

# *The Portable Editor*

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In this latest issue, we discuss the American Psychological Association Style (APA) rules on abbreviations. In APA, abbreviations should be limited to instances when (a) the abbreviation is standard and will not interfere with the reader's understanding and (b) if space and repetition can be greatly avoided through abbreviation.

Although it is tempting to use multiple abbreviations to save space and squeeze in a few more words, you should resist that temptation. Overuse of abbreviations can turn your paper into a confusing serving of alphabet soup that obscures your message. APA does not set a limit on the number of abbreviations, but the *American Medical Association Manual of Style* wisely cautions writers to use no more than four to five *unfamiliar* abbreviations because that is the maximum number of new abbreviations most readers can remember without having to backtrack in the text.

The APA Manual provides a few basic guidelines for abbreviating, but exceptions to the rules always exist. The list below outlines the APA guidelines and provides examples as well as notable exceptions.

- A basic, consistent rule across writing styles is to define abbreviations on first use by writing out the full term, followed immediately by the abbreviation in parentheses. Within parentheses, use square brackets to define an abbreviation. In APA, once an abbreviation is defined, you must use the abbreviation rather than writing out the term.

*Examples:* “According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)...”  
“According to recent reports (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2015)...”

*Exceptions:* Terms abbreviated in the text can be written out in titles and headers. Standard abbreviations such as units of measurement and states do not need to be written out. APA also allows abbreviations that appear as words in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* to be used without definition (IQ, REM, AIDS, HIV, 24/7).

- Do not use periods or spaces in abbreviations of all capital letters, unless the abbreviation is a proper name *or* refers to participants using identity-concealing labels:

*Examples:* MSW (master's of social work), ANOVA (analysis of variance), DSS (Department of Social Services), CPS (child protective services)

“Participants F.I.M. and S.W.F. expressed vocal opposition to ...”

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*Exceptions:* Use a period when abbreviating United States as an adjective (e.g., U.S. Marines or U.S. Senator) or when a standard abbreviation uses internal periods such as the M.I.N.I. (Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview).

- Use a period if the abbreviation is a Latin abbreviation or a reference abbreviation:

*Examples:* i.e., (id est, meaning *that is*); e.g., (exempla gratis, meaning *such as*); vs. (versus); cf. (conferre, meaning *compare*); a.m. (ante meridiem, meaning *before noon*); *or* Vol. 7, p. 12, 4th ed.

- Do not use periods when abbreviating measurements:  
*Examples:* ft (foot/feet), lb (pound), mi (mile), min (minute)  
*Exceptions:* Use a period when abbreviating inch (in.) to avoid confusion with the preposition *in*.
- Units of measurement and statistical abbreviations should be abbreviated only when accompanied by numerical values:  
*Examples:* 7 mg, 12 mi,  $M = 7.5(SD = 2.1)$ , but written out when not used with a number  
 "...measured in milligrams, several miles after the exit, the means were determined..."
- Only certain units of time should be abbreviated.
  - Acceptable to abbreviate hour (hr), minute (min), and second (s)
  - Do not abbreviate day, week, month, or year.
- To form the plural of abbreviations, add the letter s alone (no apostrophe, no italics).  
*Examples:* vols., IQs, Eds.  
*Exception:* Do not add s to pluralize units of measurement (12 m not 12 ms).

### Abbreviations in Citations

Citations should be as condensed as possible, so APA has endorsed basic rules of abbreviation to provide readers with reference information.

- Always abbreviate the first and middle names of authors, editors, translators, and other contributors to a source.  
 Shakespeare, W.; Chomsky, N.; DuBois, W.E.B.; van der Slaght, G.
- Use the following abbreviations within citations (take note of capitalization):

APA Citation Abbreviations	
<i>Book Part</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
edition	ed.
Revised edition	Rev. ed.
Second Edition	2nd ed.
Editor(s)	Ed. or Eds.
Translator(s)	Trans.

No date	n.d.
Page(s)	p. or pp.
Volume(s)	Vol. or Vols.
Number of issue	No.
Part	Pt.
Technical Report	Tech. Rep.
Supplement	Suppl.

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**Bonus Round:** Initialisms and acronyms are two types of abbreviations used to shorten phrases.

*Initialisms* are abbreviations that are pronounced one letter at a time.

*Examples:* FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) HTML (hypertext markup language), FYI (for your information).

*Acronyms* are abbreviations that are pronounced as words.

*Examples:*

NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration)

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

Scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus; Thanks to Jacques Cousteau!)

Radar (radio detecting and ranging)

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