



TIPS FOR WRITING PSYCHOLOGY LAB REPORTS

Organization

A lab report is typically divided into different sections:

- Title Page, Abstract, *Introduction*, *Methods*, *Results*, *Discussion*, References

It can be useful to further divide the italicized sections using sub-headings. This will help you organize the information presented in each section

It is often easier to write certain sections first. A common approach is to go through the various sections in the following order:

- Methods, Results, Introduction, Discussion, Abstract, Title Page, References

General Tips

It is important to realize that there is no one “right way” to write a lab report or any of the sections it contains, because:

1. Each author has his or her own unique style of writing
2. There are certain elements that need to be present in each section
3. Always check with your professor for his or her specific report requirements
4. Having a guide to consult is necessary
 - The *APA Manual* and *Writing Papers in Psychology* (Rosnow & Rosnow, 2003) are two useful guides

Sections of the Report:

Title Page

- Follow the formatting style suggested by your instructor
- Make your title informative about your study, be sure not to be too general
 - “A Study of Long-term Memory” is too broad

Abstract

In this section you **briefly** summarize your whole study (usually no more than 175-250 words)

- Start with no more than one or two sentences to introduce your study
 - Brief description of the research area and the purpose for your study
- One to two sentences to describe the most important aspects of your methodology
- **Concisely** state the major findings of your study
- Be sure to end with a concluding statement (bottom line that the reader should take from your study)

Introduction

In this section you are introducing the reader to your research area in psychology, your study in particular and the reason for conducting your study (your purpose)

- In the introduction you want to summarize the **relevant** background information and research and acknowledge work that has already been conducted in your particular field of study
- In this way you are setting the stage to talk about **your** research study and to explain to the reader how your study different is from what anyone else in this area has done before

Getting background information:

- This involves searching scholarly databases for *primary journal articles* to find research regarding your topic
- PsycInfo, Web of Science and PubMed are three particularly useful databases to search for psychological research
- These databases can be accessed through the university library websites

Note: To make sure that the information and background research you are going to present in your introduction follows an organized and logical flow, it is often very useful to make a detailed outline first

Once you have described the background information and research necessary to set the stage, you then begin to describe the purpose for conducting your study at the end of the introduction

- Some useful questions to ask yourself before writing this section are:
 - What novel contribution will this research make?
 - How does your research depart from and expand on what has already been done?

The introduction usually concludes by stating the research hypothesis or hypotheses

Methods

Here you need to tell the reader how you conducted your study, in sufficient detail to permit independent replication of your study

- This section is typically divided into subsections such as:
 - Subjects
 - Apparatus
 - Procedure

Typically, at the end of the methods section you describe the statistical treatment of your data

- The location of statistical information in your lab report is usually assignment specific, so double check your assignment sheet or ask your professor

Results

In this section you need to present the data you obtained in as clear, concise and comprehensive manner as possible

- Here the data is described but not interpreted (you need to say what happened but avoid explaining why you obtained certain data)
 - Interpretation is saved for the discussion section
- To make sure data is presented in an organized fashion, try to logically chunk data together
 - For example you might want to use a separate paragraph for each dependent variable examined

For information pertaining to the presentation of statistics it is best to consult your statistics text or the *APA Manual*

In the results section data is also presented using figures (pictures or graphs) and/or tables

- Any figures or tables included in your report must be referred to in the written text of your results section
- It is important to note that you **should not** repeat information presented in graphs in your text
 - For example, do not report means and standard errors in the written text of your results if this same information is presented in one of your graphs

Discussion

In this section you want to discuss the results of your study in relation to previous research (the material you presented in your introduction)

Start out by reiterating the aims and hypotheses of your study

- Summarize the main findings of your study
 - Take note that in the discussion you should not include any statistical information

After summarizing your findings you begin to discuss your findings in relation to previous research

- Do your findings match what others have found?
 - What theories are supported by these converging results?
- Do your results differ from those reported in previous studies?
 - If so, why did you think your results differ?

In the discussion you also need to talk about the limitations of your study

- Try to anticipate how someone might critique your study, your findings or your conclusions
- Can you offer a rebuttal to the potential criticisms you have raised?
 - Doing so will strengthen your discussion and your report
 - Try to play your own devil's advocate
- Discussing the limitations of your study often leads to making suggestions for future research

Your discussion section should end with a concluding paragraph highlighting the major conclusions and implications of your research study

References

You need to include a list of all the papers you cite in your report

- If you have read a paper but have not cited the paper in your report it is not necessary to include that paper in the reference section
- Check with your professor if you are unsure of the reference format you should choose

Final Thoughts: Some General Tips for Writing Psychology Lab Reports

- Try to use primary research papers as much as possible
- Avoid the use of quotes as they often disrupt the flow of you writing
 - It is better to paraphrase and then cite your source
- Aim to be as concise as possible throughout your report
 - Eliminate unnecessary words that do not add extra meaning to your sentences
 - Keep your sentences simple and straightforward
 - Avoid using flowery, descriptive language
- Aim to be as precise as possible throughout your report
 - Try to clarify ambiguous areas of your report
 - Make sure all words convey the meaning you intend for them
- Aim for a scholarly, formal tone throughout your report