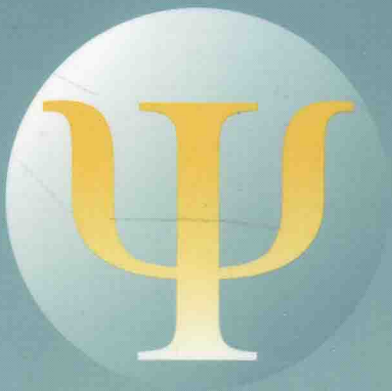
WRITING FOR PSYCHOLOGY



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PREFACE

Why this book? This book came about because psychologists write and psychology students write—and because writing in psychology is different from writing in other fields. It has many of its own rules, procedures, and traditions. This book identifies these, provides examples, and describes ways to make that writing enjoyable and successful.

Still, writing is writing. As you'll see as you read on, the lessons in this book also rely on some writing tools and practices that work for good writers in all fields, no matter how new or how proficient, whether for school, for work, or for personal enrichment. Chapters 2 and 3 guide you in the use of some of these versatile tools. We've chosen examples that adapt these tools to some typical, specific needs of the psychology student. We've tried to do so in a way that captures some of the excitement of psychology as a discipline, making it one of the most popular fields of study.

This isn't the first or only book on writing in psychology. No, earlier books exist and no doubt later ones will follow, because the need for good writing in psychology has been evident to people for a long time. But based on our reading of these earlier books, we saw a need for a concise volume that:

- Explained, with examples, how writers in psychology could use the best practices of good writers in all fields (Chapters 2 and 3).

- Explained in detail—again, with examples—how the successful psychology student created the three most basic forms of writing in the psychology curriculum:
  —the experimental laboratory report (Chapter 4)
  —the "term paper" and other evaluations of research (Chapter 5)
  —the exam essay (Chapter 6).
- Addressed the growing need of psychology students to become proficient oral presenters in classes and at conferences (Chapter 7).
- Offered a brief, easy-to-follow guide to APA (American Psychological Association) rules for citation of books, articles, and other sources, both in print and online (Chapter 8).

Honoring throughout the process model of writing, we not only give advice on correct APA formatting of information but also attempt to lead you through the decision-making stages on the way to the successful final form of the document. So you'll find, for example, that we annotate sample papers to show how the work demonstrates sound writing practices.

Who should use this book? *Writing for Psychology* addresses the writing needs of students at all levels of the undergraduate psychology curriculum, from introductory to advanced courses. It can also be used as a refresher and quick reference for graduate students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The greatest gift of writing is the opportunity it gives to work closely with others. This project has brought me once again into collaboration with my colleague Jim Sanford of the George Mason University Department of Psychology, with whom I have deliberated on cross-curricular writing issues since 1980. Jim's leadership and collegial spirit in writing across the curriculum have made his department exemplary in its attention to student growth in writing.

Brian Barker, poet and bibliographer, deserves thanks for the careful and creative research that helped produce our final chapter. Thanks also to the College of Arts and Sciences, Daniele Struppa, Dean, for supporting Brian's contribution to this project.

At Allyn and Bacon, thanks to Joe Opiela for his confident persistence, and to Mary Varney and Lisa Kimball for their efforts toward the success of this project. For their constructive reviews of the work-in-progress, Jim and I thank Scott Allison, University of Richmond; Dawn Reno, University of Central Florida; Victoria Sundin, Northern Illinois University; and Wayne Viney, Colorado State University.

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My deepest thanks go to Irene, Ann Louise, Flannery, Christopher, Jimmy, and Jeff, who teach me as they grow, and to Ann, *amore mio*.

—Christopher Thaiss

The ideas that I have embraced in this book first began taking shape when I was an undergraduate student working in Harry Bahrick's laboratory at Ohio Wesleyan University and later, as a graduate student, working under the guidance of the late Sam Brown at Kansas State University. They were reawakened and broadened during my participation in George Mason University's faculty workshop in writing across the curriculum in the summer of 1980. There, with the guidance of Don Gallehr and Chris Thaiss, the concept of writing as a process finally became real. Out of that workshop developed a reading-writing group that met for years afterward. Group members Rick Coffinberger, Bob Gilstrap, and Erica Jacobs continued to criticize and encourage my writing efforts. More recently, I have received far more assistance than I have given from George Mason faculty and students far too numerous to name. But I would like specifically to acknowledge the help of Angela Bruflat and Jennifer Wilkinson, two of the best undergraduate student writers with whom I have had the privilege of working, for allowing us to use examples of their writing in this book. And, of course, a special thanks to Eric and Michelle and to Lyn, who always knows when to give me space and when to take it away and who remains the best editor of all.

