

**SUPPLEMENTAL DISSERTATION/THESIS GUIDE:
A SUMMARY OF COMMON ERRORS AND
ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES**

(rev. 12/07)

Some of the specific requirements in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.) (APA)—in use by the College of Education and Human Services—or the *MLA Style Manual* (2nd ed.) (MLA)—in use by Literature and Languages—are often not used by students working on dissertations or theses (note: other style manuals are used by some master’s programs). In some cases, students may not be aware of a specific rule, because they have not reviewed the manual sufficiently during their course work. Chapter 6 of APA and Chapter 5 of MLA also distinguish dissertations and theses from journal submissions, giving institutions the flexibility to require additional guidelines ([example: single-spacing block quotes and individual reference entries in the reference list](#)).

Important note—for students who wish to use software designed to assist with the use of a specific style manual (such as APA PERRLA), please be aware that such software **WILL CAUSE YOU EXTRA WORK** in some cases. For example, the APA PERRLA software is not compatible with the title page requirements of the Graduate School. We **DO NOT** use a running head or page numbers on title pages. Plus, you would have to create the text for the rest of the title page, so the program does not really save you much in the long run. In addition, these programs may cause problems with variations in references (for example).

The completed, bound dissertation/thesis is a permanent record that reflects upon the student, the faculty, the department, and the university. As such, faculty advisers and committee members expect top quality proposals, dissertations, and theses from their students. Both dissertations and theses are formal, scholarly works that require attention to detail, consistency, and flawless writing. **Students are expected to adhere to all requirements of the Graduate School (especially including the *Doctoral Student Handbook* or the *Thesis Guide*) and the style manual used. Deviations often cause delays and could impact graduation.**

To ensure that doctoral dissertations and master’s theses completed at Texas A&M University-Commerce are quality publications, the Office of Graduate Studies and Research offers this supplementary guide as an **addition** to APA/MLA and the Graduate School’s *Doctoral Student Handbook/Thesis Guide*. The list below includes some commonly disregarded APA, MLA, and Graduate School requirements plus supplemental guidelines found in published dissertation guides and on university web sites. (Note: page references that follow refer to APA [5th ed.] or MLA [2nd ed.])

The *Doctoral Student Handbook* is, to quote the Department of Literature and Languages, “the Prime Directive.” The guidelines presented in the handbook include title page, signature page, and copyright page format and specifications for required sections, margins, and pagination. The *Thesis Guide* provides similar guidelines. These standards are **NOT** optional.

Graduate School Requirements

The following guidelines are intended to clarify some of the requirements of the Office of Graduate Studies and Research.

For the title page of a dissertation, the specific degree should be one of the following (with no major listed): DOCTOR OF EDUCATION or DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

Also, the month and year of graduation are not separated by a comma.

To be sure that the left margin is set to allow for 1½ inches, set the left margin on your computer to 1.55” for the entire text. For the top margin of the first page of the Abstract, set the top margin on your computer to 2.25” for that page only.

The headings listed in the Table of Contents and the headings found in the text **MUST MATCH** exactly.

Students need to be clear about the purpose of each dissertation chapter (e.g., the Method chapter provides details about the design and completion of the study).

If appendices are used, each one requires a title page (with no printed number). Center the title under the appendix identification (e.g., Appendix B) in the middle of the page, and continue the page numbering sequentially.

APA Requirements

Paragraphs must be “longer than a single sentence but not longer than one manuscript page” (p. 380).

The completed dissertation should refer to the study itself in the past tense (p. 42).

Citations

A direct quotation requires a page number in the citation. A paraphrased reference should not have a page number in the citation.

Citations in text are often incorrect. References with two authors require both names for every citation. References with more than two authors require specific treatment according to the number of authors (see APA, pp. 208-209). The publication date is required for each citation, if the reference list includes more than one reference by the respective author(s). Otherwise, the date is only required for the first citation in each paragraph.

Note differences between parenthetical citations and citations within a sentence. When citing multiple works in parentheses, use alphabetical order (as in reference list) and separate each with a semicolon. Except for block quotations, final punctuation marks are always placed after a citation at the end of a sentence. Citations within a sentence require past tense (p. 42), and the date in parentheses should follow the author(s) immediately.

