

# An Introduction to APA Style

A Student Guide for the 5th edition of the APA Manual

## AN INTRODUCTION TO WRITING IN APA STYLE

This document provides an introduction to writing in American Psychological Association (APA) style. All of the information in the handout is contained in the **fifth edition** of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. If you need more details please refer to the APA manual; available in the Douglas College Library and the Psychology Lab.

How to use this document

The document is designed to help you write an APA style research report. It is divided into three main sections.

1. Organisation of an APA Style Report.

The first section provides you with a description of each of the major sections of an APA report.

2. Citations and References

The second section provides information on how to document your work; that is, it tells you how to cite and reference the articles that you will use when writing your paper. Read this section before gathering library materials (e.g., journal articles and books) and taking notes so you will know what type of information to record (e.g., author[s] name, date of publication, name of journal). Also, carefully read the subsection on plagiarism.

3. Sample APA Paper

The third section provides an example of an APA style paper.

## Formatting

### General Guidelines

- Leave 2.54 cm (one inch) margins at the top, bottom, left and right sides of all the pages of the paper.
- Double space all lines of text including the title page and the reference section.
- Use italics for the following:
  - Participants (sub-heading)
  - Apparatus or Materials (sub-heading)
  - Procedure (sub-heading)
  - Name of journal and volume number (in reference list)
  - Book title
- Use left justification only; leave the right edge of the text ragged.
- Use either Times New Roman 12 pt or Courier 12 pt .
- A header and page number should be on the top right-hand corner of each page. The header and page number is 1.27cm or ½ inch below the top edge of the page. The header is 5 spaces to the left of the page number. The page number is 2.54 cm or 1 inch from the right edge of the paper.
- Number all pages including the title page.
- Indent paragraphs 5-7 spaces; do not indent the abstract.
- When reporting a numerical value, present the numerical value as digits if the value is greater than or equal to 10. If the numerical value is less than 10, type the value as a word, unless it contains a decimal.
- Staple the paper once in the upper left-hand corner. Do not use folders or duo-tangs.
- Make a backup copy of your paper.

### Comments on Writing Style

- You should strive to present your ideas clearly and logically. Be precise in your choice of words. Get to the point, this is a scientific paper and therefore wordiness is frowned upon.
- Do not use colloquialisms (informal language). This is a formal paper.
- Refrain from making over-generalisations. For example, "Since the dawn of time, man has been intrigued about . . ."
- Academic papers are generally written in the third person. Although the use of personal pronouns are acceptable (e.g., we, our, I, my), they should be used judiciously: this is, after all, a formal paper. For example, both "The hypothesis for the experiment was . . ." (third person) and "Our hypothesis for the experiment was . . ." (first person), would be acceptable whereas "In my opinion, . . ." would be unacceptable because of the shift in tone from formal to informal.
- The active voice is preferable to the passive voice. For example, it is preferable to say "Participants completed a questionnaire" (active voice) rather than "Participants were given a questionnaire" (passive voice).

## Title Page

(See p. 1 of the Sample Paper)

The title page is comprised of the following elements:

- header
- running head
- title
- author's name(s)
- affiliation

### Header

The header is the first 2 to 3 main words of the title, for example, Context and Memory.

Remove unnecessary words such as "The", "An", "A study of . . .".

Typing: The header is typed in upper and lower case. The header is 1.27 cm or ½ inch from the top edge of the paper and 5 spaces to the left of the page number. The page number is 2.54 cm or 1 inch from the right edge of the paper. The header and page number appears on every page of the lab report.

### Running Head

The running head is a shortened version of the title that is no more than 50 characters in length; this includes spaces, and punctuation.

Typing: The running head is typed in upper case only. It is double spaced below the header, left justified, and the words "Running head:" appears before the abbreviated title.

### Title

The title summarises the main topic of the paper and mentions the variables considered in the study (e.g., The Effect of Repetition on Memory). The title is no more than 12 words. Remove unnecessary phrases such as "A Study of . . .".

Typing: The title is centred and typed in upper and lower case. The title appears in the top half of the page.

### Author's Name

Each author's name should be included on the title page.

Typing: The author's first and last name is centred and double spaced below the title. If there is more than one author, then each subsequent author's name should be centred, double spaced and on a separate line below the previous author's name.

### Affiliation

The affiliation is the name of the institution at which the study or experiment was conducted.

