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# Your Quick and Easy Proposal and Dissertation Guide

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Your Quick and Easy Proposal and Dissertation Guide (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

Dr. Clayton Alford

Why This Guide?

**A 15 -minute read should save you hours of work.** If you spend just 15 minutes reading this guide, then use it as a reference in writing your proposal or dissertation, you should save several hours you would otherwise have spent correcting APA style and grammar errors.

For nearly 10 years, I have seen doctoral students spend hours correcting APA style and grammar errors in their proposals and dissertations. Often, they ignored APA style and grammar rules for their Masters. This guide focuses on the areas that cause most problems for doctoral learners. If you keep this guide handy and refer to it when writing each chapter, you should significantly reduce the time you spend correcting errors caught by your dissertation committee.

Free of errors, your proposal and dissertation, two of the most important documents you will ever write, should showcase your ability to think critically and logically, research independently, and clearly communicate the results of your research. The fewer mistakes you make, the quicker you can correct them, and the more time you have for your research.

APA n.m, p.x means Chapter n, section n.m, page x of APA Publication Manual (Sixth Edition).

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## 1 Your First Few Tasks

- 1 Define the problem and check that you have the time and resources to research it.
- 2 Verify that it advances an earlier study or covers an original issue or a gap.
- 3 Write a purpose statement that explains why the problem merits investigation, who cares about it, how you will collect and analyze the data, and what outcome(s) you expect.
- 4 Discuss with your Dissertation Committee Chair in what person you want to write - first person singular (I, me, mine, my) or third person (the researcher, he, her, hers, his, she).

## 2 References

- 1 Start writing your References in APA format as soon as you have any material you expect to use as a citation. Expand them whenever you find more citation-worthy material. Every citation, except for personal communications and classical works (such as the Bible and the Q'ran) must appear in your References. Regularly updating them will save you time later. You can easily delete entries you do not use.
- 2 Here are the basic rules:
  - a) Start References on a new page, with a Level 1 heading using normal font (**not bold**).
  - b) Make each entry a single paragraph with half-inch hanging indent, double line spacing, and 0pt spacing before and after. That lets you quickly put entries in alphabetical order. It is easier than hitting the Enter and Tab keys as each line ends.
  - c) Order entries alphabetically by author; put two or more works by the same author(s) in date order; label two or more works by the same author(s) with the same year year(a), year (b) (e.g., 2016(a), 2016(b)), both in the References and in the citations.

See APA 6.25, pp. 181-183. See also this blog -

<http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/2010/05/alphabetization-in-apa-style.html>

- d) For format and content, see APA 6.26 – 6.32, pp. 183-192. Note particularly the rules for UPPER-CASE and lower-case for titles in 6.29, pp. 185-186.
- e) Font - Journal entries use *italic* font for *the journal title and volume number* - regular font elsewhere. Other entries use *italic font for the title* - regular font elsewhere.
- f) More than seven authors (correct format all entries) – see APA 7.01, paragraph 2 Journal article with DOI, more than seven authors p. 198.
- g) APA Chapter 7, pp. 198-224 explains how to show references for most types of works; pp.193-198 list the Chapter 7 location for each type of reference.
- h) Entry end – Never follow a DOI or URL with a period; put a period at the end of an entry that ends with anything but a DOI or URL.

### **3 Citations**

- A. There are parenthetical and in-text citations. This sentence is an example of a parenthetical citation (Alford, 2018, p. 3). Alford (2018, p. 3) wrote this sentence as an example of an in-text citation. APA Table 6.1, p. 177 gives the citation format for first and later citations by one, two, three to five, and more than five authors and for groups with and without abbreviations. Always check a new citation against that table.
- B. This table shows the required content for each type of citation.

Citation Type	Required Content		
	Author	Date	Page Number
Parenthetical Direct Quote	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parenthetical without Direct Quote	Yes	Yes	Recommended
A work’s first in-text citation in a paragraph	Yes	Yes	If direct quote, Yes Otherwise Recommended
A work’s later in-text citation in the same paragraph APA 6.11, pp. 174-175 “Within a paragraph”	Yes	No	

- C. Put direct quote citations with <40 words in quotation marks in the body of the text.
- D. Put direct quote citations with >39 words in block quotation format (APA 4.08, p. 92).