—James F. Sanford

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1

WRITING FOR PSYCHOLOGY

Welcome to psychology! If you have declared psychology as a major, you have joined a cast of hundreds of thousands of other students worldwide. Psychology is one of the most popular academic majors, attracting people whose interests range from mathematical modeling of human behavior to helping people cope with their difficulties. If you have claimed another discipline as your focus of study, or if you have not yet decided on your major, you will still almost certainly complete one or more psychology courses during your program of study. Psychology courses are taken by students in almost every major in almost every institution of higher education.

In your psychology courses, you will study cognitive processes and human (and sometimes animal) behavior. You will be trying to understand, as psychologists have since the founding of the discipline in the latter part of the 1800s, why we act the way we do. Your first course will almost certainly acquaint you with a broad survey of the history, methods, and content material of psychology. If you enroll in additional psychology courses, these courses will focus on narrower content areas, and they will explore these areas in more detail. If you major in psychology, you will also undoubtedly take a course or two in the methods and statistical analyses used in the discipline.

You will also be writing at every step along the way. As a student in an introductory survey course, you will take notes on class presentations. You may also be required to write one or more short papers or a longer term paper. If you attend a college or university that has relatively few students enrolled in each section of introductory psychology, your exams may include essays, and you may submit reflection papers on course content and how it has affected you in the present or past.

As you get to more advanced courses, the frequency and length of your papers will probably increase, and more and more courses will include essay exams. The writing style and format, the types of references you will have to include, and the depth and focus of your papers will also change. You will be expected to use the format and style mandated by the American Psychological Association, and your references will be expected to include recent primary source articles in professional journals.

DISTINCTIVE CHALLENGES ABOUT WRITING FOR PSYCHOLOGY

As you begin to understand psychology and what psychologists do, you will note one more important fact. That is that psychology is an **empirical** discipline. This means that psychologists have developed their knowledge base through observation and measurement of behavior. In their research, psychologists observe and record the behavior of humans and animals in many situations and in many settings. These settings include controlled psychological laboratory environments and real-world, natural environments. Methods can include laboratory experiments, correlational studies, case studies, naturalistic observation, and surveys or questionnaires. Even psychologists who do not actively engage in research base their practices on the knowledge that other psychologists have gained by using this empirical approach.

An empirical approach also requires that observations be **disinterested;** that is, researchers are expected to be **unbiased** in their recording of data and not influenced by their own hopes or expectations. (The term *disinterested* should not be confused with *uninterested,* since uninterested psychologists would certainly not engage in very much—or very creative—research!)

The birth of psychology is traced to the late 1800s, when Wilhelm Wundt established the first laboratory to study phenomena of the mind. Since that time, more than a hundred years ago, hundreds of thousands of psychologists have completed millions of empirical studies in attempts to discover what makes people tick. They have made careful observations and kept detailed records of behavior.

Prior to Wundt's work, philosophers reasoned about the contents and qualities of the mind but made few empirical observations of behaviors. These philosophers were students of the mind, but they were not actively seeking to **observe** and **measure** the behaviors on which psychologists base their conclusions about mental processes. It took Wundt and his followers to establish a new paradigm for understanding mental events. As students of psychology, you will hear of the empirical approach over and over, for

that is how the discipline has come to understand behavior and mental processes.

What does this have to do with writing? In its most basic form, it means that a good deal of the writing that you do as a psychology student will be geared toward **describing, explaining** and **understanding** psychological concepts from the standpoint of **empirical investigation.** You will need to describe and critically evaluate research studies as well as describe the conclusions that these studies have led to. Textbooks in psychology routinely present descriptions and results of experiments and other types of studies as well as what these studies have told us. A survey of several introductory psychology textbooks showed that the number of references in them varied between 1,200 and 2,500, most of them reports of experiments, surveys, and other types of empirical research. "Just the facts, ma'am," is not enough. How the facts have become part of the lore of psychology is equally important.

Thus, in psychology, "creative" writing, at least as understood in English and the humanities, will occupy little of your time. Instead, your writing will be geared more toward explanations, summaries, critical reviews, and conclusions of empirical research. If the types of writing are put on a continuum, with **creative** (e.g., poetry, fictional prose) at one end and **technical** (e.g., scientific reports, laboratory summaries) at the other, most of the writing in psychology will fall in the technical half.

This is the primary reason why a book like *Writing for Psychology* has an important niche and why it should be a part of psychology students' libraries. Writing in psychology is not the same as writing in English or writing in business. It has its own focus as well as its own style and format. As you progress through your psychology courses, you will become more and more aware of how psychology works and why psychologists do what they do. Writing is an integral part of it.

WHAT THIS BOOK COVERS

Subsequent chapters in this book are arranged to proceed from general advice about writing that you can apply in all circumstances in psychology to specific chapters that detail the typical writing projects that face psychology students and working scholars. We do not suggest that you read the book from cover to cover, but you will find that later chapters refer you back to pertinent sections of earlier ones.