Typing: The affiliation is typed in upper and lower case. It is centred and double spaced below the author(s) name.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Your instructor may also ask you to include your student number, course name, section number, instructor's name and due date; check with your instructor. If you are required to include your student number, course and section number and due date, then each of the entries would be centred and immediately below the preceding entry. For example, your student number would be centred and immediately below your name; the course and section number would be centred and immediately below your student number; and the due date would be centred and immediately below the course and section number.

## Abstract

(See p. 2 of the Sample Paper)

The abstract is a summary of the entire paper; do not include material that is not presented in the paper. The abstract is comprised of the following:

- the purpose of the research
- the variables being investigated
- a description of the participants
- a description of the method including apparatus or materials, data gathering procedures, names of tests, etc.
- a description of your findings; do NOT include numerical results
- a conclusion

The abstract is written in past tense. Report numerical values (e.g., number of participants) as digits unless the numerical value begins a sentence in which case report the numerical value as a word. The abstract is no more than 120 words.

Typing: The abstract appears on the second page of the paper. The word "abstract" is centred and written in upper and lower case. Do NOT indent the first line of the abstract.

## Introduction

(See pp. 3-5 of the Sample Paper)

This section introduces the topic being studied, reviews previous research, and clearly states the hypothesis for the study.

Academic journal articles are used to review previous research; this is referred to as a literature review. The literature review is NOT a passive summary of each academic journal article, but rather an active, critical discussion of past research. The active discussion involves integrating and synthesising the main research trends as well as noting limitations of past research. Because you are borrowing ideas from previous research, this section will be filled with citations (see pp. 9-11 for examples of APA style citations). In addition, APA style rarely uses direct quotes; paraphrasing (putting it into your own words), with proper citations, is preferred. The literature review should serve as a rationale for the present study and the hypothesis becomes a logical extension of the literature review. Past tense is used for the literature review.

Following the literature review, the variables used in the present study are defined and the rationale for the hypothesis is developed. The hypothesis is then stated and the predictions are made. At the end of the introduction, the reader should have a clear idea of what was expected to happen in the study and the reasons for the predictions. It is important to emphasize that the introduction section moves from the general (i.e., the general topic, why it is important, theory, previous research findings) to the specific (i.e., the present study).

Typing: The introduction section begins on the third page of the paper. The title of the paper is centred and printed in upper and lower case instead of the word "introduction". The introduction is approximately two to three pages in length. Each new paragraph should be indented 5-7 spaces.

## Method

(See pp. 5-7 of the Sample Paper)

The method section describes in detail how the study was conducted in order to facilitate replication. The method section is divided into three subsections: (1) participants; (2) apparatus or materials; and (3) procedure.

Typing: The word "method" is centred, typed in upper and lower case and immediately follows the last sentence of the introduction section.

### Participants

The participants subsection describes the people who volunteered for the study. This includes information about the number of participants, their sex and average age and any other defining characteristics of the group of people (do not list details of individual participants).

This section also describes how the participants were recruited for the study.

Typing: The word "participant" is italicised, left justified, and typed in upper and lower case. This subsection is written in past tense. The first line of this subsection is indented 5-7 spaces. When reporting the number of participants, present the number as digits if the numerical value is greater than or equal to 10. If the number of participants is less than 10, type the numerical value as a word.

### Apparatus or Materials

The apparatus or materials subsection describes the equipment and/or tests that were used in the study (not pencils or pens). Standard apparatus, for example, a stop-watch, does not need to be described. If a test was used, cite the test name and author(s) in APA style and include the source of the test in the reference list. If the test (or data recording form) has instructions typed on the test form, describe the instructions; do not provide verbatim instructions. If the test uses a rating scale, include a description of the rating scale and how total scores are produced. The description of the apparatus or materials must be written in sentence form. Do not include procedural information when describing the apparatus/materials.

If equipment (e.g., a mirror tracer) was used for data collection, then "apparatus" should be used as the header for this subsection. If data collection involved the use of tests, then use "materials" as the header for this subsection.

Typing: The word "apparatus" or "materials" is italicised, left justified, typed in upper and lower case and immediately follows the last sentence of the participants subsection. This subsection is written in past tense. The first line of this subsection and subsequent paragraphs are indented 5-7 spaces. When describing a test that uses a rating scale, type the rating scale as digits and the anchors for the scale should be italicised and in parentheses. For example, the participants rated their responses from 1 (*most important*) to 5 (*least important*).

### Procedure

The procedure subsection provides a summary of the steps followed during data collection. Describe each step in chronological order. Provide enough detail to enable the reader to understand how the data was collected. This description should include: how participants were separated into groups or conditions; where the testing took place; any verbal instructions given to each group or condition; the order of presentation of testing material; any experimental manipulations; how the dependent variable(s) were measured and any variables that were held constant. Instructions that are printed on a questionnaire or data recording forms are described in the materials/apparatus section and are not repeated here.