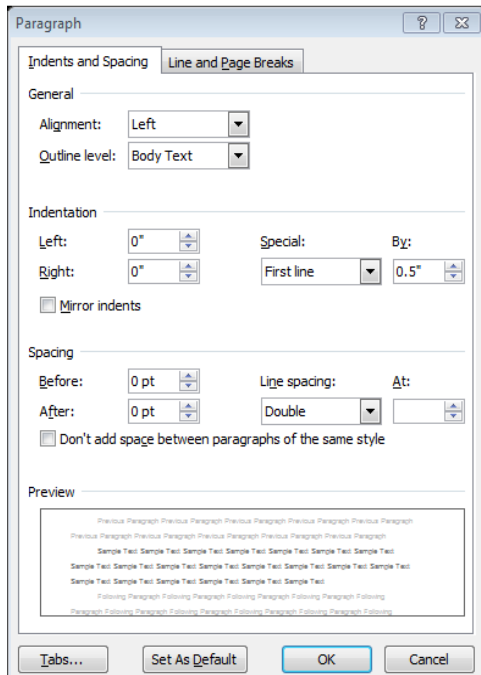
- E. Present most citations in your own words to reduce plagiarism. Limit your use of direct quote citations to those that are well written, focused on an issue, and relatively short.
- F. If you have two or more citations in the same parentheses, put them in the same order as they appear in the References (APA 6.16, pp. 177-178).
- G. Opening Quotation Marks. The word “that” never precedes an opening quotation mark. Put a comma after the word that precedes an opening quotation mark. When citing written sources, avoid “said,” and use other words, such as stated.
- H. Single Quotation Marks. When a direct quote inside double quotation marks includes text that, in the original, appeared inside double quotation marks, replace those double quotation marks with single quotation marks around that text (APA 4.08, p. 92). Do not use single quotation marks for any other purpose.
- I. Secondary source citation format:
  - In text - Williams (as cited in Richardson, 2012, p. 42) investigated truancy.
  - Paraphrased – “Truancy was high” (Williams, as cited in Richardson, 2012, p. 42).
  - In your References, show only the secondary source (e.g., Richardson, not Williams.)
- J. Omit all authors’ initials or first names unless they are necessary to avoid confusion.
- K. APA 4.12, pp. 96-97 gives correct spelling of the possessive form for a name that ends in s. The possessive form of a citation with more than one name has apostrophe s after the last author’s name. The possessive form of Name et al. is Name et al.’s.
- L. The abbreviation for page and pages is p. and pp., respectively.

## 4 Grammar and Style

- A. **Abbreviations.** Do not use casual abbreviations, such as don't, he'd, or they've. Do use abbreviations for long terms you use more than once. The first time you use the term, show the full wording and the abbreviation in parentheses, for all later appearances, use only the abbreviation, for example, No Child Left Behind (NCLB).
- B. **Academic writing and subject-verb agreement.** Never use first person plural or second person (our, ours, us, we, you, your, yours). **To avoid singular (plural) subjects with plural (singular) verbs** (a) discuss only named individuals using third person singular (he, her, hers, him, his, she) and singular verbs and (b) discuss everyone and everything else in the plural (teachers, schools, their, them, they) using plural verbs. You also **avoid awkward terms (e.g., he/she, him/her, her/his).**
- C. **Affect v effect.** **Avoid the words “affect” and “effect.”** Even if you use them correctly, an influential reader might mistakenly think they are wrong. With rare exceptions, “affect” is always a verb and “effect” is always a noun.
- D. **Commas and semicolons.** Use commas to separate items in a list. Use a comma after an opening word or phrase, for example, yesterday, in science classrooms. Except for lists (e.g., (a), (b), (c)), never put a comma before an open parenthesis; if necessary, put it after the close parenthesis as I did earlier in this sentence. A comma always follows therefore, however, and similar words; Unless such a word begins a sentence, put a comma or semicolon after the word that precedes it.
- Use semicolons for only two purposes: to separate independent clauses and to separate items in a list that uses commas. An example of the first is the semicolon in

- this sentence; an example of the second is in this parenthetical list of citations (Mowbray et al., 2014; Wilson & Reed, 2005).
- E. **Correct automatically.** Open your document, click on File, Options, and Proofing. Make Writing Style Grammar & Refinements, click on settings. Check all boxes in all lists except Words expressing Uncertainty and Gender Specific; make Punctuation Required with Quotes “inside,” make Spaces Between Sentences “two spaces,” click OK twice. Click on the ribbon’s Review tab and click on ABC Spelling & Grammar button. Review all comments; accept those you agree with, ignore the others.
  - F. **Empty paragraphs** - Except on the title page, never have an empty paragraph. Insert a page break from the Ribbon Insert tab, not a series of empty paragraphs, ahead of headings, tables, or graphs that must be on the top line of a page.
  - G. **Ethnic and racial identity** – see APA 3.14 pp. 75-76 for guidance on this topic. Except in direct quote citations, always use clear, courteous, academic language; if possible, use the terms members of a racial or ethnic group call themselves.
  - H. **Lists** – APA 3.04 (“The use of numbered” p. 64) Use numbers for only those lists that are a time sequence or in order of importance. **Avoid numbers for all other lists,** instead, use bullets or letters: (e.g., A, B; a, b); or (a), (b)).
  - I. **Numbers** – Use words for all numbers that start a sentence and all numbers closer to zero than 10; Use Arabic numbers everywhere else. Put apostrophe s after a number only if it owns what follows. In the 1960s, Route 66’s towns had many motels.
  - J. **Paragraph content.** Each paragraph should have from three to six sentences, should cover a single thought, with the second and later sentences transitioning the logical thread from and usually being longer and more complex than the preceding sentence.

