

# *The Portable Editor*

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Each year, students entering the MSW program often struggle with the same grammatical and APA style rules. Below are a few of the common problems generally found in student writing at the beginning of each academic year.

## **Floating Pronouns**

**Example:** Writing is an essential part of graduate education, and strong writing skills are necessary tools for both students and faculty. *They* are also vital for practitioners in the field.

What does “they” refer to in the above sentence? From a writer’s perspective, using pronouns seems a logical way to avoid repetition of the subject. However, from the reader’s perspective, “floating pronouns” (i.e., those that are not anchored to the referent by a noun) can be confusing. If the pronoun's referent is not abundantly clear, these floating pronouns force the reader to backtrack in the text to figure out to what *they*, *them*, *it*, *this*, refers. Anything that forces the reader to backtrack leaves the impression of disorganized, choppy writing. More important, each pronoun represents the opportunity for the reader to misidentify the referent and take away misinformation.

**Solution:** Such skills are also vital for practitioners in the field.

## **Quote Mark Quirks**

- In American English, periods and commas always go inside quote marks, whereas semicolons, colons, and question marks are placed outside quotes as long as the punctuation is not part of the quotation.
- Single quote marks are used to indicate quoted material within a quote; do not use single quote marks to indicate an unusual or ironic word use.
- Per APA, do not use quote marks for scale anchors; set scale anchors in italics and enclose numerical value in parentheses (if applicable). "...the 5-point scale ranged from *always* (5) to *never* (1)."

## **Abbreviations**

Per APA: to define an abbreviation, spell out the term on *first* use and enclose abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter, you **MUST** use the abbreviation.

**Example:** According to the website of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), “the NASW Code of Ethics is intended to serve as a guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers.”

To define an abbreviation *within parenthetical* material, such as an in-text citation, use square brackets to enclose the abbreviation.

**Example:** (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2010).

### Serial Commas

APA style rules also require the use of the *serial comma* or *series comma*, which is a comma inserted before the grammatical conjunction (usually *and*, *or*, *but*, sometimes *nor*) joining the last item in a list or series of three or more items.

**Example:** "The discussion was long, boring, and pointless."

The series comma also applies to APA citation formats for three or more authors, using either "&" or "and."

**Example:** (Fraser, Richman, & Day, 2010) or "Bledsoe, Jones, and Guo (2011) have shown ..."

### Capitalization

Per APA style: When referring to racial/ethnic groups, treat White and Black as proper nouns and capitalize. All proper nouns referring to racial/ethnic groups should be capitalized (e.g., American Indian, Native American, Asian American, African American, Caucasian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Latino)

Capitalize names of regions but NOT directions.

**Example:** I drove south on the interstate because I live in Southern Durham.

### Introductory Phrases

An introductory word or phrase must be set off with a comma.

**Example:** As your direct supervisor, your field advisor is well positioned to evaluate your skills. First, I want to thank the Nobel Committee for giving me this award.

### Lists

Items in a list must have parallel structure (i.e., be a matching set). One method for creating parallel structure is to use the same verb form for each item in the list.

**Example:** Try to develop a healthier lifestyle by making small changes in your daily routine such as eating breakfast, getting 8 hours of sleep, and balancing work with play.

When the items in a list are complicated or the writer wants to emphasize the items, APA uses lowercase letters enclosed in parentheses for an *in-line series*.

**Example:** The first three steps of social information processing include (a) encoding cues, (b) interpreting cues, and (c) clarifying goals.

**Numbered or Bulleted Lists:** Items in a list can also be set off by using numbers or bullet points; however, special rules apply for the spacing and indentation of numbered and bulleted lists. See pages 63-65 in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition APA Manual for guidance.

Source: Diane Wyant, UNC School of Social Work academic editor and educational specialist  
American Psychological Association Publication Manual, 6<sup>th</sup> edition

**Need Writing Assistance??**

**Susan and Diane are here to help!!**

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