

Burke Johnson's Writing Tips (As of January 16, 2003)

Please note that many practices are not the same in the United States and in Western Europe. Many of the following tips are United States specific (e.g., the rule discussed under number three below does not apply in Western Europe).

1. Always include the comma before the and in a series of three or more items (APA, 2001: p.78).

- Correct example: The three most popular approaches to qualitative research in education are case study, phenomenology, and ethnography.

2. Do not use the term "subjects" to refer to people.

- Instead, as recommended by APA (2001: p.65, p.70), we are to use the term "participants" or some other human descriptor (e.g., teachers or students) whenever it is possible to do so.
- Also, the section heading where you describe your participants should be Participants, not Subjects, if you are doing research with humans.

3. Here is a lesson on grammar as it is practiced in the United States. Commas and periods are placed inside of the quotes, not outside of the quotes. Just remember the PQ rule: punctuation first and quotation second.

- Incorrect example: Some popular emic terms used by Mobile high school students are "geeks", "dorks", "book worms", and "jocks".
- Correct example: Some popular emic terms used by Mobile high school students are "geeks," "dorks," "book worms," and "jocks."

4. Try to minimize or eliminate the use of anthropomorphism in your writing (APA, 2001: pp.38-39). When you do this you attribute human characteristics to non humans.

- Example: Do not say "The research study collected data from 150 student teachers." As you know, the research study did not collect your data!
- Improved example: The researcher collected data from 150 student teachers.
- Even better example: I collected data from 150 student teachers.

5. As you can see in the above example, there is nothing wrong with using personal pronouns.

- For example, the use of "I" is fine if you are the only author or researcher (e.g., APA, 2001: p.49, 52, etc.). (For more than one author, "we" can be used.)
- It is, for example, simpler and more direct to say "I collected data from three groups" than to say "The researcher collected data from three groups."
- Note: you cannot, however, use personal pronouns in the article abstract.

6. Avoid using passive voice (APA, 2001; p.41).

- Active voice is much easier to read than passive voice.
- Active voice helps the writer take ownership of his or her work.
- Be direct in your writing style. It is much clearer.

- Here's an example of passive voice: Emic terms were used by the research participants.
 - Here's an example of active voice: The research participants used emic terms.
7. Do not use the words Firstly, Secondly, Thirdly, etc;
- You should say First, Second, Third, and so on.
8. Do not include the apostrophe in years (e.g., 1990's or 1980's). Rather exclude the apostrophe
- This is the correct form: 1990s or 1980s.
9. Pretest and posttest are one word
- Do not write pre-test or post-test
 - Do write pretest and posttest.
10. Avoid sexist language. One way to do this is to use the plural form (they) rather than singular form (but be very careful with subject/verb agreement if you use this approach).
- It is also acceptable to use "he or she."
 - Do not use s/he or he/she
11. The word "data" is plural; it is not singular. The singular of data is datum.
- It is incorrect to say "The data was collected by five students."
 - The sentence should read "The data were collected by five students."
 - Remember, it's "data are" or "data were," not "data is" or "data was."
12. Do not capitalize, underline, or use italics for variable names in text.
13. Avoid the use of underlining, italics, or bolding for emphasis in your writing.
14. Use one space (not two) between sentences.
15. Do not separate two independent clauses with a comma; use a semicolon. That is, avoid comma splice errors.
16. A colon is preceded by an independent clause (APA, 2001: p.80).
17. Remember that a paragraph should always have a clear and organized structure. For example, always begin a paragraph with a topic sentence. Also, do not write paragraphs that are only one or two sentences long--either make it longer, delete it, or attach it to the previous paragraph. As a general rule, is a good idea to make all of your paragraphs approximately the same in length for ease of reading.
18. Create natural transitions from paragraph to paragraph.
19. Do not overuse one word transitions at the start of sentences sparingly (e.g., Therefore, Hence, Additionally, Conversely, etc.) Don't start every sentence with a

transition followed by a comma. On the other hand, the occasional use of one word transitions can be helpful when used effectively.

20. Use the phrases "with regard to" and "regarding" sparingly because they tend to be imprecise. "With regard to" is a cliché (remember to avoid clichés in your writing), and "regarding" can usually be made more direct and precise.

21. Try to use simpler words rather than more complex words. For example, replace the word "utilization" with the simpler word "use."

22. Note that e.g., means "for example, i.e., means "that is, viz., means "namely," cf. means "compare," and et al., means "and others." Also note that a comma comes after each of these.

23. Avoid the use of "etc." It is not needed.

24. Do not use bullets in formal writing (e.g., dissertations). If you have a series, identify the elements using lowercase letters in parentheses. Here is an example. We collected data from three groups: (a) students, (b) teachers, and (c) parents.

25. Use the same term or word, consistently, to refer to a concept throughout your paper. It confuses readers when you use what you may consider to be synonyms (i.e., multiple words to refer to the same thing). Synonyms confuse readers of technical papers.

26. Write an outline of what you plan on writing about before you begin to write. This will help you prevent the problem of repeating yourself and it will lead to good, logical organization. You may write a Table of Contents before you begin writing or go back and forth to the TOC as you write.

27. Remember these commonly misused plural and singular forms:

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
datum	data
phenomenon	phenomena
criterion	criteria

28. In the U.S., use toward rather than towards.

29. For more on writing, see the following additional sources:

- Chapter 18 in the Johnson/Christensen text
- APA Publication Manual
- <http://sut1.sut.ac.th/strunk>
- <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~writing/links.html>
- <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>
- <http://www.apastyle.org/faqs.html>
- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_apa.html
- <http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/tse-portal/>

- <http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/wrerrors/wrerrors.html>
- http://www.vanguard.edu/faculty/ddegelman/amoebaweb/index.cfm?doc_id=241

5