K. **Paragraph format.** This dialog box shows correct paragraph format for your



regular paragraphs.

L. **Parallelism.** Certain word groupings always go together, for example, you cannot have “On the other hand” unless you have “on the one hand” earlier. In any list, each entry must be the same concept, for example, the building was old, a fire hazard, and an eyesore. You could not replace “an eyesore” with “presenting ugly appearance” because those words cannot follow “was.”

M. **Split infinitives** No APA style rule prohibits split infinitives; using them, however, could irk important readers of your work. Therefore, **avoid them.**

N. **That or which?** In the structure “Noun [that][, which] information,” for example, “...schools [that][, which] had budget problems...,” if the sentence needs the words after the noun, use “that” without any comma after the noun; if the words after the noun give only incidental information use which with a comma after the noun.

O. **Voice and tense.** APA 3.18, pp. 77-78 urges active voice, except when focusing on the object of the action. Discuss citations and your research in the past tense. Use present tense to discuss ongoing conditions, such as the effect of current legislation on schools. For all unknown or conditional future events, use could, might, should, or would. **Avoid will, except to discuss what appears later in your proposal or dissertation.**



## 5 Proposal or Dissertation Structure

Your proposal or dissertation consists of a title page, abstract, table of contents, chapters 1 through 3 (proposal) chapters 1 through 5 (dissertation), references, and appendices.

- A. Font – Make 12 pt Times New Roman this the document’s default font. You can use smaller Times New Roman font for Captions, footnotes, and footnote numbers.
- B. Running head. If your university or college requires a Running head, it
  - a) Is all UPPER-CASE:
  - b) Appears flush left in your header
  - c) Takes no more than 50 characters, including spaces and punctuation
  - d) On the title page, has Running head: immediately ahead of it
  - e) On all other pages, has nothing immediately ahead of it
- C. Page numbering. Put no page number on the title page; put Roman numbers on all other pages ahead of Chapter 1; put Arabic numbers on all pages starting with the first page of Chapter 1. Ask your dissertation Chair if your university or college requires page numbers centered in the footer or right justified in the header.
- D. See APA 3.02 and Table 3.1, p. 62 for heading structure.
- E. Transition words and phrases – Appendix A has a list of transition words and phrases. You can use them to create powerful links between your ideas, thereby improving your readers’ understanding of the logic of your paper. Before using any transition word, be sure you believe that it is the right match for the logic in your proposal or dissertation, by understanding its meanings, usage, connotations, and nuances. You can find many useful transition words and phrases at this link - <http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/transition-words.html>

## 6 Chapter Contents

This part has check sheets for each chapter in Chapter number order. The natural order for writing proposal chapters is 2, 3, 1 and for dissertation chapters is 2, 3, 1, 4, and 5. Write the Abstract last.

### Chapter 1 - Introduction

#### **Background, problem statement, research questions, study’s significance, assumptions**

Before you send Chapter 1 to your doctoral dissertation committee, review and be confident that it is consistent with parts 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each special issue on this check sheet.

Item	Special Issues	Check
Introduction	Present a brief introduction to your research topic, including past research in the area and why you find it of interest. Research involves investigation; therefore, eliminate from this chapter any personal bias such as aiming to prove anything.	
Problem Statement	Give the background to the problem. Ensure the problem statement is clear, practical, and has intellectual rigor.	
Purpose Statement	Ensure the purpose statement is clear, concise, and aligned with your research goals.	
Research Questions or Hypotheses	Ensure the questions or hypotheses are clear, aligned with your study’s purpose, and have proper depth and breadth. Ensure they correlate with measurable variables.	
Limitations	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Delimitations	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Terms Definitions	Present terms in alphabetical order; if a term’s definition requires understanding a term that appears later in the alphabet mention the later term and (see below) in the definition.	
Significance	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Summary	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Preview of Next Chapter	The final paragraph or two of this chapter should summarize the contents of the next chapter.	
Length	Aim to write between 10 and 15 pages for this chapter.	
Citations	Ensure all citations follow the guidance in Part 3, above.	
References	Verify that all citations, except personal communications and classical works, are in your References in the correct format and order discussed in Part 2, above.	
Grammar/Style	Verify that the chapter follows guidance in Part 4, above.	