Numbers

All numbers over nine should be in figures, unless the number begins a sentence (which should be avoided in formal writing). Some numbers below 10 will need to be in figures, depending on the situation (see APA pp. 123-127).

Percentages with a number should always be printed as figures with no space between them (examples: 50%, 6%, 1.5%).

Seriation

Parallel construction (pp. 57-60) requires each element to be similar.

Be sure to distinguish between the format and enumeration required for a series within a sentence and the requirements for a series made up of separate paragraphs (pp. 115-117).

Word Choice

Do not treat inanimate objects as persons (p. 38). (Example: “The institution did not believe that the students could be admitted.”)

The use of *which* or *that* is not interchangeable (p. 55). Likewise, *while* and *since* are often used incorrectly (pp. 56-57).

Relative pronouns must agree with nouns they replace. “Use *who* for human beings; use *that* or *which* for animals and for things” (p. 48).

APA and MLA Requirements

Students should remember that both style manuals are designed primarily for publication submissions (such as journal articles). Hence, some manual specifications (such as running heads) do not apply to dissertations or theses (Chapter 6 in APA, Chapter 5 in MLA).

According to APA, all chapter numbers should be in figures, not words. However, MLA requires the chapter numbers to be in words.

Levels of heading should be consistent throughout the dissertation/thesis, though one chapter may utilize more levels than another (APA pp. 113-115, MLA p. 128). Also,

APA has recommendations for selecting specific heading levels, depending on how many are needed.

Punctuation

Periods and commas **never** (a rare absolute statement in English) fall outside quotation marks (double or single). Other punctuation marks are placed inside the quotation marks only when they are part of the actual quotation.

Underlining should not be used anywhere in the text. Since the dissertation/thesis will not be typeset, italics, rather than underlining, should be used.

In a series of more than two items, separate all items with a comma (including the item before *and* and *or*).

The apostrophe is not used to form the plural of a number or an abbreviation.

Hyphens and dashes should be entered without spaces before or after them (except when a hyphen is used as a negative sign [space before] or a minus sign [space before and after]). A dash is entered as two hyphens (although some word processors convert these hyphens to a dash), unless a special character with a dash is available.

Hyphens should not be used with most prefixes (see APA Table 3.2 and MLA section 3.46).

For additional usage of commas and other punctuation, please consult your style manual.

Quotations

Block quotations routinely are the site of errors. A quotation of 40 or more words should begin on a new line. Each line should be indented five spaces (APA) from the left margin (10 spaces for MLA), and no quotation marks are used. The final punctuation mark should precede the citation (which is not part of the quotation).

Single quotation marks can only be used (another absolute) within double quotation marks.

Agreement

The following word is plural: *data* —watch agreement with pronouns and verbs.

Likewise, watch subject-verb agreement, especially when referring to an individual (Example: “A student should submit his/her [not *their*] response...”). To avoid this problem, both APA and MLA suggest using plural forms (“Students should submit their responses...”).

References

All reference citations and reference list entries **MUST** match. Any reference cited in the text **MUST** be in the reference list, and similarly, all references in the reference list must be cited in the text (APA p. 215, MLA p.153). (Note: APA does not require personal communications to be included in the reference list.)

A *bibliography* is comprehensive (as noted in APA) and generally includes only books (as noted in MLA). Therefore, the reference list of a dissertation or thesis should be titled, *References* (APA) or *Works Cited* (MLA).

The style manuals require a very specific format for each type of reference. Learning the reference format for your field will be critical to your career.

Tables and Figures

Titles (placed above the table) and rules (or border lines) are used to designate tables, and figures require captions (placed under the figure). Both should be numbered (Arabic numerals) consecutively throughout the text.

Examples:

Table 1

Student Achievement Scores by Grade Level

	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Mean	45	59	65

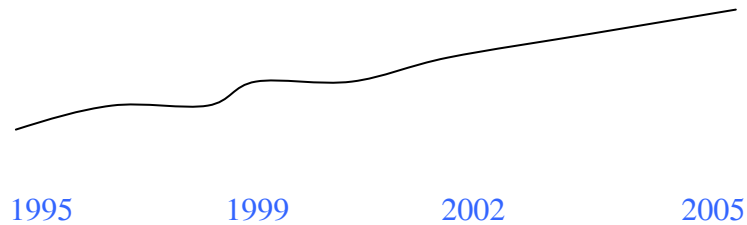


Figure 1. Trends in college attendance, 1995-2005.

