

# The Portable Editor

## Tips for Improving Your Writing Volume 3, No. 8

Recently, Onwuegbuzie, Combs, Slate, and Frels (2010) published an article titled, "Evidence-Based Guidelines for Avoiding the Most Common APA Errors in Journal Article Submissions." The guidelines are based on findings of earlier research conducted by Combs, Onwuegbuzie, and Frels (2010) that examined 110 manuscripts submitted for publication in the professional journal *Research in the Schools*. Each manuscript was closely examined for the number (unique and cumulative) and type of APA errors. Not one manuscript got away with a clean report card! The results of the Combs et al. study were detailed in a table listing the 60 most common mistakes. The top 10 errors are reported in Table 1 below. In addition, 72% of the manuscripts contained grammatical errors such as use of *which* versus *that*, or subject-verb number disagreement (e.g., using *data is* rather than *data are*).

Some might consider this report merely an indictment of faculty who require students to use APA style but fail to follow the rules in their own writing. We think this study magnifies those APA rules that are the trickiest to master and thus warrant extra effort. At the time of the study, the APA sixth edition was new, and the journal was transitioning between editions; therefore, the error descriptions reference both the fifth and sixth editions.

Table 1

### *Top 10 Most Common APA Errors*

Rank Order of Error	APA Error	Percentage of Manuscripts with Error	Description of Error and Reference to Fifth Edition APA Rule Page No.	Description of Error and Reference to Sixth Edition APA Rule Page No.
1	Use of numbers	57.3%	Not using Arabic figures for numbers 10 and greater (p. 122); not using Arabic figures to represent time, dates, ages, sample, subsample, or population size or in a numbered series (pp. 124-125)	No change in the rule for Arabic numerals for numbers 10 or greater. <b>CHANGE:</b> If less than 10 (a) do not use figures for sample size, population size, or numbers of study participants; (b) use words rather than numerals for the <b>approximation</b> of numbers of days, months, and years; and (c) do not use numerals for numbers less than 10 even when grouped with numbers greater than 10 (pp. 112-113)
2	Hyphenation	55.5%	Not hyphenating two words acting as a compound adjective when preceding the term it modifies (p. 91) For example, "city-level decision" or "decision-making skills."	No change (p. 97)

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3	Use of et al.	44.5%	Not citing all authors the first time; in subsequent citations, not reducing the citation to first author + et al. (period always used with al.; et al. not italicized; p. 208)	Sixth edition provided clarification for citing works with six or more authors (first author + et al. on first and all subsequent uses; p. 175)
4	Capitalization in Titles and Headings	44.5%	Not capitalizing the words in headings appropriately (i.e., capitalize words of 4 letters or more); incorrect capitals or punctuation with Level 4 headings (pp. 113-114, 289-290)	No change (pp. 101-102)
5	Imprecise language: Use of <i>since</i>	41.8%	Using <i>since</i> instead of <i>because</i> (p. 57)  ( <b>Note:</b> Error No. 13, “misuse of <i>while</i> ,” often co-occurs with misuse of <i>since</i> ..)	No change (p. 83) APA limits use of <i>since</i> and <i>while to</i> temporal terms. <i>While</i> indicates two or more simultaneous events, and <i>since</i> indicates a time span from one event to another.
6	Tables and figures	40.0%	Information not presented in table format. All table data repeated in text. Figures and tables not formatted correctly (e.g., showing gridlines, p. 201)	No change in format, but a table may be single- or double-spaced (p. 141)
7	Use of serial comma in between elements in a list	40.0%	Not using serial comma (i.e., before <i>and</i> and <i>or</i> ) in a series of three or more items (p. 78)	No change (p. 88)
8	Use of abbreviations/ acronyms	37.3%	Not spelling out acronyms or defining abbreviation on the first use (p. 104)	No change (p. 106)
9	Line Spacing	30.0%	Not consistently using double spacing between lines, including use of direct quotations (p. 286)	No change (p. 229) <b>Note:</b> Sixth edition recommendation for two spaces following a sentence refers for <b>draft</b> copies of manuscripts.
10	Use of & (ampersand symbol) as opposed to the word <i>and</i>	33.6%	Incorrectly using the ampersand in the text or the word <i>and</i> in the citation (p. 209)	No change (p. 177)

Source: Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Combs, J. P., Slate, J. R., & Frels, R. K. (2010). Evidence-based guidelines for avoiding the most common APA errors in journal article submissions [Editorial]. *Research in the Schools*. Retrieved from [http://msera.org/download/RITS\\_16\\_2\\_APAErrors6th.pdf](http://msera.org/download/RITS_16_2_APAErrors6th.pdf)