Basics of APA Citation and Referencing Style

The American Psychological Association (APA) writing style prescriptions have been widely adopted within psychology (including for BPS research journals). The full list, as described in the APA Publication Manual, is long and detailed: this handout aims to give you the rudiments of citation and referencing style. It is essential to use these formats accurately and consistently throughout your thesis (and in any work submitted for publication in psychology journals).

Citations in the text

Several publications on qualitative research methods (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Willig, 2008) discuss ...

- citations within a bracket are in alphabetical order (not date order)
- citations are separated by semicolons; authors and date are separated by a comma
- cite multiple authors in full the first time; use et al. (note the punctuation) thereafter (but if there are six or more authors, use et al. throughout)
- use an ampersand (&) within the bracket (and in the reference list), "and" otherwise.

Reference list

Journal article


Chapter in a book


Complete book

• note usage of punctuation, italics and ampersands (&)
• book titles are in lower case; journal titles in title case
• no part numbers needed for journal articles
• APA style says include doi details for journal articles – this is not needed for the thesis

Frequently asked questions

How do I cite a secondary source?

If you cite a paper in the text, you are assumed to have read it yourself (and therefore may be asked about it in the viva). If it is a hard-to-obtain reference, e.g., a conference presentation, which you have seen cited elsewhere but not read yourself, cite both the primary and the secondary source. For example, if you want to cite Bloggs (1978), which you saw referred to in Jones (2006), then your citation would be (Bloggs, 1978, cited in Jones, 2006). For your thesis, list both works in your reference list (contrary to the APA style guide, which recommends giving the secondary source only).

How do I cite an unpublished document?

For an unpublished document, the citation in the text should give the date, and the reference should give the reader information on how to locate the document. For example, for the following DClinPsy thesis, the citation is Saunders (2008) and the reference is:


How do I cite a website?

If you are citing a web page, your reference list needs to give the full URL (i.e. the web address). For example, if you are citing the NICE guidelines on depression, in the text give the citation as (NICE, 2010), and in the reference list, give it as:


Does each part of the research thesis stand alone as far as the “et al.” rule is concerned?

Each of the three parts of the research thesis (literature review, empirical paper and critical appraisal) is regarded as a separate paper, and so you should cite each reference in full the first time you use it in each part (and each part will also have its own reference list).

Further details

http://www.apastyle.org (This site has a good Frequently Asked Questions list and also an online tutorial.)

**Further Help**

Also see our APA LibGuide support page and full APA style guide http://libguides.liv.ac.uk/onlineprogrammes/apafull-pdf

If you have any questions please contact your Librarian (see list of Liaison Librarians and Librarian for Online Programmes).