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Tips for Writing a Great Paper

These 'tips' come from years of reading great papers. It's very frustrating to take off points for technical issues when someone has worked hard at researching, developing and writing an excellent paper. Don't let this happen to you. These are solutions to the issues I most often see people struggle with.

DO WHAT THE ASSIGNMENT SAYS:

Read the assignment carefully.

- More than once. If it is discussed in more than one place in the course, check and read about it in all places so that you get all the information about it. If there are any discrepancies, talk to your professor early.
- When you are done writing the paper, *read the assignment again* – did you do everything it asked for? This is a critical step that most people skip. (I have graded many excellent papers with entire sections of the assignment missing just because this wasn't done. I've done it myself. Results in a large loss of points on good work.)

Do what it asks for.

- Most assignments are broken down into parts. Use this as a checklist and make sure all parts are done.
- Look carefully at the verbs in the assignment. Does it say "discuss" "synthesize", "examine", "analyze" or "explain"? Does it say "using concepts from the reading" or "Using experiences from your career"? The wording is extremely important in telling you what the task is. Make sure you are addressing the verbs and the sources being described.
- Make it easy for the instructor to see that you did the assignment!
- Use the language of the assignment in your paper to make it easy for the reader to see how you have addressed the components of the assignment
- If the paper is more than 2-3 pages, use subtitles and title the sections with words that identify the parts of the assignment. For instance, if the assignment asks you to make recommendations, you should have a sub-section called "Recommendations". You want to make it easy for the instructor to see that you have all the components of the assignment.

Use The Rubric (if there is one):

- If there is a rubric, note the amount of points for each section. The number of points tells you how to allot the space and effort in the paper.
- You do this by looking at the assigned page length of the text portion of the paper. If there isn't one, use the final length of the paper. For a 10 page paper, 10% is one page, for a 15 page paper 20% is 3 pages etc.
- For instance, if one section is worth 10% and another worth 50%, the second gets half of the space of the paper and you should spend (ideally) half your effort on that section.
- At the end of writing the paper, go back and check yourself.. If you have 20% of the paper on a part that is worth 5% - or worse - 10% on something worth 40% of the grade, fix it.

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Correct As You Go

- As you write, in the program Word, your spellchecker and your grammar checker will be automatically working. The spellchecker underlines in **red** and the grammar checker underlines in **green**. Most people know to pay attention to what the spellchecker marks, but it seems many ignore the grammar checker. Bad idea. The green lines are your friends.
- To use, right click on whatever is underlined. If it is a potential misspelling, the program gives a list of possible fixes and you can select one.
- ALWAYS also click on the green underlines. When you right click it will tell you something about a grammar error. Sometimes it will be a general comment or it may be that you have typed two identical words in a row or used the wrong tense. You may not always agree with the suggestion. In that case move on.
- The biggest point is: FIX ISSUES AS YOU GO. Don't wait till the end.

Get Good At APA

- Use the APA 6th Edition Manual as your primary resource. It is now available in a Kindle editions as well as in print. If you still need to get it in print, get the spiral bound version as it is much easier to work with.
- Owl at Purdue Online Writing Lab which is based on the APA 6th Edition, second printing is a good secondary resource. I would never recommend it as your primary source because it does not have everything. Find it at: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/>
- Resisting learning APA is a kind of cultural norm in higher education as far as I can tell. In other words it is common. My advice? Give it up. It is a skill like any other. You do not need to memorize everything in the APA Manual, but there are a handful you will want to know well. At the end of this document is a list of the most common errors I see with APA. This should be useful.
- A good strategy is to get some plastic sticky tabs that are the kind you can write on and mark the most common pages in your manual you check. This might be things like the citations section, references, headings, sample paper and so forth. The list of common errors will help. If you are using a Kindle version, there is a way to highlight and put tabs on pages in there as well.
- Another good strategy is once you have created a well done APA paper. (title page, header, page number, title, headings, etc. are all correct) save a separate copy and make it your template. Then when you start a new paper, just go in and enter the correct information, but you don't need to set up the formatting.
- Important: When it comes to specifics about APA format required in a course, DO NOT rely on what others tell you, or what you have done in other classes. Follow the guidelines of the instructor you have in that course. If you have a question - ask.

