APA Style

American Psychological Association (APA) style calls for (1) brief documentation in parentheses near each in-text citation and (2) complete documentation in a list of references at the end of your text. The models in this chapter draw on the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition (2010). Additional information is available at www.apastyle.org.

A DIRECTORY TO APA STYLE

In-Text Documentation  139

1. Author named in a signal phrase  139
2. Author named in parentheses  140
3. Authors with the same last name  140
4. Two authors  140
5. Three or more authors  141
6. Organization or government as author  141
7. Author unknown  141
8. Two or more works cited together  142
9. Two or more works by one author in the same year  142
10. Source quoted in another source  142
11. Work without page numbers  142
12. An entire work  143
13. Personal communication  143

Notes  143
**Reference List 144**

**BOOKS 144**

Documentation Map: Book 146

1. One author 145
2. Two or more works by the same author 145
3. Two or more authors 145
4. Organization or government as author 147
5. Author and editor 147
6. Edited collection 147
7. Work in an edited collection 147
8. Unknown author 148
9. Edition other than the first 148
10. Translation 148
11. Multivolume work 148
12. Article in a reference book 149

**PERIODICALS 149**

Documentation Map: Article in a Magazine 151

13. Article in a journal paginated by volume 150
14. Article in a journal paginated by issue 150
15. Article in a magazine 150
16. Article in a newspaper 152
17. Article by an unknown author 152
18. Book review 152
19. Letter to the editor 152

**ONLINE SOURCES 153**

Documentation Map: Work from a Website 155
Documentation Map: Article in a Journal with DOI 156
Documentation Map: Article Accessed through a Database with DOI 157
20. Work from a nonperiodical website  
21. Article in an online periodical  
22. Article available only through a database  
23. Article or chapter in a Web document or online reference work  
24. Electronic book  
25. Wiki entry  
26. Online discussion source  
27. Blog entry  
28. Online video  
29. Podcast  

OTHER KINDS OF SOURCES  
30. Film, video, or DVD  
31. Music recording  
32. Proceedings of a conference  
33. Television program  
34. Software or computer program  
35. Government document  
36. Dissertation  
37. Technical or research report  

CITING SOURCES NOT COVERED BY APA  

Formatting a Paper  
Sample Pages  

Throughout this chapter, you’ll find models and examples that are color-coded to help you see how writers include source information in their texts and reference lists: tan for author or editor, yellow for title, gray for publication information: place of publication, publisher, date of publication, page number(s), and so on.
APA-a In-Text Documentation

Brief documentation in your text makes clear to your reader precisely what you took from a source and, in the case of a quotation, precisely where (usually, on which page) in the source you found the text you are quoting.

Paraphrases and summaries are more common than quotations in APA-style projects. See R-4 for more on all three kinds of citation. As you cite each source, you will need to decide whether to name the author in a signal phrase—“as McCullough (2001) wrote”—or in parentheses—“(McCullough, 2001).” Note that APA requires you to use the past tense or present perfect tense for verbs in Signal Phrases: “Moss (2003) argued.” “Moss (2003) has argued.”

1. Author Named in a Signal Phrase
If you are quoting, you must give the page number(s). You are not required to give the page number(s) with a paraphrase or a summary, but APA encourages you to do so, especially if you are citing a long or complex work; most of the models in this chapter do include page numbers.

Author Quoted
Put the date in parentheses right after the author’s name; put the page in parentheses as close to the quotation as possible.

McCullough (2001) described John Adams as having “the hands of a man accustomed to pruning his own trees, cutting his own hay, and splitting his own firewood” (p. 18).

Notice that in this example, the parenthetical reference with the page number comes after the closing quotation marks but before the period at the end of the sentence.

Author Paraphrased
Put the date in parentheses right after the author’s name; follow the date with the page.

John Adams’s hands were those of a laborer, according to McCullough (2001, p. 18).
2. AUTHOR NAMED IN PARENTHESES

If you do not mention an author in a signal phrase, put his or her name, a comma, and the year of publication in parentheses as close as possible to the quotation, paraphrase, or summary.

**AUTHOR QUOTED**

Give the author, date, and page in one parenthesis, or split the information between two parentheses.

One biographer (McCullough, 2001) has said John Adams had “the hands of a man accustomed to pruning his own trees, cutting his own hay, and splitting his own firewood” (p. 18).

**AUTHOR PARAPHRASED OR SUMMARIZED**

Give the author, date, and page in one parenthesis toward the beginning or the end of the paraphrase.

