recommends Microsoft Word. It is preferable for formatting, even when a Google Doc is permitted or requested. USC students can [download Microsoft Office for free](#) and use Microsoft One Drive with their @usc.edu account to share files with others at USC without formatting sacrifices (and view/download a copy of the [Dissertation Formatting Guide](#), [DSC Course Assignment Guide for MS Word](#), and the [DSC Sample Tables/figures file](#)—essential for formatting). For properly formatted dissertations, see Chapter Dissertations [1](#) & [2](#), and [Executive Dissertation 1](#). FYI—Rossier formatting differs from [USC Grad School formatting](#).

If a Google Doc is required, from your Google Drive, select New—Google Doc—>—From a Template—then scroll down to the “Education” section and select Report: APA 7th ed. or use the DSC [Course Assignment Guide](#). Both docs are imperfect but suitable for course papers. Dissertation writing with a Google Doc is not recommended.

Setting Up Your Microsoft Word File

Begin by updating the default settings in Microsoft Word to better conform with APA 7: See <https://youtu.be/xsnEJtkTxLs>. For examples, see the [DSC Course Assignment Guide](#) and the [Dissertation Formatting Guide](#) (access and download these Microsoft One Drive files by using

your @usc.edu credentials). The dissertation formatting guide is set up to satisfy the USC Rossier [Checklist for EdD dissertations](#). Please also see [APA 7 changes](#) for more insight.

Paper Size

Use an 8.5 x 11-inch size paper layout within Microsoft Word for your writing, with 1-inch margins on all sides. Please also visit the APA 7 paper format page:

<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/paper-format>.

Font

Use the same font size and type throughout the file. Recommended fonts by APA 7 include 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Calibri, 11-point Arial, 10-point Lucida Sans Unicode, 11-point Georgia, and 10-point computer modern. There are only three exceptions for using a different font: computer code, footnotes, and figure images. See [font](#).

Headings

Please outline and structure your writing per the guidelines for [headings](#). In most situations (other than those with lengthy introductions), the first heading after a [section label](#) (paper title, chapter title, etc.) should be a Level 1 heading. For any subsections within a Level 1 heading, two or more subheadings of the same type are required (or none of that type). See the [examples](#). Note that there should not be a heading immediately after a section label or a heading of the same level. All headings must also be in title case. See [Title Case \(exceptions & converter\)](#). The [title case converter tool](#) helps with checking headings and titles for APA.

Indentation and Line Spacing

In general, align all text to the left 1-inch margin. The text should be left-aligned (not left- and right-aligned). The first line for each paragraph should be indented 0.5 inches from the left margin. For more information on paragraph alignment and indentation (as well as

exceptions), see

<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/paper-format/paragraph-format>.

Line spacing should be set to double-spacing and before/after set to 0. For more info, especially regarding the exceptions for the [title page](#), [tables](#), [figures](#), [footnotes](#), and [displayed equation formatting](#), see

<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/paper-format/line-spacing>.

Understanding Critical Writing Necessities

Thesis/Topic Statement

A [thesis statement](#) establishes the overarching approach and argument for the writing. [Topic sentences](#) are more specific in focus and set up the main points within a paragraph. A reader should understand your main points by looking only at your thesis statement, headings, and topic sentences. Avoid burying critical information within a paragraph.

Paragraphs

[Quality paragraphs](#) begin with a topic statement and utilize a unifying [synthesis](#) of information. Please see these links for [examples](#) and [tips](#).

References Section

A problematic [references section](#) is typically a sign of poor organization. To save you trouble, use this [sample note-taking guide](#)—or something like it. The formatting for each reference can be figured by comparing it with APA examples by type of source (e.g., book, government report, or journal article). See the references [guide](#), [examples](#), and [URL info](#). From there, each reference begins flush left and has a hanging indentation of .5-inch for anything beyond the first line. Other than [some epigraphs](#) (see APA 7 manual, pp. 277–278) and [secondary sources](#), all sources cited should be listed in the references section and each source in

the references section should be cited within the writing. View Chapters 9–10 in the APA 7 manual for more details and examples. Also, consider [Expanding Your Pool of Sources](#).