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

### Conceptual or theoretical framework, review of research

Before you send Chapter 2 to your doctoral dissertation committee, review and be confident that it is consistent with parts 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each special issue on this check sheet.

Item	Special Issues	Check
Introduction	List the main areas of relevant past research.	
Body 1	This chapter frames your research and is the foundation of your dissertation, including relevant theoretical issues.	
Body 2	Present a series of discussions (each beginning with a level 2 or level 3 heading) of citations of (almost) all works in your References. Coordinate major themes under level 2 headings and minor themes under level 3 headings. Present ideas in a logical progression. Compare, contrast, and evaluate research, issues, and themes.	
Body 3	Discuss how you found the relevant citations and how your research and ideas evolved. Identify gaps in the literature, both here and in Chapter 5. Show how your research is relevant to your field of study.	
Body 4	Synthesize the Literature Review. Discuss each citation's relevance to your research and prior research in the same areas.	
Body 5	Include citations that conflict with your expectations as well as works that support them. At least 80% of your citations should be from works written within the past five years.	
Body 6	Include the top five writers in your area of research.	
Significance	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Summary	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Preview of Next Chapter	The final paragraph or two of this chapter should summarize the contents of the next chapter.	
Length	Aim to write between 40 and 60 pages for this chapter.	
Citations	Ensure all citations follow the guidance in Part 3, above.	
References	Verify that all citations, except personal communications and classical works, are in your References in the correct format and order discussed in Part 2, above.	
Grammar/Style	Verify that the chapter follows guidance in Part 4, above.	

### Chapter 3 - Methodology

#### Method, variables, organized by research questions or hypotheses

Before you send Chapter 3 to your doctoral dissertation committee, review and be confident that it is consistent with parts 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each special issue on this check sheet.

Item	Special Issues	Check
Introduction	Introduce your methodology. Repeat your Problem Statement and Purpose Statement.	
Body 1	Discuss the pros and cons of each research method (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed) explain why you chose your method(s) and why you rejected the other method(s). Discuss sample size, sampling method, research population, data collection, retention, and destruction. Discuss informed consent, confidentiality, and geographical location. Discuss protected groups, such as students under age 18.	
Body 2	Explain how your research is based on theoretical principles and concepts outlined in Chapter 2. Discuss how you propose to do a trial run of your research before doing the actual research. As appropriate, discuss use of Likert scales, triangulation, dependability, credibility, and validation. Present null and alternative hypotheses. Discuss expected findings.	
Body 3	Discuss ethical issues, how to reduce or eliminate conflicts of interest, and how to reduce, nullify or avoid researcher bias.	
Significance	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Summary	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Preview of Next Chapter	The final paragraph or two of this chapter of your dissertation should summarize the contents of the next chapter. No such summary should appear in Chapter 3 of your proposal.	
Length	Aim to write between 15 and 30 pages for this chapter.	
Citations	Ensure all citations follow the guidance in Part 3, above.	
References	For your proposal, verify that all citations, except personal communications and classical works, are in your References in the correct format and order discussed in Part 2, above. Verify that each entry in the References has at least one citation in your proposal and that each such citation has the same spelling of author name(s) and the same date as the entry in the References.  For your dissertation, verify that all citations, except personal communications and classical works, are in your References in the correct format and order discussed in Part 2, above.	
Grammar/Style	Verify that the chapter follows guidance in Part 4, above.	

## Chapter 4 – Research Findings

### Discussion of data gathered and analysis of findings

Before you send Chapter 4 to your doctoral dissertation committee, review and be confident that it is consistent with parts 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each special issue on this check sheet.