This subsection is written in paragraph form; do NOT number the steps.

Typing: The word "procedure" is italicised, left justified, typed in upper and lower case and immediately follows the last sentence of the apparatus/materials subsection. This subsection is written in past tense. The first line of this subsection and subsequent paragraphs are indented 5-7 spaces.

## Results

(See pp. 7-8 of the Sample Paper)

The main purpose of this section is to convey the numerical data obtained. Begin with a reiteration of the hypothesis. Describe the statistic that will be used to evaluate the results. Follow this with a written description of the results for each group or condition.

Report the mean ( $M$ ), standard deviation ( $SD$ ) for each group or condition and, when appropriate, the correlation coefficient ( $r$ ); do NOT include the participants' individual scores. Raw data, if requested by your instructor, is included in the Appendix section (see the appendix sub-section of this document for appropriate APA style). Numerical results ( $M$ ,  $SD$ ,  $r$ ) are reported as digits. Report all results in sentence format. If a figure or table (see below for a description of an APA style figure or table) is included in this section, refer to the figure or table and state its relevance in the text of this section. Once all results have been reported, clearly state whether the results support the hypothesis; do not draw any conclusions. The values you choose to report in this section should justify any conclusions you draw in the discussion section.

NOTE: this section is written as a coherent paragraph(s).

Typing: The word "results" is centred, typed in upper and lower case and appears immediately after the last sentence of the procedure section. This section is written in past tense and should be approximately one-half to one page long including a table or figure. The first line of this subsection and subsequent paragraphs are indented 5-7 spaces.

Tables (see p. 8 of the Sample Paper)

Your instructor may require a table as part of the results section. Tables are usually included if the results contain several sets of numbers that would be difficult to understand in sentence format. For example, if the results consisted of several means ( $M$ ) and standard deviations ( $SD$ ), reporting these values as a list of digits would detract from the readability and comprehension of the overall results. A table, therefore, serves as an organised presentation of the results. Values that are to be compared should be next to each other. For example, means ( $M$ ) should be in one column, standard deviation ( $SD$ ) should be in an adjacent column. Provide a brief summary of the table in the text of the results section; highlighting the relevant comparisons.

Typing: Number each table with an Arabic numeral. The word "Table" and its corresponding number is left justified. The title for the table is italicised, left justified and underneath the table number. The heading for each column should be clear and concise; in addition, the heading should not be wider than the longest column entry. A horizontal line divides: the title from the headings; the headings from the numerical values; and the last row of the table from the rest of the text. Do NOT use vertical lines to separate each column.

Figures (see p. 7 of the Sample Paper)

Figures are graphs, drawings, or diagrams. Your instructor may require a graph (referred to as a figure) of your results. The graph should provide a visual representation of the over-all results. Provide a brief description of the graph in the text of the results section. Unless otherwise specified, the graph should be computer generated.

Typing: Label each axis indicating the quantity being measured and the units used. Each label is parallel to its axis; for example, the label for the ordinate/vertical axis should be printed vertically whereas the label for the abscissa/horizontal axis is printed horizontally. Provide the unit of measure in brackets after the label. Always include a zero point. Use a sans serif font, for example, Arial, Helvetica, Futura for the labels and numbers of the ordinate and abscissa. The font size should be no larger than 14 pt and no smaller than 8 pt; the point size should not vary more than 4 pts. For example, if 8 pt is used for the ordinate

then the font size cannot be greater than 12 pt for the abscissa. When choosing a grid scale, take into consideration the range of both axes. The graph should be two dimensional NOT three dimensional . Number all figures with Arabic numerals. The figure caption/title is below the figure. The word "Figure" and its corresponding number is left justified, italicised and followed by a period; one space after the period, type the title of the figure. The first letter of the title is in upper case with subsequent letters in lower case.

### Discussion

(See pp. 8-10 of the Sample Paper)

In the discussion section, the results are examined, interpreted, and evaluated. Inferences may be drawn. The discussion moves from the specific (e.g., your results described in words) to the general (e.g., why the results are theoretically important and how they relate to other findings in psychology). The discussion section usually opens by clearly stating whether the hypothesis was supported by the results. The results of the study are then evaluated against previous research. Discuss the similarities and differences between your results and past research results; limit your comments to those journal articles used in your literature review (include citations). Do NOT introduce new journal articles in this section. Do NOT repeat points already made or refer back to the introduction section; each new comment should help bolster your conclusions. The broader implications of the results should be discussed. If the results did not support the hypothesis, provide a plausible explanation; this should NOT be a litany of excuses. Methodological problems should be discussed with the expectation of suggestions to improve the study. Suggestions for future research may be provided.