John Adams’s hands were those of a laborer (McCullough, 2001, p. 18).

3. AUTHORS WITH THE SAME LAST NAME

If your reference list includes more than one person with the same last name, include initials in all documentation to distinguish the authors from one another.

Eclecticism is common in contemporary criticism (J. M. Smith, 1992, p. vii).

4. TWO AUTHORS

Always mention both authors. Use and in a signal phrase, but use an ampersand (&) in parentheses.

Carlson and Ventura (1990, p. v) wanted to introduce Julio Cortázar, Marjorie Agosín, and other Latin American writers to an audience of English-speaking adolescents.

According to the Peter Principle, “In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence” (Peter & Hull, 1969, p. 26).
5. THREE OR MORE AUTHORS
In the first reference to a work by three to five persons, name all contributors. In subsequent references, name the first author followed by et al., Latin for “and others.” Whenever you refer to a work by six or more contributors, name only the first author, followed by et al. Use and in a signal phrase, but use an ampersand (&) in parentheses.

Faigley, George, Palchik, and Selfe (2004, p. xii) have argued that where there used to be a concept called literacy, today’s multitude of new kinds of texts has given us literacies.

Peilen et al. (1990, p. 75) supported their claims about corporate corruption with startling anecdotal evidence.

6. ORGANIZATION OR GOVERNMENT AS AUTHOR
If an organization name is recognizable by its abbreviation, give the full name and the abbreviation the first time you cite the source. In subsequent citations, use only the abbreviation. If the organization does not have a familiar abbreviation, always use its full name.

FIRST CITATION
(American Psychological Association [APA], 2008)

SUBSEQUENT CITATIONS
(APA, 2008)

7. AUTHOR UNKNOWN
Use the complete title if it is short; if it is long, use the first few words of the title under which the work appears in the reference list.


A powerful editorial asserted that healthy liver donor Mike Hurewitz died because of “frightening” faulty postoperative care (“Every Patient’s Nightmare,” 2007).
8. TWO OR MORE WORKS CITED TOGETHER
If you cite multiple works in the same parenthesis, place them in the order that they appear in your reference list, separated by semicolons.

Many researchers have argued that what counts as “literacy” is not necessarily learned at school (Heath, 1983; Moss, 2003).

9. TWO OR MORE WORKS BY ONE AUTHOR IN THE SAME YEAR
If your list of references includes more than one work by the same author published in the same year, order them alphabetically by title, adding lowercase letters (“a,” “b,” and so on) to the year.

Kaplan (2000a) described orderly shantytowns in Turkey that did not resemble the other slums he visited.

10. SOURCE QUOTED IN ANOTHER SOURCE
When you cite a source that was quoted in another source, let the reader know that you used a secondary source by adding the words as cited in.

During the meeting with the psychologist, the patient stated repeatedly that he “didn’t want to be too paranoid” (as cited in Oberfield & Yasik, 2004, p. 294).

11. WORK WITHOUT PAGE NUMBERS
Instead of page numbers, some electronic works have paragraph numbers, which you should include (preceded by the abbreviation para.) if you are referring to a specific part of such a source. In sources with neither page nor paragraph numbers, refer readers to a particular part of the source if possible, perhaps indicating a heading and the paragraph under the heading.

Russell’s dismissals from Trinity College at Cambridge and from City College in New York City have been seen as examples of the controversy that marked his life (Irvine, 2006, para. 2).
12. AN ENTIRE WORK

You do not need to give a page number if you are directing readers’ attention to an entire work.

Kaplan (2000) considered Turkey and Central Asia explosive.

When you are citing an entire website, give the URL in the text. You do not need to include the website in your reference list. To cite part of a website, see no. 20 on page 153.

Beyond providing diagnostic information, the website for the Alzheimer’s Association includes a variety of resources for family and community support of patients suffering from Alzheimer’s (http://www.alz.org).

13. PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Cite email, telephone conversations, interviews, personal letters, messages from nonarchived electronic discussion sources, and other personal texts as personal communication, along with the person’s initial(s), last name, and the date. You do not need to include such personal communications in your reference list.

L. Strauss (personal communication, December 6, 2006) told about visiting Yogi Berra when they both lived in Montclair, New Jersey.

