



# Writing Psychology at University

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES



## 1 What is Psychology?

Psychology is the science that studies people's thoughts, emotions, and actions. To do this we work on the assumption that we have a biological dimension, a psychological dimension, and a social dimension. For example, psychology studies how, throughout our life, society and interactions with other people, as well as the different biological factors linked to our body, condition our mind and our behaviour. At the same time, thoughts and emotions also change our life in society, and can even bring about changes in our biology. That is why we say that all three dimensions are inextricable, that is, they are inseparable and mutually determined. In short, we are biopsychosocial beings, and therefore, when writing in psychology, we address each of these dimensions and their interactions to varying degrees.

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## 2 General characteristics of writing in Psychology

Understanding people as biopsychosocial beings has important consequences for our field of study, starting with the wide variety of texts we can find. Psychology is both a health science and a social science, which is why writing in psychology takes elements from both traditions.

In addition, psychology has always been two-dimensional: experimental, interested in discovering the laws of human behaviour and arguing its findings through intensive use of statistical techniques; and qualitative, concerned with how people understand the world around them and, therefore, interested in the most subjective dimensions of experience, language and collective social practices. On the other hand, we can understand psychology as both a basic science (responsible for producing knowledge), and an applied science (responsible for designing interventions to improve the well-being of people). Finally, there are also a multitude of theoretical frameworks which we can use to help us observe people and their reality.

All this means that there are a variety of styles for writing in psychology, depending on scope, objectives, methodologies or theoretical approach. However, there are certain common recognisable elements about which there is a certain degree of consensus, which we set out below:

- A psychology text is an argumentative text, i.e. a realistic text that tries to convince the reader that what is explained is based on theoretical, logical, and/or empirical reasoning that is difficult to refute. To do so, it states clearly and in detail the facts on which it is based, reasoning precisely, and systematically referring to the academic literature on which the argument is built.
- The purpose of this text is always to try to explain the human mind and behaviour, or to try to understand people's lives. Therefore, a text in psychology can never ignore ethical issues. Our writing as psychology professionals is based on the responsibility of knowing that whoever reads it can assume that whatever is written is true and, therefore, we write with an awareness of the effects that our statements can have. Therefore, a psychology text is based on the values of the ethical codes of the profession, in particular protecting confidentiality, respecting users and participants, supporting personal autonomy, working for social justice, and commitment to the issues that need to be addressed. In this sense, our texts validate the realities of human life without judging individuals, judging instead the systems, institutions or structures that condition them.
- When we write in psychology we must keep in mind that it is not possible to separate facts and their interpretation, since the latter condition the former, and therefore we find a variety of views, theoretical approaches and methods for studying and interpreting these events. Therefore, it is always necessary to define the concepts used with precision. This is done, on the one hand, in order to recognise the authors and the schools of thought from which they come, and, on the other hand, to make it very clear which meaning we finally adopt. In other words, to emphasise our position in the debate (ethical, political, ontological, epistemological, etc.) in which our text is situated.
- A psychology text is constructed from discussions that take place in academic literature. Therefore, it is part of the practice and ethics of writing in psychology to guarantee the reader that our writing is based on quality literature, namely peer-reviewed publications, which explain the procedure followed or the reasons posed in a transparent manner. Since most results in psychology are difficult to replicate (as they are based on personal and subjective experiences which take place within specific sociohistorical moments and places), we must be extremely honest in describing the path that has been followed, and clearly explain the limitations to the knowledge produced.
- Finally, in order for citizens to be able to participate in the decisions that affect them, it is essential that, in disseminating psychological knowledge, in addition to doing so in a documented, reasoned and rigorous manner, we do so in a way which is clear and appropriate to the audience we address and to the media we use.