The body of a table must be double-spaced. See the *Doctoral Student Handbook* for further requirements for lists of tables and figures, as well as their incorporation in the Table of Contents. In addition, tables and figures must be cited in the text (by number, not with a word like *below* or a page reference), and no table or figure can be placed in text prior to its first reference, though the placement need not be immediately after the reference. (Note: a page break **SHOULD NOT** follow the sentence or paragraph with the table or figure reference if it leaves excessive white space. A paragraph **CAN** be broken by the placement of a table or figure.) Although not a requirement (except by some advisers), tables and figures should not follow text on a page. The placement of tables and figures at the top of the page will assist the reader. In any case, do not break a table that can fit on one page. If a table must be converted to landscape format to make it fit on the page, the table should face the right margin. (Remember, a dissertation is not a journal article)

Abbreviations

Except for commonly used abbreviations (check the appropriate style manual), complete words generally are preferred over abbreviations. The abbreviation *etc.* suggests laziness on the part of the writer and should be avoided. In APA, “a term to be abbreviated must, on its first appearance, be written out completely and followed immediately by its abbreviation in parentheses” (p. 104). Abbreviations should be avoided especially in tables, if possible. The ampersand (&) is never used in text (exception: Texas A&M University-Commerce), only in parenthetical material.

Periods and spaces are not used in abbreviations made up of capital letters, such as degree names and states (examples: PhD, EdD, MS, TX, OK, DC). However, periods and spaces are used with initials of names (example: J. R. Smith). Also, APA requires periods (with no space) to be used in the abbreviation for United States, when it is used as an adjective (example: U.S. Army).

Page Formatting

Widows and orphans are not acceptable. A new paragraph with only one line at the bottom of the page should be moved entirely to the next page. Similarly, the last line of a paragraph should not be left to stand alone at the top of a page. Instead, move an additional line of text to accompany that line. Likewise, do not end a page with a heading or a heading and one line of text. (To avoid these errors, however, do not adjust the margins, which must remain at least 1 inch at the top and 1 inch at the bottom.)

Supplemental Guidelines

(Please note: some of the guidelines that follow may not be found in either APA or MLA. Most of these suggestions are summarized from published dissertation guides and web sites of other institutions. However, adherence to these preferences will not weaken a dissertation or thesis. Students should check with the major adviser.)

Each chapter of the dissertation should begin with a heading that includes the chapter number and the chapter title. The chapter number can be a level 1 heading, but the chapter title should be a level 5 heading, as shown below (check with your adviser or department for preferences). Using a level 5 heading for the chapter title allows for up to four levels of heading within the chapter, which may be necessary for some dissertations. The level 1 heading for the chapter number reflects the Table of Contents (see Appendix at the end of this list for an example) and assists the reader by not detracting from the chapter title.

Example:

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Wording

Do not use the word *methodology* when referring to the method of a single study. *Method* and *methodology* are not interchangeable terms. *Methodology* refers to all methods.

Avoid judgments, opinions, and self-assessment (until the conclusion section, where interpretation of the findings is **necessary**). (Example: “These findings are impressive, though not earthshaking.”) Related problems include the use of words such as *must*, *obviously*, *necessary*, *bad*, *good* (and *true* and *pure* in the same context), *nice*, *terrible*, *stupid*, *perfect*, *ideal*, and *always* (except in reference to periods and commas).

Precision in doctoral dissertations and master's theses is important. Hence, the following words should also be avoided: *today, now, soon, the past 10 years*, and *current* (may no longer be accurate in a 10-year-old dissertation or thesis—time references should be clear and precise); *this, that, these*, and *those* (when used alone as pronouns, as opposed to adjectives, they are frequently unclear); and *where* (used in place of *in which*). In addition, care must be taken when using *every, all, few, any*, or *most*.

Contractions, colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions, slurs, figures of speech, jokes or puns, jargon, slang, and vague or flowery language are not appropriate for formal, scholarly writing. Both APA (pp.36-40) and MLA (pp. 63-64) warn against such informal usage in writing. Also, sentences ending in prepositions are often considered colloquial.

