

Some Tips for Writing Psychological Reports

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Structure of this presentation:

- Basic layout of a psychological report
- Some common problems that are easy to avoid
- Some examples from Japanese early drafts

Conventional structure of a psychological report:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- (Materials and) Method
- Results
- Discussion
- References

Introduction

- The Introduction should **justify the reasons for the study**.
- It should briefly describe the research question, and **summarize** previous research. It should raise unanswered questions, and state what the present study will do, and how.

Introduction

- **Tip:** The present tense may be used for general statements, and the past tense for describing previous work.

Examples:

- “From an early age humans are sensitive to social cues such as gaze or pointing.”
- “In one study, 6-month-old infants reliably looked in the same direction as a model...”

Method

- **How was the study done?**
- Who were the participants? How many? How selected? Relevant information (e.g., age, sex).
- What equipment was used?
- What procedures? (Tasks, measures, trials and sessions)
- The main issue with the Method section is how much detail to include.

Method

- **Tip:** Aim for brevity.
- **Tip:** Always use the **past** tense for Procedure.

Example:

“When the infant chose an object, the experimenter would say “Well done!”

should be:

“When the infant chose an object, the experimenter **said** “Well done!”

Results

- Results should be presented without interpretation of their meaning.
- Data are summarized in text, figures and/or tables.
- **Tip:** Avoid excessive precision (too many decimal places) when reporting numbers.
- **Tip:** Always use the **past** tense when reporting results. (e.g., “Married people scored higher than single people on optimism scales”)

Discussion

- A good Discussion may start with a brief summary of the most important results, followed by explanation of their meaning.
- Do they agree with previous research? If not, what might be reasons for the differences?
- **Tip:** Avoid vague qualifiers. Example: “Our results seem to indicate that very young infants might be able to understand intentions.”

Discussion

- **Tip:** Avoid vague qualifiers.

“Our results ~~seem to~~ indicate that very young infants ~~might be capable of~~ understanding others’ intentions.”

should be:

“Our results indicate that very young infants might understand others’ intentions.”

Abstract

- A brief summary of the whole paper. It should include the objectives of the study, how the study was done, what the results were, and the conclusions.
- Generally 6-8 sentences: one stating the specific question addressed, one listing the main procedures, two or three describing results, one describing the main conclusions.
- (Example later)

General Tips, Common Errors

- **Aim for brevity!** Omit needless words.
- Example:

“The dogs were able to solve a detour task after a certain amount of experience with the task.”

General Tips, Common Errors

- **Aim for brevity!** Omit needless words.

- Example:

~~“The dogs were able to solve a detour task after a certain amount of experience with the task.”~~

“The dogs solved a detour task after experience with the task.”

General Tips, Common Errors

- **Aim for brevity!** Omit needless words.

~~“In order to assess the effect...”~~ can become:

“To assess the effect...”

~~“In spite of their young age...”~~ can become:

“Despite their young age...”

General Tips, Common Errors

- Is every “**the**” necessary?: **Can repetition be avoided?**

Example:

“The younger and the middle-aged participants completed the first and the second questionnaires only; the oldest participants also completed the third questionnaire too.”

General Tips, Common Errors

~~“The younger and the middle-aged participants completed the first and the second questionnaires only; the oldest participants also completed the third questionnaire too.”~~

can become:

“Younger and middle-aged participants completed the first and second questionnaires only; the oldest completed all three.”

General Tips, Common Errors

- **Use the active voice whenever possible:**

- Example:

“Participants were given three questionnaires.”

can become

“Participants completed three questionnaires.”

General Tips, Common Errors

- **Use the active voice whenever possible:**
- Many journals now encourage first person pronouns. Example:

“Performances in the first and second sessions were compared.”

can become:

“We compared performances in the first and second sessions.”

General Tips, Common Errors

- Present methods and results in **past tense**.
- **Do not use contractions** (e.g., don't can't, haven't).
- **Data** is a plural noun. (Data were analyzed....These data show that.....)

General Tips, Common Errors

- Keep sentences short whenever possible.
- Avoid complicated words and jargon, and exaggeration. Example:

“In his very important 2010 paper, John Robertson conducted a series of impressive experiments and came to the conclusion that chimpanzees show amazing metacognitive abilities. This is an extremely consequential finding.”

General Tips, Common Errors

~~“In his very important 2010 paper, John Robertson conducted a series of impressive experiments and came to the conclusion that chimpanzees show amazing metacognitive abilities. This is an extremely consequential finding.”~~

“Research by Robertson (2010) provided support for metacognitive abilities in chimpanzees. This is an important finding.”

(From 31 words.... to 16!)

