Top 10 Little-Known APA Rules

by

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First, remember that your university rules trump APA rules. Second, read on, and perhaps forward these little-known rules to your professor or reader. These are not all the rules (duh, the APA guide is about 300 pages), just the ones I most frequently have to explain.

1. Numerals

The following are APA rules regarding numerals (APA 6th ed., Sec. 4.31). Numerals are never used at the very beginning of a sentence. Numerals (rather than spelled-out numbers) are used for the following:

- “Numbers 10 and above”
- “Numbers in the abstract of a paper”
- “Numbers that immediately precede a unit of measurement: a 5-mg dose, 10.54 cm”
- “Numbers that represent statistical…functions, fractional or decimal quantities, percentages, ratios, and percentiles and quartile: multiplied by 5, 3 times as many, 5%.” (However, “common fractions” such as “one third of the class” are spelled out.)
- “Numbers that represent time, dates, ages, scores and points on a scale, exact sums of money, and numerals as numerals: 1 hr. 34 min, 12:30 a.m., 2-year-olds, scored 4 on a 7-point scale”
- “Numbers that denote a specific place in a numbered series, parts of books and tables, and each number in a list of four or more numbers”: Grade 8 (but the eighth grade), Table 3, row 5, Chapter 1

2. Numerals regarding school grades

It’s Grade 8 but eighth grade. It’s eighth-grade teacher but eighth grader. Grades 2–5.

3. Hyphens

No hyphen with a lot of prefixes, including re, pre, post, multi, non, over, under, etc. Rules are complex, though. For instance, it if it’s broken up, it’s “pre- and posttest.” The rules are too complex to summarize here: See APA 6th ed. section 4.13, pp. 97-100.

4. Italics

Use italics (note quotes) to cite a letter, word, phrase, or sentence as a linguistic example. APA 6th ed. Section 4.21

Use italics (not quotes) to introduce a technical or key term. Use italics for scales in a Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, etc.)

5. Little-known reference rule:

Use first initials in text citations to distinguish between two different refs in text where first authors have same last name (e.g., L. W. Howard, 2000; R. Howard & Jones, 2006). See APA 6th ed., p. 176, Section 6.14: Authors With the Same Surname: “If a reference list includes publications by two or more primary authors with the same surname, include the first author’s initials in all text citations, even if the year of publication differs.”

6. Abbreviations

Don’t use an abbreviation/acronym unless you’re going to use it 4+ times in the doc. And use it exclusively after explaining it the first time; do not explain it again, even in section headings (exception: tables/figures, which are supposed to “stand alone”). “To maximize clarity, APA prefers that authors use abbreviations sparingly.” Excessive use of abbreviations can hinder reading comprehension. APA 6th ed., Section 4.22-4.23

7. Abbreviation of U.S.

Note that United States is abbreviated as “U.S.” only when used as an adjective: “U.S. Navy,” but “in the United States.” And it does not have to be explained. APA 5th ed. p. 110 plus Chicago Manual of Style.

8. Ethnicity

Use parallel construction. For instance, use Black with White or African American with European American. Typically, African American is used to refer to cultural difference, whereas Black/White is in reference to basic race. Note there is no hyphen with African American.

9. Slashes

Slashes are rarely used in APA. You do not use and/or or mother/guardian, for instance. Write more clearly. Not that the short dash (en dash: –) is used for simple comparisons: test–retest reliability, student–teacher relationships (i.e., relationships between students and teachers, as opposed to “student–teacher relationships” which would be relationships formed by education students doing their fieldwork as student teachers).

10. Capitalization

Names of theories are not capitalized unless it’s a proper name (e.g., trademarked). For all rules, see APA 6th ed. Section 4.16-4.20