

# 2

## Writing Research Reports and Essays – Getting Started



### KEYWORDS

active voice, argument, assumptions, collaboration, copying, empirical, evidence, extraneous (nuisance) variable, factor, generic, hypothesis, methodology, operationalisation, organised scepticism, participant, plagiarism, problem (research problem), qualitative, questionnaire, reference, replication, representative, scientific study, study, theory

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THERE ARE SEVERAL ELEMENTS and processes that are common to research reports and essays. Most notably, assignments that receive the best marks are those that not only follow the conventional format but are also written clearly and concisely. Importantly, assignments that get the best marks also meet the requirements of the instructions given, including word limits, and are submitted on time.

This chapter addresses key issues in getting started: (a) the thorny problem of collaborating versus copying; (b) the question of the sort of material you should gather to support your research report or essay; (c) how to evaluate internet resources; (d) critical thinking and how to apply it to the material you read; (e) writing style, including the appropriateness of personal pronouns, fluency of expression, and punctuation; (f) the use of the correct tense; (g) inclusive language; (h) the need for proofreading and redrafting; and finally (i) the physical presentation of your assignment.

## 2.1 Collaborating Not Copying – The Distinction

**Collaborative study has many benefits.** It is good practice for your professional life, and it will make your university life more enjoyable and fruitful. However, collaboration in the production of assessable assignments can be confusing and even risky. You should always check what the expectations of your lecturer or tutor are regarding collaboration in the preparation of assessable work, but even when you work with another student or students, you should *never* produce one work which is submitted by multiple students. Instead, you might talk about the resources, your understanding of them, and the expectations of the task, and then you will write your own assignment.

It is desirable for first- and second-year undergraduate students faced with writing research reports and essays to collaborate in study groups. For example, when working on research reports, it may help you to discuss hypotheses, if these were not already given in the instructions, and to discuss which references logically lead to them, and do or do not support the hypotheses. You may also like to discuss the results, and the strengths and weaknesses of the research, because sharing ideas can help your understanding of the material. Collaborating on the preparations for a research report also allows you to debate your ideas and opinions, and hopefully, that will give you a taste of the intellectual excitement to be experienced in academic research that makes much of the grind worthwhile. However, it is always important to check with your tutor or lecturer about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable at your institution.

If your assignment is an essay, the possibilities for collaboration may be much more limited. Most lecturers would probably be happy for you to share resources, such as references. However, the essay probably needs to be a structured argument for *your* point of view, and your marker will expect that what you have written is *your* argument. If you want advice about whether you are on the right track with your essay plan, it is wisest to consult with the lecturer who set the essay topic, or your tutor.

So, as we have discussed, there are benefits to collaborating with your fellow students, especially on the preparatory aspects of the research report or essay. In contrast, when it comes to the final written work, your marker needs to be confident that what is written is your own work, reflecting your own research and understanding, except where explicitly acknowledged. Using other people's ideas, argument, or expression without acknowledgment is considered plagiarism. If you and a fellow student work too closely together, which leads to you both developing (or co-authoring) material, this is considered collusion. Both plagiarism and collusion are very serious matters and will typically mean a loss of marks, perhaps zero, for that report or essay, and a meeting with your lecturer or tutor to discuss issues of academic honesty. At worst, plagiarism and collusion can, and have led to expulsion from Australian universities. For more information about your university's approach to academic honesty (or dishonesty), consult the university handbook or web page (e.g., code of conduct or student responsibilities) of your institution and any course guides produced by individual departments for subjects you are studying. Ignorance of these policies and procedures is not an acceptable excuse if you are caught submitting unoriginal material developed with or by a fellow student, or from books, journal articles, or the internet. It is also more detectable due to the use of originality-checking software such as Turnitin. There is more information about plagiarism from books, journals, and the internet in Chapter 3.

