

**GENERAL WRITING STYLE GUIDE FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS**

*If you have questions about or suggested improvements to this document,*

*please contact the COE’s* *Research Coordinator for Proposal Development**.*

**Overview**

According to the American Copy Editors Society, research confirms that readers of a well-edited document retain more of its intended message. ***Errors, inconsistencies, and cumbersome language distract the reader’s focus. As a result, the reader remembers fewer details and finds the content less credible.***

The ***conscious and subconscious processes of reading*** signify the importance of taking the time to ensure your research proposal is well-organized and well-written. To that end, ***this* General Writing Style Guide *addresses the most common inconsistencies and mistakes*** found in proposal documents.

If the funder does not require adherence to a specific style guide (e.g., American Medical Association’s *Manual of Style*, American Psychological Association’s *Publication Manual*), you must be consistent for each element irrespective of the style guide(s) you choose to use. Since page limitations make optimizing space important for your proposal, and the academic sophistication of your readers will vary by funder, consider mixing style guide approaches (e.g., use APA style for punctuation and the reference list; use AMA style for in-text citations).

***Please take the time to review these guidelines*** and draft your proposal documents accordingly, remembering that ***consistency for each element is critical***. When reviewers notice your attention to the details of crafting your proposal, they will be confident in your ability to successfully attend to the details of conducting your research.

Please contact the Research Coordinator for Proposal Development if you would like her to edit and proofread your proposal document drafts.

**Draft Identifiers**

Since the proposal development process yields multiple drafts, the header or footer of each document draft should include: (1) author’s name or initials; (2) date; and (3) page numbers.

[**Active (Direct) vs. Passive (Indirect) Voice**](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1/)

* Definitions
* passive voice: the true subject is acted on, rather than acting, which typically weakens the statement
* active voice: the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb

*Example – passive: The boy was bitten (verb) by the dog (subject).*

 *active: The dog (subject) bit (verb) the boy.*

* ***In most cases, active voice is preferred*** because:
* its concise construction ***makes your meaning clear***

*Example – passive: The certification exam was failed by over one-third of applicants.*

 *active: Over one-third of applicants failed the certification exam.*

* it ***avoids awkward and wordy sentences***, which can lead to reader fatigue

*Example – passive:* ***It was determined by the committee that the report was inconclusive.***

 *active: The committee determined the report was inconclusive.*

*Example – passive: In Year 2 of the project, we will be administering…*

 *active: In Year 2 of the project, we will administer…*

* for proposals, it ***infers confidence*** that the research will be completed

*Example – passive: The project team is planning to…*

 *active: The project team will…*

* **Recognizing passive voice**
* verb phrase will always include a form of “be” – **am, is, was, were, are, been**
* may include "by the..." after the verb
* Reason to use passive voice
* the subject performing the action is obvious, unimportant, or unknown and the action itself is important, rather than the subject performing the action

*Example – passive: Rules are made to be broken.*

 *active: Authorities make rules to be broken.*

**Punctuation and Syntax**

* Place ***one space*** between each sentence
* [***Apostrophes***](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/621/01/) signify the possessive forms of nouns, show the omission of numbers, and indicate plurals of lowercase letters
* Singular possessive – The teacher’s gradebook…

Plural possessive – The teachers’ gradebooks…

* A common mistake adds an apostrophe to lesser-used words when the plural is intended (e.g., 1960’s should be 1960s; PI’s if singular possessive, PIs if plural)
* Omission of numbers – 1960s = ’60s
* Plurals – mind your p’s and q’s
* Place periods and commas inside the closing ***quotation mark***; place other punctuation marks outside the closing quotation mark unless they are part of the quoted material
* ***Lists of three or more items***
* be consistent in using/not using a ***comma*** prior to the “and” or “or” before the final item

*Example (,)* – *This movie is provocative, sad, and funny.*

*Recommended* – using a comma before all items in a list, including the final item, eliminates any reader uncertainty as to when the list of items ends

* always use ***semicolons*** between all items if any item within the list is itself a list