Typing: The word "discussion" is centred, typed in upper and lower case and immediately follows the results section. The section is written in present tense. The discussion is approximately 2-3 pages in length. The first line of this subsection and subsequent paragraphs are indented 5-7 spaces.

### References

(See p. 11 of the Sample Paper)

The reference section is a list of cited works in an APA paper. It appears at the end of the paper. Entries are listed in alphabetical order by authors' last name, or title if there is no author. Do not list articles that were not cited in your report, but include all articles that were cited. For more information on how to complete a reference list, please refer to pp. 12-14 of this document.

### Appendix

(See pp. 12-13 of the Sample Paper)

This section is optional; check with your instructor.

The appendix contains information that is essential for the reader, but would be distracting in the body of the paper. For example, a long and detailed description of a complex piece of equipment may be necessary for the replication of a study but detracts from the readability of the method section. This description would then be placed in an appendix and referred to in the body of the paper. As mentioned in the results section, your instructor may want you to include the participants' scores. The participants' scores would be included in the appendix. To draw the reader's attention to the participants' scores refer to them in the results section of the paper. Signed consent forms, if required by your instructor, should also be included as part of the appendix.

Typing: The word "appendix" is centred, typed in upper and lower case, with an identifying letter typed in upper case. Each appendix is typed on a separate page. If there is only one appendix, then an identifying letter is not necessary. The appendix follows the reference list.

## CITATIONS AND REFERENCES

Psychology papers must be referenced using APA referencing style. This style requires reference citations in the text of the paper and a reference list at the end. Reference citations identify the source of an idea, a paraphrase, or a direct quote. They include the name of the author(s) and year of publication of the original information. Reference citations are used to indicate to the reader which ideas are your own and which came from other sources. If you present ideas that are not your own, it is critical to acknowledge the source(s) of the ideas by making an appropriate reference citation. Moreover, it is critical that you paraphrase the words of other authors, that is, “say it in your own words.” If you fail to acknowledge your sources, fail to paraphrase the work of other authors, or both, you will be committing an act of academic dishonesty called plagiarism. The consequences can be severe.

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the formal presentation or submission of research, words, ideas, illustrations or diagrams of others as one's own without citation or credit.

Confirmed violations of the College's academic dishonesty policy will be dealt with forthrightly and decisively by Faculty and Administration. In the case of a first offence, the penalties may include, but are not limited to, one or more of the following:

- rewriting of the assignment;
- completion of another assignment;
- a zero percent grade assigned to the relevant evaluation component;
- a failing grade on the course as a whole
- suspension from the program and/or College; and/or
- permanent expulsion from the College

Penalties will be noted on the student's academic record for a time period specified by the Dean/Designate.

The student will be informed by the President that the consequences of a second offence will be permanent expulsion from the College.

For details see: <http://www.douglas.bc.ca/about/policies/edu/academdis.html>

### Paraphrasing

APA style rarely includes direct quotes, instead paraphrasing the information is more common. Paraphrasing involves putting the words of another author(s) into your own words with acknowledgement to the original author(s) via a citation. The citation includes the author(s) name and date of publication.

### Quotations

It is better to paraphrase than to quote. Any material of three or more words taken from another source is a quote. When quoting, ensure that the words, punctuation, and grammar is an exact replica of the original source. In addition to the author(s) name and year of publication, the page number for the quotation **MUST** be included. When quoting from an electronic source that does not provide page numbers use paragraph (§) numbers; or, if the paper is divided into sections, provide the section and the paragraph (§) number within that section.

If the quotation is short ( $\leq 40$  words) insert the quotation as part of the sentence. Remember to enclose the quote with quotation marks.

Example: Rea (1988) has stated that "the Mini University provided a unique and creative educational experience for both the instructors and the students" (p. 303).

If the quote is greater than 40 words type the quote as a separate block. The block quote is double spaced, indented 5-7 spaces, (1.27cm or ½"), and is NOT surrounded by quotation marks.

### REFERENCE CITATIONS IN TEXT

The surname of the author and the date of publication are inserted directly into the text at the point where the author's work is mentioned. The complete citation is included in the reference list at the end of the paper. Put parentheses around the author, the date, or both if they do not form a normal part of the sentence.