If you have checked that collaboration is acceptable, there are several things you can do to make sure you stay on the right side of the collaboration versus collusion divide. First, collaboration is probably best in the planning and early (e.g., reading) stages of a research report or essay. For example, this will allow you to share practical information like planning your approach and sharing references. You may also like to discuss your understanding of such shared references once you have read them to clarify your comprehension. However, when it comes to writing the report or essay it is essential that it is your own work. For this reason, you should never share your drafts, or work on writing your reports or essays with another student(s). Also, while we will repeatedly stress the value of getting assignments proofread, your proofreader should *not* be a student completing the same assignment. You should be writing for an intelligent layperson, which means a non-psychology student is ideal as a proofreader.

## 2.2 Information Gathering

All undergraduate essays and research reports in psychology will require you to read some material on the chosen topic. You need to decide what to read, and how much. There is an enormous amount of information available within the discipline of psychology and related areas. There are two important considerations that should help guide your thinking on this issue. First, the information you are given about your research report or essay is the best guide to the topic and scope of the project. Second, undergraduate psychology majors and graduate psychology training in Australasian universities is based on a *scientist/practitioner* model of psychology. The aim of these programs is the



theoretical and, at later stages, practical training for psychology professionals who understand the scientific method and base their practice on knowledge that has been gained using accepted methods of scientific inquiry. As a result, research reports and essays are designed to build skills in scientific inquiry and the scientific method. This broad aim will, therefore, guide the information you will use.

**The scientific method.** You will learn more about the scientific method throughout your psychology studies, especially in your Research Design classes. The scientific method is an approach to learning about the world that, in the simplest terms, involves (a) observation; (b) hypothesis generation; (c) hypothesis testing using methods as objective as possible; and (d) the development of theory from findings (e.g., Popper, 1959) with the added conditions that the hypotheses and eventually the theory must be phrased in such a way that if they turn out to be false this can be discovered (i.e., falsification); and the method and findings must be reported in such a way as to be able to be replicated within a generally accepted paradigm (Eysenck, 2004). Even with these pretty strict rules, there are many ways of conducting research that broadly fit this ideal. In undergraduate psychology, you are likely to come across experiments, quasi-experiments, correlational methods, observational studies, case studies, and perhaps others that use the scientific method. There is also extensive qualitative research in psychology in recent literature, but you are less likely to encounter it at undergraduate level.

An example of an experiment is to randomly assign participants to one of two or more groups, and to manipulate a single variable (e.g., the amount of alcohol consumed) across those groups. The groups are then compared on an outcome variable that is predicted to be dependent on amount of alcohol consumed (perhaps number of times a participant runs off the road in a driving simulator). If there are consistent differences between the groups, you can be confident that the amount of alcohol consumed *caused* the differences in driving performance. You can be confident because the random allocation to the groups should mean that all *other* possible causes of driving performance, such as time of day or differences between participants such as personality or skill levels, are equally distributed across the groups and so cannot account for the difference in results.

Since it is not always possible to conduct formal experiments in psychology (we can't randomly assign you to marry similar or dissimilar people and later test how satisfied you are), psychologists often use quasi-experimental studies. The groups they compare are naturally occurring ones, such as males and females, young and older, depressed and not depressed. We cannot be so confident about what causes what in such studies, because there may well be factors involved in those groups that affect our outcome measures other than the ones we manipulate. For example, age differences, especially in children, are associated with different levels of education and even developmental stages, all of which may be the actual cause of differences between younger and older children on a range of variables.

In yet other studies, we measure variables such as self-esteem and satisfaction with life to find out whether the variables are associated with each other. That is, it may turn out that people with high self-esteem are generally more satisfied with their lives. A benefit of

a correlational design of this type is that it allows exploration of existing relationships between variables that exist in the real world. However, this kind of design does not allow us to work out which one of those things causes the other or even if they are both caused by something else entirely, like holding down a good job, which is known to improve self-esteem and lead to greater life satisfaction.

All of these sorts of designs, and more, are legitimate applications of the scientific method. You will learn about their strengths and limitations as you progress through your undergraduate psychology major, including that each of these contributes to our knowledge of psychology, as can be found in journal articles, books and textbooks, web pages, and even the popular press. The difficulty is to know where to look, and how to know which sources provide quality evidence for your research report or essay.