APA-b Notes

You may need to use content notes to give an explanation or information that doesn’t fit into your text. To signal a content note, place a superscript numeral at the appropriate point in your text. Put the notes on a separate page with the heading Notes, after your text but before the reference list. If you have multiple notes, number them consecutively throughout your text. Here is an example from In Search of Solutions: A New Direction in Psychotherapy (2003).
TEXT WITH SUPERSCRIPT
An important part of working with teams and one-way mirrors is taking the consultation break, as at Milan, BFTC, and MRI.¹

CONTENT NOTE
¹It is crucial to note here that, while working within a team is fun, stimulating, and revitalizing, it is not necessary for successful outcomes. Solution-oriented therapy works equally well when working solo.

APA-c Reference List
A reference list provides full bibliographic information for every source cited in your text with the exception of entire websites and personal communications. See page 164 for guidelines on preparing such a list; for a sample reference list, see page 169.

Books
For most books, you’ll need to provide the author, the publication date, the title and any subtitle, and the place of publication and publisher.

IMPORTANT DETAILS FOR CITING BOOKS
- **AUTHORS:** Use the author’s last name but replace the first and middle names with initials (D. Kinder for Donald Kinder).
- **DATES:** If more than one year is given, use the most recent one.
- **TITLES:** Capitalize only the first word and proper nouns and proper adjectives in titles and subtitles.
- **PUBLICATION PLACE:** Give city followed by state (abbreviated) or country, if outside the United States (for example, Boston, MA; London, England; Toronto, Ontario, Canada). If more than one city is given, use the first. Do not include the state or country if the publisher is a university whose name includes that information.

1. **ONE AUTHOR**

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of publication). *Title*. Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


2. **TWO OR MORE WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

   If the works were published in different years, list them chronologically.


   If the works were published in the same year, list them alphabetically by title, adding “a,” “b,” and so on to the year.


3. **TWO OR MORE AUTHORS**

   For two to seven authors, use this format.

   First Author’s Last Name, Initials, Next Author’s Last Name, Initials, & Final Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of publication). *Title*. Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.

For a work by eight or more authors, name just the first six authors, followed by three ellipses, and end with the final author (see no. 21 for an example from a magazine article).

4. ORGANIZATION OR GOVERNMENT AS AUTHOR
Sometimes a corporation or government organization is both author and publisher. If so, use the word Author as the publisher.

   Organization Name or Government Agency. (Year of publication). Title. Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


5. AUTHOR AND EDITOR

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of edited edition). Title. (Editor’s Initials Last Name, Ed.). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher. (Original work[s] published year[s])


6. EDITED COLLECTION

   First Editor’s Last Name, Initials, Next Editor’s Last Name, Initials, & Final Editor’s Last Name, Initials. (Eds.). (Year of edited edition). Title. Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


7. WORK IN AN EDITED COLLECTION

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of publication). Title of article or chapter. In Initials Last Name (Ed.), Title (pp. pages). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.

8. UNKNOWN AUTHOR

Title. (Year of publication). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


If the title page of a work lists the author as Anonymous, treat the reference-list entry as if the author’s name were Anonymous, and alphabetize it accordingly.

9. EDITION OTHER THAN THE FIRST

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title (name or number ed.). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


10. TRANSLATION

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of publication). Title (Translator’s Initials Last Name, Trans.). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher. (Original work published Year)


11. MULTIVOLUME WORK

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title (Vols. numbers). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.

ONE VOLUME OF A MULTIVOLUME WORK

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of whole work (Vol. number). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


12. ARTICLE IN A REFERENCE BOOK

UNSIGNED

Title of entry. (Year). In Title of reference book (Name or number ed., Vol. number, pp. pages). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


SIGNED


Periodicals

For most articles, you’ll need to provide information about the author; the date; the article title and any subtitle; the periodical title; and any volume or issue number and inclusive page numbers. (APA also recommends including a DOI if one is available; for more on DOIs, see page 153. For an example of a journal article that shows a DOI, see no. 21.)

IMPORTANT DETAILS FOR CITING PERIODICALS

- AUTHORS: List authors as you would for a book.
- DATES: For journals, give year only. For magazines and newspapers, give year followed by a comma and then month or month and day.
• **TITLES:** Capitalize article titles as you would for a book. Capitalize the first and last words and all principal words of periodical titles. Do not capitalize a, an, the, or any prepositions or coordinating conjunctions unless they begin the title of the periodical.

• **VOLUME AND ISSUE:** For journals and magazines, give volume or volume and issue, depending on the journal’s pagination method. For newspapers, do not give volume or issue.