Examples: *can't, they'll, doesn't, in terms of, lots of, kind of, something like, just about, a number of, for the purpose of, quite a large part, practically all, very few, the fact that, a famous researcher, would seem to show, they know who they are going with (who is also incorrect), and the research will examine what they are studying for.*

Generally, sentences should not begin with abbreviations. However, APA allows such use of abbreviations “only when necessary to avoid indirect and awkward writing” and only when a capitalized abbreviation or acronym can be used (p. 111).

A common error in submitted dissertations and theses is either a missing word(s) or an extra word(s), thus making the sentence awkward at best and incomprehensible at worst.

Split infinitives (example: *to not go*) are not acceptable in formal academic writing.

Generally, first and second person pronouns are not acceptable in formal dissertations/theses (check with individual departments, however). If the student believes that a self-reference is necessary, it can be worded similar to the following: “The first section describes how the data are....” Note: although APA actually permits the use of first person (pp. 37-39) and MLA does not prohibit first and second person, dissertation guides from other institutions are adamant about avoiding these pronouns—“The second person has no place in a formal dissertation” and “The first person has no place in a formal dissertation” (<http://www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/dec/essay.dissertation.html>).

Format

Do not justify right margins. Likewise, do not hyphenate words at the end of a line (allow the word processor default word wrap to determine the ends of lines).

Regarding spacing after end punctuation, irrespective of both APA and MLA, two spaces should be used (required by Literature and Languages). The extra space will assist the reader. (Individual advisers/departments may have another preference.)

Do not use additional parentheses within a set of parentheses. Use brackets if needed (example: "...a minus sign [space before and after]...").

Chapter 5 (or the final chapter of the dissertation) (see Appendix at the end of this list) can be a very useful chapter for those people who prefer not to read the entire dissertation ("what fools they must be"). Hence, the final chapter needs (at least) to summarize both the study procedure and the findings, to provide an interpretation of the findings (which can be called *conclusions*), and to provide implications for practice based on these conclusions.

Quotations/Copyrighted Work

Direct quotations should be used sparingly and only when the author's exact words are absolutely necessary to create the intended effect. Therefore, direct quotes with errors should be avoided because of their obvious weakness. However, care must be taken with paraphrased references. Changing a word or two in a sentence is not paraphrasing; it is plagiarism.

Because dissertations are copyrighted (and a thesis may be), the inclusion of an entire work (e.g., a survey instrument, a model, or a figure) by another author requires written permission from the author/publisher included in the appendix.

Research Procedures

Students need to clearly understand the differences between limitations and delimitations, unless they are permitted to put both into one section, which is a workable solution that many advisers already advocate.

Students need to be accurate in referring to the sample or the population (i.e., they are not the same).

Findings are not conclusions. The findings of any study must be interpreted for the reader. These interpretations are referred to as conclusions.

Statistical and qualitative data gathering and analysis procedures must conform to the systematic requirements for the selected method, as described in the research literature.

A final word of caution: do not assume that a bound dissertation or thesis is flawless.

Appendix A

Format for the “Table of Contents”

Required “Table of Contents” Format

Table of Contents

List of Tables [if applicable]

List of Figures [if applicable]

Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION

[and so on]

One Format That Some Departments Use

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Purpose(s) of the Study

Hypotheses and/or Research Questions

Significance of the Study

Method of Procedure

Definition of Terms

Limitations and Delimitations

Basic Assumptions

Organization of Dissertation Chapters

2 REVIEW OF [RELATED] LITERATURE

[Usually organized by subtopics]

3 METHOD (not methodology)

Design of the Study

Instrumentation

Sample Selection

Data Gathering

Treatment of Data

4 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS (or DATA)

[Usually organized by hypotheses or by research questions]

5 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY AND THE FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS,
IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER
RESEARCH

Appendices

VITA

Appendix B

Typing the “Table of Contents” in MS Word

Table of Contents

To Set Up the Table Format,	1
Set a Tab in the Ruler for the Page Number in the First Line,	3
Go to Tabs Command,.....	3
Select Right Alignment for Tabs,	5
Select a Preferred Leader, Hit Set and OK,.....	11
Type the Heading, Hit Tab, and Type the Number.	13
Each Time You Hit Return, the Next Line Will Be Formatted as Well,.....	15
Just Like This.....	17
Subheadings can then be added using new (left alignment) tabs, which are the default.	19