Apostrophes!

- The monkey's tail = the tail belonging to one monkey.
- The monkeys' tails = the tails belonging to several monkeys.
- The monkeys had tails.: Simple plural nouns have no apostrophe.
- A few irregular plurals have the apostrophe before "s" (e.g., children's, men's, women's, people's, mice's).

Apostrophes!

- The monkey groomed **its** tail.: No apostrophe in the possessive form of “it”.
- **It’s** easy when you know how.
- **“It’s” = “It is”**.

Japanese examples

- “...Such domestication history may have enhanced dogs’ highly sophisticated ability to form multi-modal representations of their owners.”

Edit:

- “~~...Such domestication history~~ may have enhanced dogs’ ~~highly sophisticated~~ ability to form multi-modal representations of their owners.”

Japanese examples

- “...~~Such domestication history~~ may have enhanced dogs’ ~~highly sophisticated~~ ability to form multi-modal representations of their owners.”

From 17 words to 13:

- “Domestication may have enhanced dogs’ ability to form multi-modal representations of their owners.”

Japanese examples

- “The stimuli were prepared using the following method:”

Edit:

- ~~“The stimuli were prepared using the following method:”~~

becomes:

“Stimuli were prepared **as follows:**”

(From 8 words to 5)

Japanese examples

[Male meadow-voles were exposed to a pregnant female in one location and a non-pregnant female in another location...]:

“The males showed no preference on the locations in the test that followed 30 min after this exposure phase. On the next day, in contrast, the males showed a preference for the location where they found the pregnant female.”

(39 words)

Japanese examples

“The males showed no preference ~~on the~~ **between** locations ~~in the test that followed~~ **when tested** 30 min after this exposure phase. ~~On the next day, in~~ In contrast, **the following day** they ~~showed a preference for~~ **preferred** the location where they found the pregnant female.”

Japanese examples

“The males showed no preference between locations when tested 30 min after this exposure phase. In contrast, the following day they preferred the location where they found the pregnant female.”

(From 39 to 30 words)

Final example: an abstract

“Understanding conspecifics’ emotional states seems important in managing social interactions. We examined whether capuchin monkeys modify their own behaviors according to a conspecific’s emotional expressions. Six subject monkeys were shown a stimulus monkey emotionally responding to an object in a container. The subject monkeys themselves could not see the object in the container, but

Abstract: continued

could only see the emotional reaction of the stimulus monkey toward the object. The subject monkeys reached more frequently when the stimulus monkey showed an emotionally positive expression than when she showed an emotionally neutral or negative expression. That is, using the emotional reactions of others, the subject monkeys might recognize the contents of the container were emotionally positive or

Abstract: continued

negative. This is the first report that New World monkeys are capable of perceiving emotional valence of conspecifics' emotional expression.”

(134 words)

Abstract: edited

“Understanding conspecifics’ emotional states ~~seems~~ **is** important ~~in~~ **for** managing social interactions. We examined whether capuchin monkeys modify their own behaviors according to ~~a conspecific’s~~ **another’s** emotional expressions. Six subject monkeys ~~were shown~~ **observed** a stimulus monkey ~~emotionally~~ responding **emotionally** to an object in a container. The subjects themselves could not see the object, ~~but~~

Abstract: edited

~~could only see the emotional reaction of the stimulus monkey. toward the object. The~~
Subjects reached **for the container** more frequently when the stimulus monkey showed an ~~emotionally~~ positive expression than [when she showed] an ~~emotionally~~ neutral or negative [expression/**one**]. ~~That is, using the emotional reactions of others,~~ **This result suggests that** the subjects ~~monkeys might recognize~~ **inferred that** the contents of the container were ~~emotionally~~ **either** positive or

Abstract: edited

negative. This is the first report that New World monkeys are ~~capable of perceiving~~ **able to perceive the** emotional valence of conspecifics' ~~emotional~~ expressions.”

Final abstract

“Understanding conspecifics’ emotional states is important for managing social interactions. We examined whether capuchin monkeys modify their own behaviors according to another’s emotional expressions. Six subject monkeys observed a stimulus monkey responding emotionally to an object in a container. The subjects themselves could not see the object, only the reaction of the stimulus monkey.

Final abstract

Subjects reached for the container more frequently when the stimulus monkey showed a positive expression than when she showed a neutral or negative expression. This result suggests that the subjects inferred that the contents of the container were either positive or negative. This is the first report that New World monkeys are able to perceive the emotional valence of conspecifics' expressions.”

(115 words)

Final tip:

- Read papers in English, and use them as a template or guide for structuring your own reports.
- Good luck with your submissions!