• **PAGES:** Use p. or pp. for a newspaper article but not for a journal or magazine article. If an article does not fall on consecutive pages, give all the page numbers (for example, 45, 75–77 for a journal or magazine; pp. C1, C3, C5–C7 for a newspaper).

13. **ARTICLE IN A JOURNAL PAGINATED BY VOLUME**

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of article. *Title of Journal, volume, pages.*


14. **ARTICLE IN A JOURNAL PAGINATED BY ISSUE**

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of article. *Title of Journal, volume(issue), pages.*

   Weaver, C., McNally, C., & Moerman, S. (2001). To grammar or not to grammar: That is not the question! *Voices from the Middle, 8*(3), 17–33.

15. **ARTICLE IN A MAGAZINE**

   If a magazine is published weekly, include the day and the month. If there are a volume number and an issue number, include them after the magazine title.

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year, Month Day). Title of article. *Title of Magazine, volume(issue), page(s).*


   If a magazine is published monthly, include the month(s) only.
16. ARTICLE IN A NEWSPAPER
If page numbers are consecutive, separate them with a dash. If not, separate them with a comma.

Author's Last Name, Initials. (Year, Month Day). Title of article. Title of Newspaper, p(p). page(s).

17. ARTICLE BY AN UNKNOWN AUTHOR
Title of article. (Year, Month Day). Title of Periodical, volume(issue), or p(p). page(s).

18. BOOK REVIEW
Reviewer’s Last Name, Initials. (Date of publication). Title of review [Review of the book Title of Work, by Author’s Initials Last Name]. Title of Periodical, volume(issue), or p(p). page(s).
If the review does not have a title, include the bracketed information about the work being reviewed, immediately after the date of publication.

19. LETTER TO THE EDITOR
Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Date of publication). Title of letter [Letter to the editor]. Title of Periodical, volume(issue), or p(p). page(s).
Online Sources

Not every online source gives you all the data that APA would like to see in a reference entry. Ideally, you will be able to list author’s or editor’s name; date of first electronic publication or most recent revision; title of document; information about print publication if any; and retrieval information: DOI (Digital Object Identifier, a string of letters and numbers that identifies an online document) or URL. In some cases, additional information about electronic publication may be required (title of site, retrieval date, name of sponsoring institution).

IMPORTANT DETAILS FOR CITING ONLINE SOURCES

• **AUTHORS:** List authors as you would for a print book or periodical.

• **TITLES:** For websites and electronic documents, articles, or books, capitalize title and subtitles as you would for a book; capitalize periodical titles as you would for a print periodical.

• **DATES:** After the author, give the year of the document’s original publication on the Web or of its most recent revision. If neither of those years is clear, use *n.d.* to mean “no date.” For undated content or content that may change (for example, a wiki entry), include the month, day, and year that you retrieved the document. You don’t need to include the retrieval date for content that’s unlikely to change.

• **DOI OR URL:** Include the DOI instead of the URL in the reference whenever one is available. If no DOI is available, provide the URL of the home page or menu page. If you do not identify the sponsoring institution, you do not need a colon before the URL or DOI. When a URL won’t fit on the line, break the URL before most punctuation, but do not break `http://`.

20. WORK FROM A NONPERIODICAL WEBSITE

   Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Date of publication). Title of work. *Title of site, DOI or Retrieved Month Day, Year (if necessary), from URL*

To cite an entire website, include the URL in parentheses in an in-text citation. Do not list the website in your list of references.

### 21. ARTICLE IN AN ONLINE PERIODICAL

When available, include the volume number and issue number as you would for a print source. If no DOI has been assigned, provide the URL of the home page or menu page of the journal or magazine, even for articles that you access through a database.

**ARTICLE IN AN ONLINE JOURNAL**

*Author's Last Name, Initials.* (Year). *Title of article. Title of Journal, volume*(issue), pages. DOI or Retrieved from URL.


**ARTICLE IN AN ONLINE MAGAZINE**

*Author's Last Name, Initials.* (Year, Month Day). *Title of article. Title of Magazine, volume*(issue). DOI or Retrieved from URL.


**ARTICLE IN AN ONLINE NEWSPAPER**

If the article can be found by searching the site, give the URL of the home page or menu page.

*Author's Last Name, Initials.* (Year, Month Day). *Title of article. Title of Newspaper. Retrieved from URL*

22. ARTICLE AVAILABLE ONLY THROUGH A DATABASE

Some sources, such as an out-of-print journal or rare book, can be accessed only through a database. When no DOI is provided, give either the name of the database or its URL.

