

Peter A. Starreveld (Ed.)



Writing Psychology



Research Reports



2nd edition

Boom

Writing Psychology Research Reports

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Second edition

Peter A. Starreveld *editor*

Boom

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Foreword

No degree programme in psychology would be complete without instruction on academic writing. It is not only students who must produce pieces of academic writing throughout their studies (e.g. when completing a bachelor's or master's programme); psychology graduates, too, are expected to write effectively to communicate developments in their field.

This book offers practical guidelines for writing academic psychology texts and is based on the two writing manuals used during the first two years of the Bachelor of Psychology programme at the University of Amsterdam. These two manuals were produced under the guidance of Christiaan Hamaker, who inspired, initiated and – until the summer of 2004 – coordinated the programme's writing units. Under his direction, Kilian Bennebroek Gravenhorst created a guide to writing a literature review, which Christiaan Hamaker adapted himself sometime later. He also authored the guide to writing empirical research reports.

Over the years, feedback was incorporated into these manuals from students and lecturers, to whom I am greatly indebted. The following lecturers (listed here in alphabetical order) also made substantial contributions: Bianca Boyer, Vittorio Busato, Petra Grijzen, Jessica van Sluis, Marcia Meerum Terwogt, Sanne Kateman, Katharina Kouwenhoven, Laurens Polder, Mariëlle Slierendrecht, Guido Valk, Jos Verbrugge, Roeland Voskens, Natascha Weitenberg, and Koen Wirtz.

In this edition, sections on bias-free and inclusive language and on sentence construction have been added to Chapter 2. The information on literature search engines in Chapter 3 has been updated, too. Chapter 6 has been augmented with information about checking statistical results. The most important reason for this new edition, however, was the appearance of the seventh edition of the *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association. The complete text has been adapted to this new style.

The purpose of this book

Academic writing is a practical skill, which cannot be learned from a book (not even this one!). You learn to write scientifically in practice, simply by doing it a lot, by taking a critical look at your own work and by receiving feedback from others. Nevertheless, recommendations can

be given on the layout and structure of scientific texts, the most important of which are given in this book. Using these recommendations by putting theory into practice will ultimately result in an effective scientific text. Completing a piece of academic writing can be a very fulfilling experience and I hope that this book will help you along your way!

Peter Starreveld
April 2022

Table of Contents

1	Scientific Reports	11
1.1	What is a literature review?	11
1.2	What is an empirical research report?	12
1.3	The content of this book	12
1.4	Criteria applicable to all reports	13
2	Academic Writing	17
2.1	Structuring an academic text	17
2.2	Academic style	20
2.3	Style and spelling guidelines	21
2.4	References and quotations	28
2.5	Reference list	32
2.6	Formatting	36
3	Preparing a Literature Review	45
3.1	Selecting a topic	45
3.2	Formulating a problem statement and provisional research question	46
3.3	Searching for literature	47
3.4	Overview of search engines	51
3.5	Writing a plan	57
4	Research Descriptions	69
4.1	The structure of a research article	69
4.2	Writing descriptions of scientific research	71
4.3	Steps for writing a research description	75
4.4	Writing a scientific summary	75
4.5	Writing related research descriptions	77
5	Writing a Literature Review	79
5.1	The structure of a literature review	79
5.2	Elements of a literature review	80
5.3	Checklist/evaluation framework	90
6	Writing a Research Report	95
6.1	Preparation and process	97
6.2	Abstract	98
6.3	Introduction	98

6.4	Method	100
6.5	Results	102
6.6	Discussion	107
6.7	Reference list	110
6.8	Appendices	111
6.9	Checklist/evaluation framework	111
Appendix A Sample Scientific Summary		117
Appendix B Sample Research Report		121
Appendix C APA Reference List Guidelines		131
Reference list		143
Index		145
About the editor		149



Scientific Reports

1

Before conducting any scientific research, it is always essential to develop an understanding of the current state of knowledge in a particular field. This knowledge is embedded in scientific literature, making literature study an integral component of scientific endeavours. The most important sources for a literature study are journal articles and books (or book chapters) that either include research reports or critically examine or review others' research. Anybody conducting scientific research, therefore, needs to be able to locate, read, understand, and critically evaluate such publications to compare and contrast them, and incorporate them into a report. Two important types of academic reports are literature reviews and empirical research reports. A literature review reports the findings of a literature study and describes the current state of scientific knowledge concerning a specific research question. An empirical research report, on the other hand, adds new empirical facts to the existing body of scientific knowledge. Both report types include an evaluation of the information being presented.

1.1 What is a literature review?

A literature review is an informative text (an exposition) describing the author's knowledge and understanding of a particular research question based on the scientific literature. After studying that literature, you will have reached a certain conclusion. The literature review is an attempt to convince the reader that this conclusion is correct, by explicitly providing the evidence for your conclusion in a coherent and persuasive discussion of the material.