Writing Clearly

Quality writing requires a combination of skills. This link covers many of the basics: <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/teaching-graduate-students-how-to-write-clearly>. As you further develop your writing, please give attention to [clarity](#), [conciseness](#), [flow](#), and [synthesis](#).

Avoiding Common Errors

Each of the following subsections covers a common issue that students struggle with. Please look through all of these and/or find a particular issue that you have questions about. Here also is the [APA Student Paper Checklist](#).

Abbreviations

Use of abbreviations is often helpful when they are “conventional and readers are likely to be more familiar with the abbreviation than with the complete form” and when “considerable space can be saved and cumbersome repetition avoided” ([APA 7](#), para. 2). There are rules for using abbreviations though. For example, abbreviations cannot be established within a heading or title. See <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/abbreviations/definition>.

Ultimately, use what works best for an average reader.

There are also exceptions. For instance, write “United States” when used as a noun or location and only abbreviate (and with periods) when used as an adjective (U.S. education system, as an example). The use of periods within APA 7 abbreviations is permitted only for exceptions. For information on other exceptions, see Latin abbreviations:

<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/abbreviations/latin>.

Capitalization, Italics, and Quotation Marks

Students often struggle with capitalization, italics, and/or quotation marks. Overusing capitalization, italics, and/or quotation marks can make the text difficult to read. Students often improperly capitalize words and inconsistently and/or incorrectly use quotation marks, italics, or neither.

See [when to capitalize: theories](#) (no) and [proper nouns](#) (yes). Additionally, table cells should be in sentence case. Avoid improper capitalization in a table. See [table tips](#).

Italics can be used for a wider variety of reasons. See the following for examples of proper italics usage: <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/italics-quotations/italics>.

To learn more about the usage and formatting of quotation marks, see <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/italics-quotations/quotation-marks>.

Citations

Figuring out how to cite a source properly can be difficult. Before you attempt to cite, understand that [citing from secondary sources is discouraged](#). Do not pull from someone else's literature review. When citing directly, begin by figuring out what type of source it is by comparing it with the [APA examples](#). This will help you figure out how to reference the source and compose a parenthetical and/or narrative citation. The final step (once you near the completion of your draft) will be to determine if any sources qualify for an exception. See [guidelines](#), as well as [exceptions 1](#), [2](#), and [3](#). Determining exceptions cannot be decided until you have identified each of the sources that are cited. Note: When multiple sources are cited within the same parenthetical, order them as they appear in the references section (alphabetically by the first author's last name).

Dashes and Hyphens

Dashes (– and —) and hyphens (-) are different but often confused (and the dashes are [tricky to format properly when writing online](#)). There are two types of dashes: en dashes (–) and em dashes (—). The shorter en dash is primarily used for ranges (16–25), relationships (Boston–New York flight, work–life balance, and a score of 8–5), and as a minus sign (–5 degrees). The longer em dash helps set off information—like an aside—to better communicate a point. Either dash (en or em) can be used (typically centered) to indicate when a table cell cannot be filled because data was not obtained or reported.

For hyphens, see these links for [when to use a hyphen](#) and [when not to](#).

First- and Third-Person Pronouns

Per [APA 7](#) (2022),

- If you are writing a paper by yourself, use the pronoun “I” to refer to yourself.
- If you are writing a paper with coauthors, use the pronoun “we” to refer to yourself and your coauthors together. (para. 1)

Do not use the third person to refer to yourself and avoid using the editorial “we.”

Lists

There are three types of [lists](#): (a) [lettered](#), (b) [bulleted](#), and (c) [numbered](#). Do not use a list or sub-list for a single item. At least two items are required. Lettered lists, like the one just used, are placed within normal sentence/paragraph writing and with each letter within a full parenthetical. Use [commas and/or semicolons based on APA 7 guidance](#).

