

# Back to School Resolution: Avoid Common APA Mistakes

Contributed by Karen Zgoda, MSW, LCSW

The leaves outside are starting to show a hint of Autumn at their edges. Notebooks, pencils, and dorm-ready furniture are on sale everywhere you go, even the drugstores. You also find yourself wondering out loud to passers-by if you are organized enough or whether your new binders will coalesce with your new, carefully chosen outfits for class. Yes, indeed, back-to-school time is officially upon us! {mosgoogle right}

This semester, however, will be different. This semester, you will finally learn to master the intricate nuances of APA style. According to the American Psychological Association (<http://www.apastyle.org/>), “[APA] style consists of rules or guidelines that a publisher observes to ensure clear and consistent presentation of written material.” In a nutshell, adhering to APA style means formatting a paper in a particular, structured way that is fairly standardized across the social and behavioral sciences. Given that the current Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (fifth edition) is more than 400 pages long, it is not surprising that many students (and faculty!) struggle with making sure their papers are properly formatted.

Fortunately, this semester, this does not have to be you. In no particular order, here are six common APA style mistakes to avoid:

## #1—Formatting in APA style as you write

Friends don’t let friends write and format a paper at the same time. In separating the writing style of your paper (i.e., choosing words to express ideas, reducing bias in word choice, constructing sentences from ideas, grammar) from the formatting of your paper (i.e., making text bold or underlined, inserting page numbers and running heads, checking margins and spacing), you may be able to work more efficiently and productively. If you format your paper after it is written, you can save yourself frustration about formatting it properly and the distracting confusion that ensues as you try to remember what you’ve formatted, what needs to be formatted, and if something needs to be reformatted. I’ve found it very easy to get stuck doing this, go back and forth over and over again, and lose complete track of what I was doing. This also tends to happen when you have a high-pressure deadline for the paper. It should be noted that some prefer to write and format their papers at the same time. However, I generally find that this process produces more formatting errors and diffused attention toward the content you are trying to express in your writing. It could be to your advantage to try both methods and see which works best for you.

## #2—Not knowing what kind of source you are looking at

You won’t be able to properly cite a source if you don’t know what it is. However, given the vast array of material we can use in our papers (i.e., books, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers, research reports, and so on), sometimes it isn’t clear what type of source we are using, especially if found in an electronic database. Often, libraries will have helpful guides on information sources (for example, <http://library.uis.edu/findinfo/types.html#types>). If these guides are not helpful to you, I highly recommend contacting your campus librarians. Go to the source to learn about the sources.

## #3—Not fully using the Publication Manual to your advantage

The Publication Manual, although indeed very extensive and detailed, is also one of your best tools for writing and formatting your papers. Even taking just 15 minutes to skim the manual will go a long way toward helping you write better papers. The first two chapters give guidance on both structuring a manuscript and framing your ideas. You can also look at sample papers formatted properly in APA style, which I have found to be one of the easiest ways to learn APA style. You get the hint—check out the book!

## #4—Treating citations as a formality rather than as a part of your argument

Reference citations are there to guide the reader, not frustrate the writer. Among the purposes for having a reference section in your paper are to give your reader a chance to examine both how, ideologically, your paper was constructed and how to locate your sources easily. All citations are some variation of author(s), date of publication, title of publication, source of publication, and page numbers. To make organizing such information less cumbersome, try writing these simple classifications at the top of your sources.

## #5—Incorrectly citing electronic resources

There seems to be some confusion about the proper way to cite Web sites, e-mails, posts from online discussion forums, electronic books, wikis, and other electronic media. The APA has guidelines on how to cite such sources (<http://www.apastyle.org/electref.html>). In general, it is advised to include the author, year of publication (or retrieval date, if the online material is likely to change), title of page or (if not available) title of Web site, and the URL (or universal resource locator). The URL begins with the familiar “http://” notation. Here are some citation examples.

Incorrect citation of a Web site:

Code of ethics. <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/Code/code.asp>

Correct citation of a Web site:

National Association of Social Workers. (1999). Code of ethics. Retrieved August 28, 2008, from <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/Code/code.asp>

Incorrect citation of an online forum message:

Socialworkchat.org. (n.d.). Field placement discussion.  
<http://www.socialworkchat.org/swchatforum/index.php?topic=213.0>

Correct citation of an online forum message:

Mankita, S. (2008, March 10). Field placement [Msg. 3]. Message posted to <http://www.socialworkchat.org>, archived at <http://www.socialworkchat.org/swchatforum/index.php?topic=213.0>

Notice that in the correct citations, the URL is not underlined. Many word processing programs have a feature that automatically underlines URLs and makes the text blue. Unfortunately, this is not proper APA style. Be sure to disable this feature when typing your papers, or be prepared to format and then reformat your URLs. That being said, however, I'm sure your professors will be pleased if such online sources do not "overpopulate" your reference section.

#6—Not checking out other helpful APA style resources

The APA has compiled an FAQ offering some advice on using APA style (<http://www.apastyle.org/faqs.html>). The organization also publishes other helpful products for you to purchase (<http://books.apa.org/subpages/apastyle.cfm>). I've used the book *Concise Rules of APA Style*, which is something of a mini-APA Publication Manual, and found it helpful. I also enjoyed using *Writing WITH Style: APA Style for Social Work* (3rd Edition), by Lenore Szuchman and Barbara Thomlison. Written for both students building their first APA formatted manuscripts and seasoned social work professionals looking to tune up their skills, this book will walk a writer through creating an APA formatted paper.

Ultimately, practice makes perfect when it comes to mastering APA style. Good luck with your schoolwork this semester, and have fun with your learning!

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