### 3 Common written texts in Psychology

It is common to imagine a psychologist as someone who interviews and listens to people, observes their behaviour and relationships, and administers a test or some kind of experiment to evaluate their reactions. While these are common tasks in our profession, we often forget that what we do most is write, and that we do so in a diverse environment and with very different goals. We do not write in the same way or for the same audience in the field of educational, developmental, legal or forensic psychology, human resources and organisational psychology, social and community psychology, psychobiology and neuroscience, health and clinical science psychology, or in the field of quantitative or qualitative methodologies.

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For this reason, the first thing to do is to become familiar with texts in our field of knowledge. To demonstrate the types of texts that can be written in psychology, we will distinguish between those that belong to the field of intervention and those that fall into the field of research.

In the area of **psychological intervention**, the most common text is the psychological assessment report, an informative text in which we collect the most important details about the people who use our services, as well as our recommendations. Assessment reports can be clinical, forensic, work related, or educational, and depending on the area, there may be variations or emphasis on one aspect or another, whilst some aspects may not even appear in the report. In general, the assessment report contains the following sections: personal information of the user; reasons for referral; past medical history (e.g. previous reports); informed consent (how the report will be used); the presenting problem which has caused the person to seek help; background information (work, education, family, etc.); mental status and behavioural observations; results of evaluation; results of the interview (clinical, educational, employment...); the diagnosis

and its possible causes (symptoms, disorder, contextualisation), and, finally, the relevant clinical, educational or occupational recommendations.

Another type of text that we usually have to write in this area is an intervention project, a programme in which we propose a series of actions, with the aim of changing a problem. Intervention projects contain the following sections: title, authors, summary, introduction—which includes the justification of the proposal, the diagnosis or detection of needs and objectives—, methodology, work plan, expected results, proposed assessment of the intervention, dissemination plan, schedule, budget and references.

Finally, it is common for psychologists to provide various training courses, for which we need to write notes and prepare presentations. We can also use blogs, infographics, podcasts or videos, for which we need to write the scripts.

In the field of **psychology research** (which includes much of the work required of psychology students) we have to write up research projects, which contain practically the same sections as the intervention project, and which lead to research reports, where we explain the results obtained in a comprehensive way to the funding body, following the same sections as the project but with the addition of a results, discussion and conclusions section, with recommendations, in the case of applied research. Additionally, research calls for different types of writing as we progress, and can lead to research articles that are published in peer-reviewed journals or other media.

During research, writing depends on the data collection techniques we use. We have to write informed consent that summarises the research for those involved; experimental or observational protocols; if we create surveys or tests, we must write the items or questions in such a way that they are understandable to those who have to answer them; and we also write field diaries and/or transcribe interviews.

In the case of scientific articles, we can write systematic reviews of psychology literature on a given topic, which sometimes include a meta-analysis of the data; theoretical articles in which we present or reflect on one or more psychological concepts; or quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method articles. The contents and the way we write articles vary greatly according to the design of our research (experimental or quasi-experimental, single case, ex post facto, survey or observational designs, etc.) in the case of quantitative research; and according to the method used in qualitative research (ethnographic, or narrative, phenomenological, performative, biographical, thematic or discursive analysis, grounded theory, participatory action research, etc.). For these reasons, it is always necessary to understand before hand how the results are communicated according to the method used.

Despite this variety, we can identify a series of common features a psychology research article must always contain: a justification and contextualisation of the research question,

objectives and/or hypotheses, a literature review, results and their interpretation, and conclusions with the limitations and implications of the research. These sections may not appear in this order, depending on the methodology to which we subscribe, but the most important thing is that they must be consistent with each other: the review must contextualise the objectives; the theoretical framework and methodology used must make it possible to achieve the objectives, and the discussion and implications must be based on the results.

Other common research-related publications are book reviews, critical reviews of published research, or brief research notes. In addition, we should also bear in mind the dissemination of our research when we write: executive summaries, press releases, lectures, infographics, video scripts, blogs or podcasts, or answers if we are interviewed.

## 4 Writing conventions in Psychology

By default, in psychology we favour the conventions of the American Psychological Association (APA), always using the latest edition. This is especially important for the use of citations and bibliographic references. For example, in psychology writing we list only the references mentioned in the text, we do not use additional bibliographies or webographies, and we minimise footnotes or endnotes as much as possible.