Chapter 2: Writing Techniques to Increase Learning, offers writing tools and exercises that will help you read more effectively and efficiently, will improve your observing and listening skills, and will help you develop your talents as a writer in varied situations. Systematic note taking, the

reading response log, and the research spreadsheet are among the tools described.

Chapter 3: The Writing Process: Predrafting, Drafting, Revising, Editing will help you overcome writing blocks and anxiety, while also giving you strategies for more effectively meeting the often unpredictable expectations of professors who assign writing tasks. The chapter shows how proceeding systematically through a series of steps commonly used by professional writers in all fields can make the writing of all kinds of papers more enjoyable and successful.

Chapter 4: Writing Experimental Laboratory Reports explains the standard format of this central type of writing in psychology, but it goes beyond description to help writers negotiate the subtle differences among the parts of the report. While adhering to the standards of the American Psychological Association, the chapter illustrates through an annotated sample report by a student the ways in which an effective report takes shape.

Chapter 5: Writing Term Papers and Critical Evaluations of Research Papers builds on the tools of Chapters 2 and 3 to show how students and practicing scholars should analyze existing research documents in order to write effective critiques of that research. Through sample critiques, the chapter shows how writers define objectives for their evaluations and then communicate convincingly with readers.

Chapter 6: Taking Exams shows how students can adapt writing process techniques to timed writing situations both to (1) diminish the anxiety of test taking, and (2) organize essays to meet the expectations of professors. Sample student essays are examined.

Chapter 7: Oral Presentations adapts writing-to-learn and writing process techniques to helping you prepare to give talks that engage listeners while informing them. Telling-a-story and question-and-answer formats are illustrated. A section on tips for effective speaking offers a concise checklist for all situations.

Chapter 8: Brief APA Citation Guide is a concise adaptation of the documentation principles of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association,* 4th edition. Original examples show how a range of sources should be cited in the text of a report and in the Reference section of a paper. Special instructions on how to include quotations in textual citations are also included.

2

WRITING TECHNIQUES TO INCREASE LEARNING

While much of this book explains formal types of writing in psychology, this chapter focuses on writing tricks and tools that professionals in this field and many others use informally to enhance their critical and creative thinking as well as their recall of information. These techniques should help you better understand and critically evaluate information from course lectures, discussions, books, and other sources.

A QUESTION OF ATTITUDE: WRITING FOR YOURSELF

Unlike the material in later chapters, this chapter discusses writing that will normally not be shared with others. When your goal is to improve thinking and learning, it's basic that you practice different writing techniques in order to discover what works best for you. This chapter will describe a range of tools and approaches, but you should think of these as starting points only and should evolve personally successful variations. Keep in mind that you will be the main—and often the only—reader of such writings, so feel free to try out diverse tools.

WRITING AND MEMORY: TAKING GOOD NOTES

When they are listening to lectures or discussions, people often regard note taking as a race. For fear of missing something, they try to scribble or type

as fast as possible. Not only do they get fatigued quickly, but they miss much of what they try to hear.

Effective note taking should be carried out in at least two stages:

1. Quick **jottings** of key words or phrases during the course of a lecture or discussion, followed by
2. **Summarizing** as soon after the event as possible, while memory is fresh and the jottings can spark fuller recall. The goal of this summarizing is to organize the information in some meaningful way, perhaps chronologically or according to greatest significance.
3. A third stage, **revision,** may follow if you are reporting the lecture or meeting to another reader in a report. Chapter 3 details ways to make your revising effective.

Careful note taking according to this procedure forces you to concentrate on the *meaning* of the material rather than just the form or grammatical structure of its presentation. In 1972, Craik and Lockhart introduced the concept of *depth of processing* to psychology. They, and hundreds of others since then, found that people remember information better if they think of it in a meaningful context, especially if it is personally relevant to the reader.

Jotting Notes

The most successful learners often think of notes as a basis for further dialogue with a speaker or discussants. It may be useful for the note taker to assume the role of the **investigative journalist** or **science fair judge,** who not only is interested in accurate recording and useful interpretation but who also intends to follow up with questions about provocative, vague, or seemingly contradictory statements.

Accordingly, the jottings you make during an event should reflect *both* your interest in capturing the **main concepts** of an event and your observation of what seems **puzzling** or **inconsistent** or **unclear.** Frequent use of the question mark in notes lets you keep track of concerns that demand follow-up dialogue—or additional research on your part.

Tools

Technically speaking, while paper and pen/pencil remain the technology of choice for most note takers, laptop computers are becoming more frequent. As long as they can be used comfortably and without keyboard noise distracting those speaking and listening, they provide the advantage of facilitating revision of summaries into reports and other communications for other readers.

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