**What is a quality source?** Different sorts of publications serve different purposes. Newspaper and magazine reports, as well as blogs, are written for the layperson who is not expected to be trained in the scientific method, while journal articles are usually written for people who are not only scientifically trained but may be working in the area that the study examines. In addition, journal articles are often very narrowly focused, considering only a very specific subject, whereas a textbook is likely to discuss a range of theories and findings related to a general topic, in much less detail than a journal article. How useful a particular reference is depends on what you need it for.

A good place to start both research reports and essays is your textbook. It should provide you with a general overview of the area of interest, is likely to provide you with definitions, and should mention one or more studies in that area with the full references. It is usually acceptable to cite your textbook in your first few research reports or essays, especially in the Introduction section as you define the topic and key concepts of your paper. However, in later years your lecturer or tutor will expect fewer textbook citations and many more references to specific journal articles.

If you are writing a research report, you will probably need to find journal articles on your specific topic or reviewing related topics. If you can find an article reviewing the area you are researching, that will help enormously because it summarises a good deal of knowledge in that area. In contrast, essays allow you to search more broadly, to include not only specific studies but also opinion pieces, which may be found in web pages, magazine articles, and perhaps even newspapers if the essay topic allows. These materials will be of particular use if you are interested in debate or opinion, as well as real-world applications or implications that may not have been directly studied. However, it is very important to understand that even well-researched and reasoned opinion pieces are not equivalent to research evidence as reported in journal articles. This is because the conclusion reflects different types of information (e.g., opinion versus data), as well as differences in the process of information gathering (e.g., the scientific method versus bibliographic research) and publishing (e.g., peer review versus edited media).

Because psychology is very concerned with the quality of the evidence for the assertions it makes about how people think and behave, you need to be aware that

publications vary in the way they report information. To ensure that research is worth reporting in the first place, psychology, like other scientific disciplines, uses a method of peer review to decide if studies are worth publishing. This means that several well-qualified professionals make judgments about whether something is worth publishing in a professional journal. Therefore, although journals do vary in the quality of the material they publish, you can be confident that an article in a professional psychology journal has been through a process of peer review and is an acceptable one to cite in an assignment. That doesn't mean that it is perfect or that you can't criticise it, but it does mean that the article has been found to make a meaningful contribution to the discipline.

**How do you find relevant articles?** You will almost always be given one or two articles as starter references. They may be in the Reserve section of your library, possibly in electronic form, for you to make a copy, or they may be accessible through web-based systems like Blackboard or WebCT. These references have been given to you because they are of specific relevance to your assignment. So, for this reason, it is *essential* you take the time to read them and understand why they have been assigned. These references will probably give you a feel for the area in question and will help you find additional articles of relevance either by looking through the references cited in these articles or by exploring articles which have subsequently cited them (e.g., by using the *cited by* link in Google Scholar). Your textbook may also provide a context for your report, usually the classic references for a particular area of psychology or authors whose other publications you can explore.

The next place to look is one of the popular online databases. Commonly used ones are *PsycINFO*, *PsycARTICLES*, *Scopus*, *Web of Knowledge*, *Web of Science*, and *Academic Search Complete*. Your library will probably have training sessions in-person or online on how to set up an account, undertake searches, and save articles. You can search databases by author, article title, abstract, or keyword. For your purposes, the keyword is most relevant. The more specific you can make the keyword, the better, because there is a huge body of literature available. If you just ask for "depression" you will get thousands of articles, and then how do you choose which to look at? If you are examining a particular group, say adolescents, add that to the keywords and limit the search (adolescents *and* depression). In this particular case, you will still get a large number of references, so refining what you ask for as much as you can is a good idea.

Make a judgment, based on the title, of how relevant each reference is to your particular assignment, then select the most pertinent ones and read the Abstract. Do this for a small number and, if easily available, briefly look through the articles. You will often find that several of them cite the same earlier articles. That is a clue that the earlier work is central to the area and is therefore worth looking at.