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However, some conventions depend on the journal where the texts are published. In addition, as it is increasingly common to publish in journals from other disciplines or multidisciplinary journals, we need to know what is expected of our text and should not be afraid to explicitly ask the person who will accept or evaluate our publication.

In line with the honesty that should characterise psychology texts, it is increasingly common to write in the first person singular or plural to refer to actions carried out by the writer, to explain personal reactions, or to develop relevant and reasoned reflections. With that in mind, using the passive voice or impersonal third person forms (*it is considered that...*, *one considers that...*) is not recommended.

Finally, in psychology we must be especially respectful of the people involved in the text, be they participants or other professionals. Therefore, on the one hand we avoid plagiarism and acknowledge authorship of the texts or materials used, and on the other hand we incorporate gender perspective, and do not use sexist, racist, LGBTQ+-phobic, classist, or age or ability-related expressions in our writing. For this reason, we listen to the suggestions of the groups of people we work with on how we should address them, for example to know if we should talk about *(dis)capacity*, *functional diversity* or *neurodivergencies*. For the same reason, we prefer to use the words *disorder*, *problem*, or *difficulty* to *that of illness*; and *user* or *participant* to *that of patient* or *subject*.

## 5 Selected works and websites for writing Psychology

1. *Termcat Online Dictionaries*, Termcat.  
[<https://www.termcat.cat/en/diccionaris-en-linia>]  
Terminology dictionaries in Catalan and other languages. See the sections on mental health, psychiatry, sociology and education, among others.
2. *APA Style & Grammar Guidelines*, American Psychological Association.  
[<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines>]  
Website with official APA style recommendations. It is essential to write and reference correctly in psychology. This webpage contains brief guidelines of the latest edition of its Publication Manual.
3. *Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Primary, Qualitative, Meta-Analytic, and Mixed Methods Research in Psychology: The APA*. Publications and Communications Board Task Force Report, Heidi M. Levitt et al. [<https://doi.apa.org/fulltext/2018-00750-003.html>]  
Guidelines for writing and reviewing qualitative articles.
4. *Reporting standards for research in psychology: Why do we need them? What might they be?* APA Publications and Communications Board Working Group on Journal Article Reporting Standards.  
[<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.9.839>]  
Guidelines for writing and reviewing quantitative articles.
5. *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)*, Ottawa Hospital. University of Oxford. Monash University.  
[<http://prisma-statement.org/PRISMAStatement/>]

Guidelines for writing and reviewing systematic reviews.

6. [The First Person in Academic Writing](https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/first-person.original.pdf). Duke University.  
[<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/first-person.original.pdf>]  
Tips for effective use of the First Person and Personal Voice in Academic Writing.
7. [Writing for Psychology. A Guide for Psychology Concentrators](https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/writing_for_psych_final_from_printer.pdf). Harvard University.  
[[https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/writing\\_for\\_psych\\_final\\_from\\_printer.pdf](https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/writing_for_psych_final_from_printer.pdf)]  
Extended writing guide for psychology, based on APA guidelines, and aimed at psychology students.
8. [Guide for Writing in Psychology](https://www.southwestern.edu/live/files/4181-guide-for-writing-in-psychologypdf). Southwestern University.  
[<https://www.southwestern.edu/live/files/4181-guide-for-writing-in-psychologypdf>]  
Brief writing guide for psychology, based on APA guidelines, and aimed at psychology students.



Servei de Llengües (UAB), Serveis Lingüístics (UB), Servei de Llengües Modernes (UdG), Institut de Llengües (UdL), Serveis Lingüístics (UVic-UCC)

Coordination: Virgínia Castillo, Enric Serra (UAB)

Author, Guide in Catalan: Joel Feliu (with Maria Verdaguer, Eva Penelo i Adriana Gil-Juárez)

Adaptation to English: Emma Hitchen

Revision of English: Pere Drou Morillo

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