Example: In 1993, Smith compared reaction times . . .

or Smith (1993) compared reaction times . . .

or In a study of reaction times (Smith, 1993) . . .

To ensure your sentence is grammatically correct, the sentence should be complete without the information contained within the parenthesis.

#### One Author

Insert the author's last name and the date of publication into the text.

Example: More than 80% of the parents that evaluated the program considered it a success (Rea, 1988).

#### Two Authors

When there are two authors always cite both names.

Example: In an earlier study (Neisser & Harsch, 1992) . . .

The symbol "&" is used when in parentheses. Use the word "and" when the authors' name are part of the sentence.

Example: An earlier study by Neisser and Harsch (1992) . . .

#### More than Two Authors

When there are three to five authors, cite all the names in the first citation and in the following citations use only the first name and "et al." (which is Latin for "and others"). Note that "et" is not followed by a period but "al" is.

First citation: Sokolowski, Smith, Jones, and Hajid (1983) discovered . . .

Subsequently: Sokolowski et al. (1983) also found that . . .

or The results were supported by a later discovery (Sokolowski et al., 1983).

When there are six or more authors, cite only the first author's name followed by "et al." for the first and subsequent citations.

### **Groups as Authors**

The full name of a group that serve as an author such as corporations, associations, and government agencies is written out unless the abbreviation is well known.

Example:      A recent study by The Douglas College Department of Institutional Research (1994) . . .

but             A police report (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 1979 [RCMP]) . . .

then            The R.C.M.P. report (1979) . . .

### **Citing a Secondary Source**

Authors refer to other researchers' work in their writing. If you would like to include this information in your paper the best thing to do is look up these sources yourself. In lieu of that, you must cite this material as a secondary source. Give the name of the original author and date of publication within the text of your paper along with the author and date of the paper you actually read.

For example, if you read about Treisman and Davies' (1973) study in a paper by Hirst and Kalmar (1987), the citation in the text of your paper would be:

In Treisman and Davies' (1973, as cited in Hirst & Kalmar, 1987) study . . .

**NOTE:** For how to reference a secondary source, see “reference for a secondary source” on p. 13.

## REFERENCE LIST

A reference list appears at the end of the APA report. This is an alphabetical list (by first author) of cited work.

Typing: The word "reference" is centred, typed in upper and lower case and appears on a separate page. Each new entry is flush left with the subsequent line of the entry indented 5-7 spaces referred to as a hanging indent. The titles of books, journals and volume numbers are italicised.

Sample references for different document types are provided below.

### Book

Myers, D. G. (2004). *Psychology* (7th ed.). New York: Worth.

*Author:* David G. Myers (only provide the author's surname and initials; do not include first names)

*Most recent date of publication:* 2004

*Title and edition number:* *Psychology* 7th edition. The title is italicised but not the edition.

*Location of publication:* New York

*Name of publishers:* Worth

**Note:** the italicised text shown above is not included in the reference section. It is provided here to help you understand the components of a book entry. The examples given below follow a similar convention.

### Book with more than one author

Elmes, D. G., Kantowitz, B. H., & Roediger, H. L. III (1992). *Research methods in psychology* (4th ed.). St. Paul, MN: West.

### Book with government agency or corporate author

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text revision). Washington, DC: Author.

### Chapter in a book

Krebs, D. L., & Denton, K. (1997). Social illusions and self deception: The evolution of biases in person perception. In J. A. Simpson & D. T. Kenrick (Eds.), *Evolutionary social psychology* (pp.21-48). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

**Journal article in print form**

Eich, E., & Macaulay, D. (2000). Are real moods required to reveal mood-congruent and mood-dependent memory? *Psychological Science*, 11(3), 244-248.

*Authors:* Eich, E., & Macaulay, D. (only provide each author's surname and initials; do not include first names)

*Most recent date of publication:* 2000

*Title of article:* Are real moods required to reveal mood-congruent and mood-dependent memory?

*Name of journal:* *Psychological Science* (italicised)

*Volume number of journal:* 11 (italicised)

*Issue number:* 3 (in brackets, but not italicised)

*Page numbers:* 244-248

**Note:** the italicised text shown above is not included in the reference section. It is provided here to help you understand the components of a journal entry.

**Journal article from an Electronic Database**

If you obtained a digital version of a journal article from an electronic database (e.g., PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, etc.), follow the referencing format for a printed journal with the addition of the retrieval date, database name, accession number (if applicable). For example,

Krebs, D. L., & Denton, K. (2006). Explanatory limitations of cognitive-developmental approaches to morality. *Psychological Review*, 113(3), 672-675. Retrieved April 20, 2007 from PsycINFO database (2006-08257-012).