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of article. Title of Journal, volume(issue), pages. DOI or Retrieved from Name of database or URL


23. ARTICLE OR CHAPTER IN A WEB DOCUMENT OR ONLINE REFERENCE WORK

For a chapter in a Web document or an article in an online reference work, give the URL of the chapter or entry if no DOI is provided.

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of entry. In Initials Last Name (Ed.), Title of reference work. DOI or Retrieved from URL


24. ELECTRONIC BOOK

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of book. DOI or Retrieved from URL


For an ebook based on a print version, include a description of the digital format in brackets after the book title.

25. WIKI ENTRY
Give the entry title and the date of posting, or n.d. if there is no date. Then include the retrieval date, the name of the wiki, and the URL for the entry.

Title of entry. (Year, Month Day). Retrieved Month Day, Year, from Title of wiki: URL
http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Discourse

26. ONLINE DISCUSSION SOURCE
If the name of the list to which the message was posted is not part of the URL, include it after Retrieved from. The URL you provide should be for the archived version of the message or post.

Author's Last Name, Initials. (Year, Month Day). Subject line of message [Descriptive label]. Retrieved from URL

Do not include email or other nonarchived discussions in your list of references. Simply cite the sender’s name in your text. See no. 13 on page 143 for guidelines on identifying such sources in your text.

27. BLOG ENTRY

Author's Last Name, Initials. (Year, Month Day). Title of post [Blog post]. Retrieved from URL
28. ONLINE VIDEO

Last Name, Initials (Writer), & Last Name, Initials (Producer). (Year, Month Day posted). Title [Descriptive label]. Retrieved from URL


29. PODCAST

Writer’s Last Name, Initials. (Writer), & Producer’s Last Name, Initials. (Producer). (Year, Month Day). Title of podcast. Title of site or program [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from URL


Other Kinds of Sources

30. FILM, VIDEO, OR DVD

Last Name, Initials (Producer), & Last Name, Initials (Director). (Year). Title [Motion picture]. Country: Studio.


31. MUSIC RECORDING

Composer’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of copyright). Title of song. On Title of album [Medium]. City, State or Country: Label.


32. PROCEEDINGS OF A CONFERENCE

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year of publication). Title of paper. In Proceedings Title (pp. pages). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.

33. TELEVISION PROGRAM

Last Name, Initials (Writer), & Last Name, Initials (Director). (Year). Title of episode [Descriptive label]. In Initials Last Name (Producer), Series title. City, State or Country: Network.


34. SOFTWARE OR COMPUTER PROGRAM

Title and version number [Computer software]. (Year). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


35. GOVERNMENT DOCUMENT

Government Agency. (Year of publication). Title. Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


ONLINE GOVERNMENT DOCUMENT

Government Agency. (Year of publication). Title (Publication No. [if any]). Retrieved from URL

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/bipolar-disorder/
nimh-bipolar-adults.pdf

36. DISSERTATION

Include the database name and accession number for dissertations that you retrieve from a database.

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of dissertation (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Name of database. (accession number)


For a dissertation that you access on the Web, include the name of the institution after Doctoral dissertation. For example: (Doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina). End your citation with Retrieved from and the URL.

37. TECHNICAL OR RESEARCH REPORT

Author’s Last Name, Initials. (Year). Title of report (Report number). Publication City, State or Country: Publisher.


Citing Sources Not Covered by APA

To cite a source for which APA does not provide guidelines, look at models similar to the source you are citing. Give any information readers will need in order to find it themselves—author; date of publication; title; publisher; information about electronic retrieval (DOI or URL); and any other pertinent information. You might want to try your citation yourself, to be sure it will lead others to your source.
APA-d Formatting a Paper

Title page. APA does not provide guidelines specifically for the title page of a paper written for a college course; check with your instructor about his or her preferences. Be sure to provide the full title; your name; the course and section number; your instructor’s name; and the date. Center each element on a separate line.

Page numbers. Beginning with the title page, insert a shortened title in capital letters in the upper left-hand corner of each page; place the page number in the upper right-hand corner. Number pages consecutively throughout your paper.

Spacing, margins, and indents. Double-space the entire paper, including any notes and your list of references. Leave one-inch margins at the top, bottom, and sides of your text; do not justify the text. The first line of each paragraph should be indented one-half inch (or five-to-seven spaces) from the left margin. APA recommends using two spaces after end-of-sentence punctuation.

