

Department of Psychology

Guidelines for the Preparation of a Thesis

The Department of Psychology has the additional requirement of following the Publication Manual of the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) or another format that is generally accepted in the relevant field of specialization. The APA Publication Manual has specific guidelines for preparing theses which are somewhat different from the instructions for creating manuscripts for submission. In certain areas in psychology, an article by Brendan Maher, former editor of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, provides excellent editorial tips (see Maher, B., *A Reader's, Writer's, and Reviewer's Guide to Assessing Research Reports in Clinical Psychology*, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 1978, 46, 835-838). Those students for whom writing is not second nature may find the short book by Colin Norman *The Queen's English*, available in the Campus Bookstore, useful.

Some students have a tendency to write the thesis for a very specialized audience of experts in the narrow topic area of the thesis. Instead, the thesis should be written in such a way as to be comprehensible by an intelligent generalist in psychology. Such an approach requires that basic terms are defined and that sufficient details about theory, method, and procedure are provided for a generalist to understand. In this context the APA rule discouraging or even prohibiting the use of abbreviations should be followed.

The appropriate length of a thesis in Psychology cannot be precisely specified. Theses of extreme length (in either direction) should be avoided, however. A thesis is typically longer than an article submitted to a journal for publication. The review of the literature is longer than in an article, as it places the problem in a somewhat broader context. This serves to make the problem understandable to the generalist, as opposed to the person working in the area. The method section is also somewhat more detailed. It should be written in such a way that a complete and precise replication is possible. This guideline requires that apparatus is described accurately. Paper and pencil tests of the author's design or otherwise unpublished, should be included as appendices, with appropriate scoring keys. Published tests that cannot be included in the thesis because of copyright, can be submitted as a separate for the convenience of the examiners.

Student authors can also err in the opposite direction by making their theses too long. Excessive length can come from a review of the literature that is too broad, or too detailed. An appropriate level of breadth and detail has to be found.

Theses can also become too long by over-analysis and over-reporting of results. A student should think very carefully before including more than five tables or figures per experiment or investigation in the main body of a thesis. The number of pieces of information in a table or figure should also be limited. The inclusion of long and detailed tables may be quite appropriate in an Appendix.

The generalist reader expects a section headed "*Conclusions*". Such a section is not the same as an abstract, nor is it a mere continuation of the discussion, nor a recital of

implications or limitations. The conclusions consist of substantive generalizations that the author feels appropriate on the basis of results obtained. Hedges and caveats weaken the conclusions and leave the reader unsatisfied. The conclusions emphasize the "point" of the thesis. Sometimes students are reluctant to state conclusions for fear of stating the obvious. Such concerns should be placed aside because what may sound obvious to the author may not appear so to the reader who may in fact have different views.

The author should also be aware that a reader is unlikely to read the thesis exactly in the order presented. It is not uncommon to look at the title first, then examine the references to see what authors are cited, then to read the conclusions, followed by the abstract, etc. To enable various reading sequences, each section should clearly contain what it suggests and should also be relatively self-contained. The appropriate content of each section from title to appendices is very well described in the [Publication Manual of APA](#). As the title is the most frequently read part of a thesis, special care should be taken in its composition. The [APA guideline](#) that the length of the title of an article be 10 to 12 words should also be followed in the preparation of thesis titles. APA also makes the point that shorter titles are more likely to be cited than large ones.

The initial responsibility for ensuring that a thesis is prepared according to the appropriate guidelines rests with the supervisor and the committee. The Department Head will examine a thesis for appropriate format before requesting an oral examination. Revisions may be required before an examination date is set.