Item	Special Issues	Check
Entire Chapter	Consult with the Chair of your Dissertation Committee before starting work on Chapter 4 to determine its content and structure.	
Introduction	Start by reminding readers of the Research Questions.	
Body 1	Discuss your data samples, data collection processes, data analysis and findings. If you present your analysis and findings in tables, figures, or both, present the material in a clear series of charts with consistent format (including color coding) and structure. Use single line spacing for information in the tables and figures, including the titles of the charts. Decide what material you want in the body of the chapter and what material you want in an appendix.	
Body 2	Answer the Research Questions. Provide a clear presentation of your results. <b>Avoid methodological jargon.</b> Your outcomes should chart a systematic path that includes the research questions and hypotheses.	
Significance	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Summary	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Preview of Next Chapter	The final paragraph or two of this chapter should summarize the contents of the next chapter.	
Length	Aim to write between 15 and 50 pages for this chapter. The length will depend, substantially, on the number of figures or charts you need to present your results and analysis of the research. If you have so many figures and charts that they would need more than 50 pages, review the results to determine if the material would be better in one or more appendices, while presenting summary charts in this chapter.	
Citations	You should need few citations in this chapter, except to compare your analysis to the analysis presented by other authors. Ensure all citations follow the guidance in Part 3, above.	
References	Verify that all citations, except personal communications and classical works, are in your References in the correct format and order discussed in Part 2, above.	
Grammar/Style	Verify that the chapter follows guidance in Part 4, above.	

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion

### Summary of findings, conclusions, implications and suggestions for further study

Before you send Chapter 5 to your doctoral dissertation committee, review and be confident that it is consistent with parts 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each special issue on this check sheet.

Item	Special Issues	Check
Entire Chapter	Consult with the Chair of your Dissertation Committee before starting work on Chapter 5.	
Introduction	Remind the reader of the results presented in Chapter 4.	
Body 1	Extend the discussion of results that you presented in Chapter 4 with conclusions, implications for professional practice, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Present the implications as flowing naturally from the conclusions. Discuss how the underlying assumptions applicable to your research interacted with the research questions and hypotheses.	
Body 2	Present recommendations for further research that would naturally develop from the results of your research. Discuss gaps in the research. You should not limit your recommendations to areas directly connected to your conclusions, but present considerations for extending research into areas that are tangential to or disconnected from your area.	
Limitations and Delimitations	Include a discussion of why you rejected the method(s) that you decided not to use in your research.	
Significance	Be brief, clear, and relevant in discussing the implications for leadership, education, and scholarship.	
Summary	Be brief, clear, and relevant.	
Length	Aim to write between 15 and 30 pages for this chapter.	
Citations	You should need no citations in this chapter, except to compare your results to those of other researchers. Ensure all citations follow the guidance in Part 3, above.	
References	Verify that all citations, except personal communications and classical works, are in your References in the correct format and order discussed in Part 2, above. Verify that each entry in the References has at least one citation in your dissertation and that each such citation has the same spelling of author name(s) and the same date as the entry in the References.	
Grammar/Style	Verify that the chapter follows guidance in Part 4, above.	

## Appendix A

### Transition Words and Phrases

This table and this link give examples of words and phrases used for many transition concepts. -

<http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/transition-words.html>

Concept	Examples
Addition	again, also, and, besides, even more, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the second place, last, lastly, moreover, next, nor, or, second, secondly, and too <b>Refrain from using “etc.,” it is imprecise.</b>
Cause	because, for that reason, on account of, since
Clarification	in other words, that is, that is to say, to clarify, to explain, to put it another way, and to rephrase it. <b>Use “i.e.,” only within parentheses.</b>
Similarity	by the same [symbol][token], in like conduct, in similar fashion, in the same way, also, and comparably
Concession	granted, it is true, of course, and to be sure, perhaps
Conclusion	finally, in conclusion, and to conclude
Contrasts	after all, and yet, at the same time, but, however, in contrast, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, otherwise, though, and yet Use “on the other hand” only if you have “on the one hand” earlier.
Demonstratives	that, these, this, and those
Outcome	correspondingly, as a result, subsequently, henceforward, therefore, thus
Illustration	as an exemplification, for example, for instance, precisely, to demonstrate, and to illustrate. <b>Use “e.g.,” only within parentheses.</b>
Place	above, adjacent to, below, beyond, here, nearby, neighboring on, opposite to, there, and wherever
Pronouns	<b>Avoid first person plural and second person (our, ours, us, we, you, your, and yours).</b> Use only third-person (he, her, hers, his, it, its, she, their, theirs, and they) and, if agreed, first-person singular (I, me, mine, my)..
Purpose	for this purpose, in order that, so that, to that end, and to this end
Qualification	almost, almost never, although, frequently, maybe, nearly always, probably
Summary	in brief, in short, in sum, in summary, to sum up, and to summarize
Time	after, afterwards, always, and subsequently, at length, during, earlier, following, immediately, in the meantime, later, meanwhile, never, next, now, once, simultaneously, so far, sometimes, soon, then, this time, until now, when, whenever, and while

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