

The Portable Editor

Tips for Improving Your Writing

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In this issue, we address a question that has puzzled many APA users since last year's changes to the style guidelines for headings: Which headings use boldface font? Because the new guidelines caused considerable confusion among APA users, the APA editors recently offered clarification at the manual's online blog, <http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/2010/06/headings-and-the-use-of-boldface-type.html>; we share the main points below.

As you prepare for a new school year and a surge of writing assignments, we also wanted to offer a few tips on how to improve the clarity and flow of your writing. As always, for more writing resources information, go to <http://ssw.unc.edu/students/writing>.

To **bold** or not to bold?

Generally, section titles, such as the examples below, use regular font type (no bold, no italics and no underlining):

- Abstract
- Author Note
- Title of Your Paper (as written on the title page of your paper)
- References, and
- Appendix/Appendices

Boldface formatting is reserved for headings **within** the body of your paper. APA refers to these headings as Levels 1-5, although the fifth level is the only heading that does NOT use boldface type. Below is an example of how your paper might look with these boldface headings:

Chapter 2: Main Heading for Chapter

[APA Level 1, centered, boldface, Headline-style caps]

Second-Level Heading [APA Level 2, flush left, boldface, headline-style caps]

Third-level heading. [APA Level 3, indented, boldface, ends with a period, sentence-style caps].

Fourth-level heading is a subsection of above topic. [APA Level 4, indented, boldface, italics, ends with period, sentence-style caps.]

Fifth-level heading is a subsection of above topic. [APA Level 5, indented, not bold, italics, sentence style caps, ends with period.]

Stress in Writing: It's a Good Thing!

One common problem in student papers is the writing often appears disorganized or choppy because it contains awkwardly structured sentences. Poorly ordered sentences do not present the reader with the bits of information in the order needed for processing the whole picture, forcing the reader to backtrack to comprehend how points are connected.

Unclear: “*Poor social skills, lack of empathy for others, and increased levels of aggression were among the most commonly reported characteristics of children with aggressive behavior.*”

Clear: “*The characteristics most common among aggressive children included poor social skills, inadequate levels of empathy, and frequent aggressive behaviors.*”

The second sentence is more “user-friendly” because it states the subject before giving the list of characteristics, allowing the reader to make sense of the information without backtracking.

And remember, the human brain tends to give greater emphasis to things that are last, such as the last item on a list, the last part of a sentence, or the last song you heard before turning off the radio.

Which of the sentences below implies that you will get the raise you have been hoping for?

- *You deserve a raise, but the budget is tight.*
- *The budget is tight but you deserve a raise.*

The end of a sentence is a natural point for emphasis or stress, so the second sentence is the correct choice because it places the “raise” in the *stress position*.

To create a seamless flow of ideas between sentences, identify the word or phrase occupying the stress position in one sentence and repeat that word or phrase at the beginning of the next sentence (i.e., *topic position*). However, this conscious approach to creating flow does not mean you repeat the same word. Rather, as shown in the example below, vary the vocabulary used to repeat the thought or idea.

“The budget is tight, but you deserve a raise. Your salary increase will begin with the new fiscal year, which starts July 1.”

In the first sentence, the underlined words “a raise” are in the stress position. In the second sentence, “salary increase” repeats the concept of “a raise” in the *topic position* (i.e., the beginning segment) of the sentence. Now, compare the effective flow of the above sentence pair with the lack of flow in the pair below:

“You deserve a raise but the budget is tight. Your salary increase will begin with the new fiscal year.”

(Although you may not care about flow as long as you are getting a raise!)

(Portable Editor Source: Diane Wyant, SSW academic editor and educational specialist, and UNC Writing Center video module available at <http://www.unc.edu/tlim/wc>)

Looking for Writing Support?

Check out the resources on <http://sww.unc.edu/students/writing>
Drop-in Support: Tuesdays, Noon — 2 p.m., Office 548e
Contact the Writing Support Team (i.e., Susan White, Diane Wyant, Cathy Bryson) for an appointment or help via e-mail/phone at soswwritingsupport@gmail.com.