

Strategies for Achieving Clarity in Research Writing

Strategy 1: Consider aspects of publishing as early as during the program development and study design stages. When creating program resources, survey instruments, or other written products, ensure that all materials are clear and straightforward, grammatically and mechanically correct, and free of inconsistencies, misspellings, and so forth. Realize that you might want to include such items, in part or wholly, in a manuscript submitted for publication.

Strategy 2: Become familiar with the “Manuscript Elements” section in chapter 2 of *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA manual). Then contemplate how best to apply the guidance therein to ensure that a manuscript is appropriately comprehensive and effectively organized.

Strategy 3: Use an outline.

Strategy 4: Ensure that your manuscript is coherent at both macro and micro levels.

- Think of writing a manuscript as telling a story. There must be continuity from the title through the conclusion. Each fact, description, or idea expressed in the manuscript should contribute meaningfully to the whole.
- Use headings and subheadings to convey the hierarchical positioning of information you’re presenting.
- Avoid redundancy. When referring to previously presented information, provide just enough detail to serve as a reminder; don’t repeat or reformulate a point already made.
- Keep paragraphs as short as possible, but don’t break up a paragraph inappropriately. A paragraph has a purpose: to present a single topic developed in some depth. If you have written an overly long paragraph, you may need to reorganize your presentation of content rather than simply break up the paragraph.
- Include transitions and topic sentences. You know how your ideas are linked, but readers with no knowledge of your research do not. Transitions from paragraph to paragraph and within paragraphs give readers that knowledge. Topic sentences help readers digest the dense and complicated content of a research article one paragraph at a time.
- Be thoughtful when using quoted material. Make prudent decisions about when to paraphrase, when to use fragmentary quotations, and when to use lengthier quotations. Provide enough context for the meaning and significance of a quotation to be clear. Incorporate quoted material into surrounding text in ways that are logically, grammatically, and mechanically sound. Use bracketed text and ellipses where necessary to increase the clarity of quotations. When quotations are transcriptions of spoken words, ensure that they don’t contain mechanical errors, such as missing or incorrect punctuation and misspellings.
- Be consistent. Apply consistent ordering to like information throughout a manuscript. Use consistent language when referring to a particular group, entity, concept, or so on. Be careful

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about using words interchangeably or using synonyms to avoid repetition; in general, it's more effective to choose the exactly correct word and use it consistently.

- Apply parallelism. Ensure that related headings—the main headings or those within a particular section—are grammatically parallel. Ensure that items in a list are grammatically parallel. Use parallelism to express related ideas within a paragraph or within a sentence.
- Use logic. Apply logical ordering (e.g., alphabetical, chronological) to items in a list or in a graphic display. If there is a reason to list items in an order that may seem nonsensical to readers, make that reason clear. Use logic in setting up figures and tables.

Strategy 5: Do individual passes through your manuscript to double-check for accuracy in language, math, and citations and references.

Strategy 6: Write like you talk (sort of). Adhere to the tenets of standard written English, but be natural. Use first person, active voice, uncomplicated sentence structures, and unpretentious language.

Strategy 7: Don't anthropomorphize.

Strategy 8: Use precise language. Avoid ambiguous or illogical comparisons. Ensure that there are clear and obvious referents for all pronouns. Use appropriate transitional words and phrases. Avoid jargon and buzzwords.

Strategy 9: Choose research-related language carefully. Apply this guidance to descriptions of racial and ethnic identities of study participants, explanations of research design and data analysis, and discussions of findings. As you read journals, note examples of language that clearly conveys methods, results, and other elements similar to those you must convey often. Do the same thing with your own writing—note examples of instances in which you've captured a concept or described a methodology, for example, in a particularly effective way. Record those examples, and refer to them when writing.

Strategy 10: Have a colleague read your manuscript. You know exactly what your writing means because you wrote it, but readers don't have that advantage. A colleague who is unfamiliar with the work described in your manuscript can help you identify areas that might cause confusion for readers.

Strategy 11: Conscientiously apply grammar and punctuation rules. If you write articles about your research or any type of material for public consumption, you must have a grasp of grammar and mechanics. Look things up in a grammar handbook, ask a colleague for help, or work with and learn from an editor. If grammar and mechanics just aren't your forte, have someone edit your manuscripts before you submit them.

Strategy 12: Learn and follow *Journal of Extension (JOE)*/APA style. Regarding style, authors often don't know what they don't know. For this reason, you should preview author materials on the *JOE* website and the APA manual before you write your next manuscript. Also, keep notes about your style gremlins—those style points that seem to elude you—and refer to those notes you as you write.

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