**Internet articles based on a printed source**

The majority of journals are published in both printed and digital formats. If you obtained a digital version of a printed journal outside of a database, follow the referencing format for a printed journal with the addition of "[Electronic version]" after the title of the article, but before the period. For example,

Kivimäki, M., Elovainio, M., Singh-Manoux, A., Vahtera, J., Helenius, H., & Pentti, J. (2005). Optimism and pessimism as predictors of change in health after death or onset of severe illness in family [Electronic version]. *Health Psychology*, 24(4), 413-421.

### Articles from On-line Journals

For journals that are only published electronically, follow the same format for referencing a printed journal, but add the retrieval date along with the URL (web address).

Vesper, J., Haak, S., Ostertag, C., & Nikkhah, G. (2007). Subthalamic nucleus deep brain stimulation in elderly patients - analysis of outcome and complications. *BMC Neurology*, 7(7), 1-9. Retrieved April 20, 2007  
<http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2377-7-7.pdf>

### Reference for a secondary source

The example used in “citing a secondary source” referred to Treisman and Davies' (1973) study that was cited in Hirst and Kalmar's (1987) paper. In the reference section, only the paper by Hirst and Kalmar (1987) would be listed. For example:

Hirst, W., & Kalmar, D. (1987). Characterizing attentional resources. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 116(1), 68-81.

### An abstract in print form

The format is similar to referencing a journal article in print form, except include “[Abstract]” after the title of the article, but before the period. For example:

Roose, N. J., Pennington, G. L., Coleman, J., Janicki, M., Li, M. P., & Kenrick, D. T. (2006). Sex differences in regret: All for love or some for lust? [Abstract]. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(6), 770-780.

### An abstract from an Electronic Database

The format is similar to referencing a journal article from an electronic database, but with the addition of “Abstract retrieved” before the retrieval date, database name, accession number (if applicable).

Maraun, M. D., Jackson, J. S. H., Luccock, C. R., Belfer, S. E., & Chrisjohn, R. D. (1998). CA and SPOD for the analysis of tests comprised of binary items. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 58(6), 916-928.  
 Abstract retrieved April 20, 2007 from PsycINFO database (1998-11621-004).

REFERENCES FOR THIS HANDOUT

American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington DC: Author.

Running head: EXCUSE-VALIDATION AS SOCIAL SUPPORT

The Effectiveness of Excuse-Validation in Reducing Negative Affect

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Sample Paper

## Abstract

Excuse-making is a common strategy people invoke to feel better following a negative event.

When excuses are advanced in public, their effectiveness may depend on whether they are validated by others. The present study was conducted to assess the emotional impact on participants of having their excuses validated by a supportive stranger in a conversation about a real life negative event, as compared to receiving no support from an attentive audience.

Participants were 31 male and 39 female undergraduate students, who participated for course credit. Participants' affective state was assessed prior to and after talking to a supportive stranger who either validated or did not validate their excuses. It was hypothesized that participants in the excuse-validation condition would report lower levels of negative affect at the post-conversation assessment than participants whose excuses were not validated. The results indicated that excuse-validation is an effective form of social support and is necessary for publicly made excuses to alleviate negative affect.

### The Effectiveness of Excuse-Validation in Reducing Negative Affect

Social psychology is replete with evidence that people who receive information that threatens their sense of self, such as a negative evaluation, will distort the information in self-serving ways (see Miller & Porter, 1988; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988, for reviews). Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky (1983) have demonstrated that making excuses (e.g., trivializing negative feedback, making an external attribution for the cause of an unfavourable outcome) is a common way in which people attempt to construct a less threatening reality following upsetting experiences.

Investigations of excuses and related processes tend to focus on excuses people make in private, laboratory contexts after receiving some form of negative feedback (see Snyder & Higgins, 1988, for a review). The results of this research suggest that processes that help people evade responsibility for their negative outcomes, such as excuses, are beneficial. Excuses preserve people's self-concepts and alleviate negative affect associated with unfavourable outcomes (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

It is unclear whether excuses provide relief from negative events when they are advanced outside of the lab, in public contexts. Few researchers have assessed the effectiveness of publicly-made excuses. Three studies (Denton & Zarbatany, 1996; Mehlman & Snyder, 1985; Schönbach, 1990), however, suggest the effectiveness of publicly-made excuses may depend on the audience who receives the excuse and context in which the excuse is invoked.