Bulleted and numbered lists are formatted differently.

1. Numbered lists are the most common.
2. The most expected indentation is 0.5-inch for the number (as demonstrated).

3. They require complete sentences and are best used when there is an order for the list and/or the numbers will be referenced elsewhere in the writing (Research Question 2, as an example, or RQ2).

A bulleted list does not require complete sentences. They are regularly used to draw more attention to items that might be otherwise written within a paragraph:

- same indentation as numbered lists
- Only items that form a complete sentence begin with capitalization and conclude with end punctuation.
- words and phrases
- See <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/lists/bulleted> for examples.

It is also sometimes useful to use a numbered list with a bulleted sublist (because sublist items are often not in complete sentences. Here is an example of a study recruitment survey creation:

1. The study researcher generated a participant pool survey (Appendix B) with their USC Qualtrics account for the following settings.
 - survey location within the United States
 - name
 - email address
 - telephone number
 - current or greatest title obtained
 - Experience scope includes pharmaceutical GxP IT or Quality IT.
 - preferred gender and ethnicity

2. The participant pool survey is saved as “Participant Pool Survey #,” with the # sequentially numbered based on the number of participant pools required.
3. A copy of the survey was generated from Step 2 (above) as “Participant Pool Survey # Test *N*” with the # the same as the source survey and the *N* sequential alphabetically increased.

Numbers

Generally, numbers less than 10 are written out (three French hens, two turtledoves, and a partridge in a pear tree). There are countless exceptions to become familiar with though. See [when to use the numeral](#), [when to write it out](#), and [additional guidance \(which includes details on stats\)](#). For example, use the numeral (e.g., 3 years) when it is connected to time, age, or date and does not begin a sentence. Similarly, use the numeral (e.g., Research Question 2, Cycle 4, Cycles 2–5) for numbers in a series.

Quotations

[Quotations](#) come from one of three possible origins: material that must be included in the [references section](#) (e.g., [textual works](#), [data and assessments](#), [audiovisual media](#), and [online media](#)), [personal communication](#), and [research participants](#). Each of these sources requires a different type of formatting. Personal communication and research participant details are not included in the references section. Please click on the respective hyperlinks to learn more, as well as this [handout for introducing quotations](#).

Shorter quotes of less than 40 words require beginning and end quotation marks. The end parenthetical citation should be within the punctuation of the sentence. Quotations of 40 or more words (which includes bracketed text) do not have beginning or end quotation marks and must be placed in [block formatting](#) with the end parenthetical placed outside/after the end punctuation

for the quote. The lead-in for a block quote might end with a [comma](#), a [colon](#) (when there is a complete sentence before the colon), or [no punctuation](#). Additionally, there are rules for [making changes to a quotation](#). For example, a quote cannot begin or end with an ellipsis (unless that is how it appeared when published), and there should always be a space before and after an ellipsis (Here is an example. ... There was a sentence break there ... but not here.). See the hyperlinks for examples and this [guide for setting up quotes](#).

Commas and Semicolons

Please see the following link to learn more about the proper use of [commas and semicolons](#). Issues with commas and semicolons are common in student writing.

Table and Figure Formatting

Most students struggle with table and/or figure formatting. The following Microsoft One Drive file (access and download a copy using your @usc.edu credentials) was created to help students: [DSC sample tables/figures file](#).

Verb Tense

Writing with the correct verb tense improves logical flow and clarity. Thankfully, APA provides helpful information:

<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/grammar/verb-tense>.

Conclusion

Quality writing is the result of using many skills in combination. Trying to learn multiple things at the same time can be overwhelming though. This document aims to help identify skills that you can build upon. Once you have mastered a set of new skills, please return to this file again to find something else to work on (and visit the [DSC Academic Tips Google Doc](#) for even more tips). Your writing and formatting will benefit. Write On and Fight On!