Headings. Though they are not required in APA style, headings can help readers follow your text. The first level of heading should be bold, centered, and capitalized as you would any other title; the second level of heading should be bold and flush with the left margin; the third level should be bold and indented, with only the first letter and proper names capitalized and with a period at the end of the heading.

First Level Heading

Second Level Heading

Third level heading.

Abstract. An abstract is a concise summary of your paper that introduces readers to your topic and main points. Most scholarly journals require an abstract; check with your instructor about his or her preference. Put your abstract on the second page, with the word Abstract centered at the top. Unless your instructor specifies a length, limit your abstract to 120 words or fewer.
Long quotations. Indent quotations of more than forty words one-half inch (or five-to-seven spaces) from the left margin. Do not use quotation marks, and place the page number(s) in parentheses after the end punctuation.

Kaplan (2000) captured ancient and contemporary Antioch for us:

At the height of its glory in the Roman-Byzantine age, when it had an amphitheater, public baths, aqueducts, and sewage pipes, half a million people lived in Antioch. Today the population is only 125,000. With sour relations between Turkey and Syria, and unstable politics throughout the Middle East, Antioch is now a backwater—seedy and tumbledown, with relatively few tourists. (p. 123)

Antioch’s decline serves as a reminder that the fortunes of cities can change drastically over time.

List of references. Start your list on a new page after any notes. Center the title and double-space the entire list. Each entry should begin at the left margin, and subsequent lines should be indented one-half inch (or five spaces). Alphabetize the list by authors’ last names (or by editors’ names, if appropriate). Alphabetize works that have no author or editor by title, disregarding A, An, and The. Be sure every source listed is cited in the text; do not include sources that you consulted but did not cite.

Illustrations. For each table, provide a number (Table 1) and a descriptive title on separate lines above the table; below the table, include a note with information about the source. For figures—charts, diagrams, graphs, photos, and so on—include a figure number (Figure 1) and information about the source in a note below the figure. Number tables and figures separately, and be sure to discuss any illustrations so that readers know how they relate to the rest of your text.
Table 1

Hours of Instruction Delivered per Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American classrooms</th>
<th>Japanese classrooms</th>
<th>Chinese classrooms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fifth Grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**APA-e Sample Pages**

The following sample pages are from “It’s in Our Genes: The Biological Basis of Human Mating Behavior,” a paper submitted by Carolyn Stonehill for a first-year writing course. They are formatted according to the guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition (2010). To read the complete paper, go to wwnorton.com/write/little-seagull-handbook.
It's in Our Genes: The Biological Basis of Human Mating Behavior

Carolyn Stonehill
English 102, Section 22
Professor Bertsch
November 13, 2010
While cultural values and messages certainly play a part in the process of mate selection, the genetic and psychological predispositions developed by our ancestors play the biggest role in determining to whom we are attracted. Women are attracted to strong, capable men with access to resources to help rear children. Men find women attractive based on visual signs of youth, health, and, by implication, fertility. While perceptions of attractiveness are influenced by cultural norms and reinforced by advertisements and popular media, the persistence of mating behaviors that have no relationship to societal realities suggests that they are part of our biological heritage.
Consider the following scenario: It’s a sunny afternoon on campus, and Jenny is walking to her next class. Out of the corner of her eye, she catches sight of her lab partner, Joey, parking his car. She stops to admire how tall, muscular, and stylishly dressed he is, and she does not take her eyes off him as he walks away from his shiny new BMW. As he flashes her a pearly white smile, Jenny melts, then quickly adjusts her skirt and smooths her hair.

This scenario, while generalized, is familiar: Our attraction to people—or lack of it—often depends on their physical traits. But why this attraction? Why does Jenny respond the way she does to her handsome lab partner? Why does she deem him handsome at all? Certainly Joey embodies the stereotypes of physical attractiveness prevalent in contemporary American society.

Advertisements, television shows, and magazine articles all provide Jenny with signals telling her what constitutes the ideal American man. Yet she is also attracted to Joey’s new sports car even though she has a new car herself. Does Jenny find this man striking because of the influence of her culture, or does her attraction lie in a more fundamental part of her constitution?

Evolutionary psychologists, who apply principles of evolutionary biology to research on the human mind, would say that Jenny’s responses in this situation are due largely to mating strategies developed by her prehistoric ancestors. Driven by the need to reproduce and propagate the species, these ancestors of ours formed patterns of mate selection so effective in providing for
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