A study by Schönbach (1990) revealed that audiences in competitive or antagonistic contexts (e.g., people on an opposing side of a dispute) have a vested interest in challenging people's excuses, which constrains the excuse-maker's ability to evade responsibility and to alleviate negative affect. Similarly, a study by Mehlman and Snyder (1985) demonstrated that

excuses examined by an "all knowing," electronic audience in an experimental context were constrained by anticipated challenges to their validity, and, therefore, less effective than privately-made, unexamined excuses in relieving negative affect.

In contrast, in a study of social support strategy effectiveness, Denton and Zabatany (1996) observed that when people discussed real life negative experiences with friends during supportive conversations, their friends not only agreed with their excuses (i.e., provided excuse-validation) but also made excuses for them. In terms of the effectiveness of excuses and excuse-validation in reducing negative affect, Denton and Zabatany (1996) reported that the excuses people made for themselves were ineffective in reducing negative affect; but, friends' validation of these excuses helped alleviate negative affect. Indeed, the validation of excuses by friends was found to be a more effective support strategy than any other form of social support or coping assessed in this study (i.e., excuse-making, emotional support, advice, discussing a more pleasant topic). The correlational nature of this study, however, does not permit conclusions to be drawn about whether excuse-validation caused reductions in negative affect or was a consequence of negative affect reduction.

The present study was a first attempt to test the effectiveness of excuse-validation as a social support strategy in a controlled experiment. Participants discussed a real-life negative event with a supportive stranger who either validated their excuses or listened attentively without providing excuse-validation. Prior to and after this discussion, participants completed a questionnaire to assess their level of negative affect. Based on past correlational research on excuse-validation (Denton & Zabatany, 1996) and related research on the effects of implicit (Mehlman & Snyder, 1985) and explicit (Schönbach, 1990) challenges to people's excuses, it

was expected that participants whose excuses were validated would benefit more from the supportive conversation than participants whose excuses were not validated.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 31 male and 39 female undergraduate students ( $M$  age = 25.8) who attended the University of Western Ontario. Participants were told that the study assessed how people talk about negative events. Volunteers received course credit for their participation.

### *Materials*

Two brief versions of the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (MAACL; Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965) were used to assess negative affect (see Appendix A). Each checklist contained 42 words that described various emotional states (e.g., happy, nervous). Participants were instructed to read each item and place an “x” beside those items that described how they felt at that moment. Total negative affect scores were created by adding together the number of negative emotional words in each of three subscales (i.e., anxiety, depression, anger) that were marked with an “x” and the number of positive emotional words (e.g., relaxed, happy) that were not marked with an “x,” then dividing by three. The highest possible score on the test was 14, which indicated a very high level of negative affect.

In addition to the MAACL, a short, written questionnaire was created for this study. This five-item questionnaire assessed participants impressions of the supportive stranger (e.g., How supportive was she? How comfortable did you feel talking to her?). Responses were made on seven-point rating scales and aggregated to produce an impression of supportive stranger score. The higher the score, the more positively participants viewed the supportive stranger.

*Procedure*

A research assistant contacted potential participants by telephone and provided them with a brief description of the study. Meeting times were arranged for volunteers, who were tested individually in a Psychology lab.

When participants arrived at the Psychology lab, the experimenter asked them to (a) disclose an upsetting incident from their past that still bothered them to think about and (b) complete a brief version of the MAACL. Next, participants discussed the incident they disclosed to the experimenter with a "supportive stranger" (who was referred to as a research assistant) for seven minutes in front of a video camera.

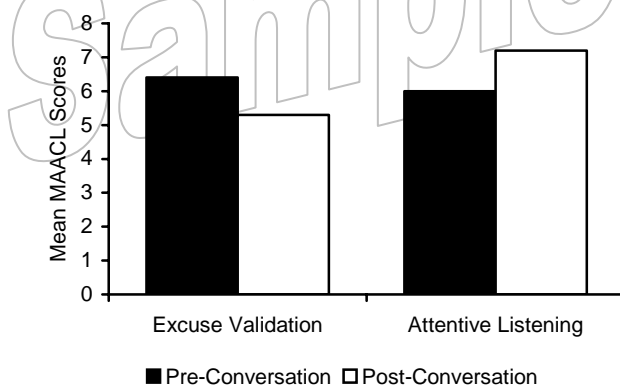
During the seven-minute conversation, the supportive stranger interacted with participants according to the social support requirements of the experimental condition to which subjects' were randomly assigned: excuse-validation or attentive listening. In the excuse-validation condition, the supportive stranger was instructed to validate every excuse participants made by nodding or by verbalizing agreement. For example, if a participant minimized the seriousness of getting an "F" on a test by saying it was only a quiz, the supportive stranger might say, "yeah, quizzes aren't worth much." In contrast, in the attentive listening condition, the supportive stranger would not validate participants' excuses or invoke any other form of support, but merely provide an opportunity for participants to express their feelings and points of view by encouraging conversation and asking questions. For example, after learning about a failing grade, the supportive stranger might ask, "What did you do when you received your grade?"