You should be able to access full-text versions of articles in the most frequently used journals dating at least back to the mid-1990s, and many more full-text references from much earlier. Because they are easily accessed, there is a temptation to use only modern references; this will often be a good idea, as it will give you the contemporary view of the phenomenon. However, it is valuable to bear in mind that many studies that are run as

the basis of first-year research reports are replications of classic psychology research, which may mean you need to read several key papers from across the last five decades. This may involve locating hard copies held in the Periodicals section of your library (or those of nearby universities).

One final point on finding articles for research reports is that although it is acceptable to use some secondary sources in first-year assignments, for example, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (as cited in Lilienfeld et al., 2014), they are often frowned upon by markers at other year levels. In later years, you are expected to have read the original study or to use another original source to make or support your argument. If you cannot access the primary source, do not simply cite it from the reference list of the article you do have, especially if this primary source is an older, foreign article or textbook, as this is easily detectable (e.g., a simple search of your library's holdings will reveal the absence of the resource) and may also be considered a breach of academic honesty (i.e., you are claiming you have read material you have not read).

Psychological essays allow wider scope in the use of material. In addition to academic materials like those just discussed, it may be appropriate to search internet sources such as Google or Yahoo for non-academic sources which demonstrate popular views or more general information currently occupying the minds of writers, researchers, and others. However, this will require considerable criticality from you, as it is important to be aware of the quality of evidence that is presented in such sources. Furthermore, it is crucial that you make clear whether you are reporting a matter of opinion, a public poll, or the result of (likely, unpublished) research. For example, if it is research, has it been reviewed by the authors' peers in the discipline, or is it privately published (e.g., "none of the journals would accept it, so I put it on the web myself")? There is more information on evaluating such material in the next section.

In an essay, the way you might use internet material is to report that a particular topic is popular or has received considerable attention over a particular period (e.g., by using a date range in your search), in the sense of having many entries. You might briefly describe some of them, being careful to note the qualities of the material (e.g., opinion pieces, blogs, reports, professional online publications, etc.). Depending on the way the essay question is framed, you may argue for or against the opinions expressed, using evidence from other readings or research. Alternatively, you might use the internet to familiarise yourself with a topic, especially if your library has few resources in that area. This might allow you to narrow the scope of your inquiry, and possibly discover some of the names of researchers current in the field whose formal publications you can then access. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination, as long as you remember to acknowledge the work of others by properly citing them in your essay.

**Some web resources.** Having said all that, the web is great for generally exploring a topic, and frequently contains material that is both more controversial and current than journal articles (e.g., publication biases like the tendency to only publish significant findings can affect what is available in academic journals), and much more current than

books. That is because almost all universities have websites, and many academics maintain their own pages discussing their current research, often with links to related material. Below are some web addresses that you may like to explore. They were all checked at the time of this publication and all were active then. You may want to use a search engine to find a specific topic, and that is fine, but this usually results in lots of extraneous material that is time-consuming to wade through.

Your textbook publisher will also have a website, usually with links to ancillary material relevant to that text, and probably including study guides and examples of test questions. Such sites are very well worth exploring.

Here are sites maintained by the peak bodies of psychology in Australia and America:

Australian Psychological Society: [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

American Psychological Association: [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

Association for Psychological Science: [www.psychologicalscience.org](http://www.psychologicalscience.org)

These sites have a lot of information relevant to professional psychologists, which won't be of immediate relevance to you, although they will give you a flavour of what is important to psychologists. However, they do have links to student resources.

We're reluctant to give just a few sites in case they are somehow thought to be special. They aren't. They are just ones we've found when we've been looking. There are plenty more out there to be found, and they may well be better than these. Having said that, here is one site that has copies of some of the most famous papers in the history of psychology and allows you to search them by author or topic:

<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca>

A site for information within the general area of social psychology is:

<http://www.socialpsychology.org>

A similar site maintained by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, which has a students' corner, is:

<http://www.spsp.org>

Some blogs that you may find interesting and useful are:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/09/170911122615.htm>

[@mindhacksblog](#)

<http://www.spring.org.uk/>

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/were-only-human>

<http://www.badscience.net/> (more than psych, but good on science)

Happy searching – but don't get carried away!