Proof, Proof, Proof:

- I suggest a three-step proofreading practice.
- First, run your spellchecker which checks for grammar too (even if you think you've already fixed everything). Fix anything that needs fixing.
- Second, you proofread your paper. I **strongly** suggest you read it out loud to yourself or another. You will catch many more errors that way. Fix anything that needs fixing.
- Third, have someone else proof it for you who is good at proofreading. Fix anything that needs fixing. An important part of this step is to decide how you want them to give you feedback. I tell my proof-read to use the comment feature in Word. I do not let them change anything directly. I may also let them use track changes.

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- As a final step, run your spellchecker AGAIN to catch any errors made during the fixes.

Plagiarism:

- Nothing ruins a good paper like plagiarism. And 99% of the time it is unintended plagiarism or at least is based on a poor understanding of the rules or directions given in the class.
- The most common source of plagiarism in the GW SON courses is copying and pasting material from the web into Blackboard Discussion Boards and/or papers.
- Material becomes plagiarism when the source is not cited. So anything that is cut and pasted and not in quotes and cited, is plagiarism.
- Secondly, since this is a nursing program, the use of websites, especially consumer oriented websites such as hospitals, drug and device manufacturers and even many apparent consumer groups - are not approved sources of academic level sources of information.

TIPS FOR AVOIDING MOST COMMON APA ERRORS

1. Use the Sample Paper! (p. 41)

- For many formatting questions, the sample paper is a great quick resource.
- See also: APA Sample Paper -<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/18/>

2. Do I do an abstracts?

- Unless specified, in most papers, you don't need an Abstract page. These are required in formal papers such thesis, dissertations, research proposals and articles for publication.

3. Get the Header Right (p.41)

Most common errors;

- Not knowing the format
- Not knowing that the cover page and the rest of the pages are different; the words "Running Head" disappear after the cover page, and all that remains is the capitalized header on the rest of the pages (see sample paper, p. 41).

4. Put the Title on the First Page of Text (p. 41)

- For the Title Page and First Page of Text look at the *Sample Papers* in APA 6th Edition Manual (pg. 41).
- The title is not considered a heading. It is not a Heading Level I (and not in bold), therefore if you are using headings in your paper, your next heading should be Heading Level I not Heading Level II.

5. Employ Proper Use of Title Case (p. 102)

- Common errors - misuse or lack of use of title case when appropriate. APA manual provides some good guidance. For example, Bill Smith, Executive Director of Hill Hospital explained that... versus... the executive director of Hill Hospital was Bill Smith.

6. Employ Proper Use of Citations (p. 174-179)

- This takes some time to learn. Plan on using the manual a lot for this.

Common errors:

- Forgetting to put page number(s) in citation *after quotes*.
- Confusion on format for multiple citations of same authors in one paragraph. These are tricky, see pp. 174-175 in the manual.
- Overuse of secondary citations. This means citing a source that was mentioned in an article or text.

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Example: Leslie as cited in Smith (2009). The APA rule is that we almost never use secondary sources unless the original source cannot be found. It is your job to locate the original citation. The good news is that almost all journal articles and texts have a reference list of anyone they cite, so it is not that difficult to track down the original source material. That is what you should use, cite and put on your reference list. (Your instructor may allow secondary citations in some cases.)

7. Use Quotes (p.170-171) and Quotation Marks (p.91) Correctly

- Overuse of quotes is not considered acceptable in academic writing. The job of the author is to synthesize the literature. So papers should not have numerous quotes and only use them when the quote itself makes a point in such a way that it forwards the paper. Quotes should not be used to deliver information alone.

8. Learn APA Headings (p. 62-63)

- The rules changed in the 6th edition so that the format of the levels of headings are different) (pg. 62). It is pretty simple, but you need to read and understand this section.
- On the first page of the paper, the title should not be followed directly by a header. Typically there is introductory information. As a convention, the sub-heading "introduction" is not used so that the paper flows from the paper's title directly into the introductory material.