

## Burke Johnson's Writing Tips

The following are a few common mistakes I have seen in student papers. By reviewing this list, you can easily avoid this set of problems and make your teacher's life much easier because your teacher will not have to make as many corrections to your writing.

Please note that a few of the following practices are United States specific (e.g., the rules discussed under number 1 and 3 do not apply in Western Europe).

1. Always include a comma before the "and" in a series of three or more items (APA, 2001: p.78).

- Incorrect example: The three most popular approaches to qualitative research are case study, phenomenology and ethnography.
- Correct example: The three most popular approaches to qualitative research are case study, phenomenology, and ethnography.

2. Do not use the term "subjects" to refer to people.

- Instead, as recommended by APA (2001: p.65, p.70), you should use the term "participants" or some other human descriptor (e.g., teachers or students).
- Also, the section heading where you describe your participants should be Participants, not Subjects, if you are doing research with humans.

3. Here is a lesson on grammar as it is practiced in the United States. Commas and periods are placed inside of the quotes, not outside of the quotes. Just remember the PQ rule: punctuation first and quotation second.

- Incorrect example: Some popular emic terms used by Mobile high school students are "geeks", "dorks", and "jocks".
- Correct example: Some popular emic terms used by Mobile high school students are "geeks," "dorks," and "jocks."

4. Minimize or eliminate the use of anthropomorphism in your writing (APA, 2001: pp.38-39). Anthropomorphism is defined (by American Heritage dictionary) as the "attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena."

- Example: Do not say "The research study collected data from 150 student teachers." As you know, the research study did not collect your data!
- Improved example: The researcher collected data from 150 student teachers.
- Even better example: I collected data from 150 student teachers.

5. As you can see in the above example, there is nothing wrong with using personal pronouns.

- For example, the use of "I" is fine if you are the author or researcher (e.g., APA, 2001: p.49, 52, etc.). (For more than one author, "we" can be used if you are referring to all of the authors.)
- It is, for example, simpler and more direct to say "I collected data from three groups of participants" than to say "The researcher collected data from three groups of participants."
- Exception: do not use personal pronouns in the article abstract.

6. Avoid using passive voice (APA, 2001; p.41).
  - Active voice is easier to read than passive voice.
  - Active voice helps the writer take ownership of his or her work.
  - Be direct in your writing style. It is much clearer.
  - Here's an example of passive voice: Emic terms were used by the research participants.
  - Here's an example of active voice: The research participants used emic terms.
7. Avoid the words Firstly, Secondly, Thirdly, etc;
  - It is simpler to say First, Second, Third, and so on.
8. Do not include the apostrophe in years (e.g., 1990's or 1980's).
  - This is the correct form: 1990s or 1980s.
9. Pretest is one word, and posttest is one word
  - Do not write pre-test or post-test
  - Do write pretest and posttest.
10. Avoid sexist language. One way to do this is to use the plural form (they) rather than singular form, but be very careful with subject/verb agreement if you use this approach.
  - It is acceptable to use "he or she."
  - Do not use s/he or he/she
11. The word "data" is plural; it is not singular. The singular of data is datum.
  - It is incorrect to say "The data was collected by the researcher."
  - The sentence should read "The data were collected by the researcher."
  - Remember, it's "data are" or "data were," not "data is" or "data was."
12. Do not capitalize, underline, or use italics for variable names in text.
13. Avoid or minimize the use of underlining, italics, or bolding for emphasis in your writing.
14. Use one space (not two) between sentences.
15. Do not separate two independent clauses with a comma; use a semicolon. That is, avoid comma splice errors. (In case you forgot, an independent clause essentially is a short sentence.)
16. A colon is preceded by an independent clause (APA, 2001: p.80).
17. Remember that a paragraph should always have a clear and organized structure. For example, always begin a paragraph with a topic sentence. Also, do not write paragraphs that are only one or two sentences long--either make your paragraph longer, delete it, or attach it to the previous paragraph (and if you use this last strategy you must make sure it fits with the rest of the material in the previous paragraph). As a general rule, is a good idea to make all of your paragraphs approximately the same length.

18. Create natural transitions from paragraph to paragraph.
19. Do not overuse one word transitions at the start of sentences (e.g., Therefore, Hence, Additionally, Conversely, etc.) Don't start every sentence with a transition followed by a comma. On the other hand, the occasional use of one word transitions can be helpful.
20. Use the phrases "with regard to" and "regarding" sparingly because they tend to be imprecise. "With regard to" is a cliché (remember to avoid clichés in your writing), and "regarding" can usually be made more direct and precise.
21. Be careful with words like "this," "that," and "it." That is, replace them with more precise language indicating exactly what they refer to.
22. Use simple words rather than complex words. For example, replace the word "utilization" with the simpler word "use."
23. Note that e.g., means "for example," i.e., means "that is," viz., means "namely," cf. means "compare," and et al., means "and others."
24. Avoid the use of "etc."
25. Use bullets sparingly in formal writing such as dissertations.
26. If you have a series in a sentence or a paragraph, identify the elements using lowercase letters (not numbers) in parentheses. Here is an example. We collected data from the following three groups: (a) students, (b) teachers, and (c) parents.
27. Use affect and effect correctly. Usually, "affect" is used as a verb and "effect" is used as a noun.  
Correct: The research examined the effect of teaching strategies on student learning.  
Correct: Teaching strategies affect student learning.
28. Avoid using multiple (synonymous) terms to refer to a single concept. Use the same term or word consistently to refer to a concept throughout your paper. It confuses readers when you use multiple words to refer to the same thing, and in technical writing you need to be as clear as possible.
29. Develop an outline before you begin writing. This will help prevent the problem of repeating yourself and it will lead to good, logical organization. For dissertations and books, I recommend developing your first version of the Table of Contents before you begin writing and continually revising the TOC during the writing project.
30. Remember these commonly misused plural and singular forms:
- | <u>Singular</u> | <u>Plural</u> |
|-----------------|---------------|
| datum           | data          |
| phenomenon      | phenomena     |
| criterion       | criteria      |

31. In the U.S., use toward rather than towards.

32. For more on writing, see the following additional sources:

- Chapters 4 (How to Write a Research Proposal) and 20 (Preparation of the Research Report) in the Johnson/Christensen text
- APA Publication Manual
- See Web Resources on the companion website of Johnson and Christensen's textbook for many helpful links. The links are under Chapter 4 and 20.