The evidence, in this case, consists of three aggregated argument types. The first type comprises facts (i.e. research results) reported by others. The second type consists of the interpretation of those facts by others (usually either in the form of a new theory, or by modifying, refining, or fully or partially proving/disproving an existing theory). The third type of argument comes from your own evaluation of the scientific merits of the first two argument types. Your exposition will combine

these three types of arguments in such a way as to create a line of reasoning leading inevitably to your conclusion. It will be scientifically sound if all the available facts and interpretations on the subject have been considered and your structuring and evaluation of them is logically correct.

1.2 What is an empirical research report?

An empirical research report is an informative text (an exposition) presenting new observations about a particular question. The introduction to this type of report will always include a succinct summary of information pertinent to the relevant field of research. The three types of arguments listed in Section 1.1 will apply here too; however, in this case, the author uses them to reason coherently and convincingly towards the conclusion that a key question remains unanswered – a question that you have investigated by making certain observations. The report will describe exactly what you investigated, and how, and what the results of the investigation were. Next, you will interpret the results, outline their relevance to the field of research you described in the introduction, and provide a commentary on the results. The exposition will be scientifically sound if: a) the literature review provides a succinct but thorough summary of the field of research; b) the research design is sound and the data obtained has been analysed correctly, and c) the interpretation of the results is indeed supported by the facts.

1.3 The content of this book

This book examines the various components of both types of reports and is, therefore, a manual for writing both literature reviews and empirical research reports. This first chapter sets out several general criteria that apply to written reports. To write an academic text on a particular topic, you must create a cohesive written exposition that combines words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into sections, and sections into a complete academic text. This book provides tips and instructions relating to all of the above levels. Chapter 2 offers some general recommendations for the structure, style, and format of scientific texts. Chapter 3 describes how to choose the topic of a literature review, how to search for scholarly literature on a particular research question and how to plan your review. Chapter 4 looks at how to describe empirical research effectively. Descriptions of this kind form the crux of a literature review and are also included (albeit more succinctly) in the introduction and sometimes also in

the discussion sections of empirical research reports. Chapter 4 also provides instructions on how to create summaries of studies you have read that can be used as preparation for writing both a literature review and an empirical research report; Appendix A provides an example of such a summary. Chapter 5 looks at writing the full literature review itself. In a very condensed form, a literature review is also part of the introduction of an empirical research report. Chapter 6 outlines exactly how to create such a research report. Appendix B presents a sample research report. Both types of report use references to the sources you consulted, Appendix C presents samples of such references.

1.4 Criteria applicable to all reports

Some criteria apply universally to all reports. They are given here at the very beginning so that they are not obscured by the discussion of the other elements. These general criteria are as follows:

- *Accuracy*
The content of the report must be correct. Both literature reviews and empirical research reports must present information taken correctly from the sources discussed; in an empirical research report, the experimental results reported must also correspond with the results obtained. Accuracy also means that information contradicting your exposition cannot be omitted.
- *Clarity*
The report must be easy to understand. A literature review must give the reader (who is not familiar with the original publications) a clear understanding of what was studied and how, as well as the researchers' conclusions. The same applies to empirical research reports, but with the additional requirement that a reader must be able to replicate the reported study.
- *Structure*
The report must be structured clearly and logically, with the various sections linked cohesively. An effective title, a standardised layout and informative subheadings are part of an effective structure.
- *Language*
The report must be written in good English, with the correct spelling, grammar, and division of paragraphs. The style of the report must also be objective and impartial, and present as much information as possible using the fewest words.
- *References*
The report must correctly cite the publications on which it is based and include a list of references in the proper format.

- *Layout*
The layout of the report must be following the rules of the American Psychological Association (APA).
- *Originality*
You must write the report yourself. Copying or paraphrasing others' work (or your own prior work) without citing the source is not permitted.

Writing academic texts is an important skill for Psychology or Educational Theory students, whether in the course of their studies or thereafter, when they are active practitioners.

Writing Psychology Research Reports teaches students how to comply with currently prevailing standards when writing reports of literature studies or experimental research. Step by step it takes the reader through every aspect of writing up a literature study or composing a research report. It deals with every angle, from the choice of a subject to reporting their own or other people's research results and applying the APA-style guidelines. The many tips and tools also make it a useful reference work for professional practitioners.

This second edition is completely up to date with the recent guidelines of the seventh edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

Peter A. Starreveld is an associate professor in the Psychology programme at the UvA and coordinates the shared content of the bachelor's programme.

English translation of the successful publication **Verslaglegging van psychologisch onderzoek** (fifth edition).



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