*Example (;)* – *The kitchen’s color scheme will be either blue, red, and beige; black and white; or blue, green, and eggshell.*

* always use ***semicolons*** for enumerated lists

*Example – The evaluation will address (1) …; (2) …; (3)…; and (4)….*

* The [***use of hyphens***](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/576/1/) is one of the most confounding style issues. The general rule is to use a hyphen when joining two or more words to serve as a single adjective before a noun

*Example – students in fourth grade vs. fourth-grade students*

*Example – costs of health care vs. health-care costs*

*Example – assessment results at the district level vs. district-level assessment results*

Hyphens also are used to “stand in” for a common element in all but the last word of a list

*Example – pre- and post-intervention surveys*

*Example – 5th-, 8th-, and 10th-grade teachers*

* Use the ***percent sign*** when referring to numbers represented numerically (9%); spell out “percent” when referring to numbers that are presented as words (nine percent)
* Be consistent in ***using numerals or words*** when referencing numbers
* always use the word if a number begins a sentence
* use numerals exclusively OR

use words for numbers 0-9 and numerals for numbers 10 and above with one exception: represent numbers 0-9 numerically if they are being compared with numbers 10 and above within the same paragraph

*Example – Of those responding to the survey, 8% were African American, 36% were Hispanic, 52% were White, and 4% represented other ethnicities.*

**Common Latin Abbreviations**

* ***i.e.,*** = “that is,” – used to give specific clarification; always put comma after last period
* ***e.g.,*** = “for example,” – a list of some but not all possibilities; “etc.” is inferred and should

not included

* ***et al.*** = “and others” – no comma before or period after “et”
* ***vs.*** = “versus” – can be used in place of “compared to”

**Headings**

* Headings subconsciously guide the reader through your proposal. Since reviewers read multiple proposals, ***be deliberate in crafting your headings*** so they can follow the flow of your proposal and better remember its main components.
* In most cases, the funder provides a required structure for the narrative; ***use subheadings within the main structure*** to provide those important subconscious memory cues.
* ***Always provide a space before Level 1 headings***. The white space provides a mental break for the reviewer.
* If the funder requires proposal documents to be ***double-spaced, indent each paragraph at ¼-inch***. If your documents are ***single spaced, use block paragraphs*** with a blank line between each to provide important white space.
* Do not leave ***“orphan” headings*** at the bottom of a page.

**NAME OF PROJECT**

**Level 1 Heading**

Paragraph begins here if double-spaced…

Paragraph begins here if single-spaced; insert a blank line between each paragraph only at this heading level

**Level 2 Heading**

Paragraph begins here if double-spaced…

Paragraph begins here if single-spaced…

Level 3 Heading. Text begins here…

*Level 4 Heading.* Text begins here…

**Figures and Tables**

* Be consistent in the use of decimal places for each data set referenced in the text and within figures/tables.
* In general, show both numerical values and percentages – this allows the reader to appreciate both the volume and ratio of what is being discussed
* If you use multiple figures of similar data (i.e., similar variables) keep values on the Y-axis the same; otherwise, the results across figures are visually skewed
* Within the text, always provide a parenthetical reference as well as an overview of each figure or table, highlighting the data/information you find most interesting or that you want to stress; you do not have to describe every element… instead, use the text to direct the reader to what you want them notice about the data

**Citations and Bibliography/References**

* To optimize space for your narrative, consider using numerical superscripts for citations
* For the Bibliography/References section, list and enumerate your references in the order in which they appear in the text
* Consistently use the reference formatting style with which you are most familiar
* Important – verify that all textual citations have an accompanying reference and *vice versa*.

**Appendices**

* + Always reference each appendix within the text by its title and provide a brief description of its contents
	+ Unless required by the funder, do not include appendices that have not been referenced in the text
	+ Clearly label each item in the Appendix with a capital letter (i.e., Appendix A, B, C…) and its title
	+ Present and label the appendices in the order in which they appear in the text, unless the funder requires a different order