After seven minutes of conversation with the supportive stranger, the experimenter entered the room and asked the supportive stranger to leave. Participants then completed the

second version of the MAACL and the set of five questions about the supportive stranger. Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

## Results

The effectiveness of the three forms of social support were assessed by comparing the mean pre- and post-conversation MAACL scores of participants in both experimental conditions. As expected, participants in the excuse-validation condition reported higher negative affect scores before ( $M = 6.4$ ) than after ( $M = 5.3$ ) talking to the supportive stranger (see Figure 1). In comparison, participants in the attentive listening conditions experienced an increase in negative affect from the pre-conversation assessment to the post-conversation assessment ( $M_s = 6.0$  and  $7.2$ , respectively).



*Figure 1.* Mean pre- and post-conversation MAACL score by experimental condition.

Analyses of participants' impressions of the supportive stranger revealed that she was viewed as highly supportive in both experimental conditions. As shown in Table 1, participants in both experimental conditions viewed her very positively. The average impression of supportive stranger rating by participants in the excuse-validation condition was 5.9 (on a seven-point scale). The average rating by participants in the attentive listening condition was 6.0.

Table 1

*Mean Impression of Supportive Stranger Ratings Across Experimental Conditions*

Experimental Condition	Mean Rating
Excuse-Validation	5.9
Attentive Listening	6.0

### Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that excuse-validation was effective in reducing negative affect. As expected, participants whose excuses were validated by the supportive stranger reported lower levels of negative affect at the post-conversation assessment than at the pre-conversation assessment. Reductions in negative affect from pre- to post-conversation were not reported by participants in the attentive listening condition, whose excuses were not validated. These results were not moderated by participants' impressions of the supportive stranger. Participants in both experimental conditions rated the supportive stranger very positively.

Past research suggests that excuses are commonly invoked following negative events (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). The results of the present study demonstrate that the validation of excuses is an effective way to help people feel better. The reason why excuse-validation may alleviate negative affect is because validation strengthens the credibility of excuses, making them believable. According to Snyder et al. (1983), when excuses are believed, excuse-makers

may feel less responsible for the event that evoked the excuses (“It wasn’t my fault”) or the event may seem less important (“It wasn’t worth getting upset about”). In contrast, when excuses do not receive validation, as in the attentive listening condition where excuse-validation was prohibited, the excuse-maker may have difficulty evading responsibility or minimizing the event (Denton & Zarbatany, 1996; Mehlman & Snyder, 1985; Schönbach, 1990).

Although the hypothesis in this study was supported, the study has a number of limitations. First, no controls were taken to ensure that excuse-making occurred in both experimental conditions. It is possible that only participants in the excuse-validation condition made excuses or that participants in the excuse-validation condition made more excuses than participants in the attentive listening condition. Therefore, the results of the experimental condition may be confounded by excuse-making. To minimize the confounding effects of excuse-making, future researchers may consider assessing the amount of excuse-making across conditions and, if necessary, invoking statistical controls.

A second limitation of the present study concerns the type of negative event disclosed by participants. The only constraint imposed on participants was that the event disclosed continued to evoke negative affect. It is possible that factors like the type of negative event (e.g., academic failure, loss of relationship) may affect the type of social support needed. Accordingly, excuse-making and excuse-validation may be more effective for some events than others. Therefore, to rule out the confounding effects of event type, future researchers may consider putting additional constraints on the type of event disclosed or ensuring that similar types of events are disclosed by subjects across experimental conditions.

In conclusion, the findings of this study are consistent with the claim of researchers such as Snyder and Higgins (1988) that the ability to make and benefit from excuses may depend on

the receptiveness of one's audience. When audience members behave as though they believe the excuses people make for themselves, the audience communicates that the excuses are valid. This may engender greater confidence in excuse-makers about their perception of a self-serving reality, which, in turn, may give rise to a more positive affective state.

Sample Paper

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Appendix A  
*MAACL Form A*

Sample Paper

*MAACL Form B*

Sample Paper