## 2.3 Evaluating Internet Resources

This section has been called “Evaluating Internet Resources”, but the advice applies equally well to various media such as magazines, newspapers, blogs, and podcasts. The quality of such material is enormously variable, and you should not even consider citing newspapers or magazines for research reports. However, essays may be a different matter. Where you are asked to discuss, compare, or evaluate psychological theories, diagnoses or treatments, it is safer to stick to textbooks and journal articles. Occasionally, you may be asked to examine popular opinion or the impact of psychological practices on the general population. In such a case, it is acceptable to find summaries or opinions in the broader media, including the internet.

The internet itself provides information on how to evaluate internet material. One website that we like (though there are others) is found at <http://www.virtualsalt.com/-evalu8it.htm>. It is by Harris (2015) and is specifically aimed at evaluating internet research sources. A more general one is an online tutorial from Monash University, found at <http://www.monash.edu.rlo/tutorials>, which is more a comprehensive look at evaluating any material you find, and also contains links to a huge number of other learning strategies.

Harris (2015) suggests that a good way to evaluate material is to use a checklist with the acronym CARS, for Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, and Support. Credibility involves whether the author is known, and how likely they are to be knowledgeable and trustworthy. Does the web page you are looking at name the author? If so, what biographical information do they give? Would you consider them to be expert in the field, or at least experienced? Do they provide contact details? Do they cite material from scientific sources, such as journal articles, which can be checked by you? Are they employed by a recognisable institution, and what sort (university, government department, research organisation)? While you are not expected to recognise the professional standing of particular individuals, you can at least be more confident of the trustworthiness of material on the home page of an academic at a university or major research institution than that of a person whose affiliation is unknown.

Accuracy includes whether the material is comprehensive. Does it give you a rounded picture of the subject, or does it seem to present a partial or biased view? Does it admit alternative views, even if only to argue against them? Accuracy also includes a level of appropriateness. Is the material aimed at a general audience, or schoolchildren, or a specialist audience? Accuracy also includes timeliness (Harris, 2015). Especially in areas relating to some effects (e.g., biological effects on behaviour), some information becomes out of date fairly quickly. Does the document contain a date? However, don't be too quick to judge journal articles published before you were born. They may have been updated but could form the basis of long-lasting and influential theories that are still relevant. Nonetheless, such “classics” will usually be referred to in your texts and, in the second and third years, you will be expected to read the original sources, not what some later author says was done.

The standard of Reasonableness includes judgments of whether the article is fair, objective, moderate, and consistent (Harris, 2015). Does the article present information in a fair and balanced way, including reporting information or arguments contrary to its own point of view? Is it trying to raise your emotions to the point where you cannot think clearly about its arguments? This approach can often be detected by the use of ridiculous counter examples (i.e., a “straw man”) or sarcasm, and while we cannot be totally objective, it is essential to beware of articles written in strongly slanted ways. One such influence is the particular political or ideological point of view that may influence the material, which can be harder to ignore if at odds with your own views, and equally hard to identify if consistent with your views. Try asking yourself, “What does the writer gain or achieve from convincing me of their point of view?” Also, run reality checks on what seem like unusual or extreme claims. Because psychology deals with how people think and behave, you are already a good amateur psychology theorist or you wouldn’t be able to function in society. If a claim seems contrary to your experience, look for more information, but try to keep an open mind. Moderate and conditional claims are more likely to be accurate.

The final area of Support refers to the sort of evidence cited in support of the claims made in the material you find. Claims of fact and statistics frequently come from other sources (Harris, 2015), and an argument is more credible if those sources are also credible. Does the author cite their own sources of information? If you find several articles that agree with each other, you can be more confident of the claims being made, or they may all be citing the same dubious source (e.g., drinking eight glasses of water a day is widely cited as the ideal intake, but has no scientific support). Communication scholars talk about the “given-new” principle: when giving new information, it is better understood if linked to something already known (Haviland & Clark, 1974). Is what you are being told in the article consistent with things you already know from other areas of your study? If the material is untrustworthy about something you already know, you should suspect what it is telling you about something unknown to you.

The process of choosing what material is relevant to your particular writing project needs more than just being careful about the source. It also requires you to think critically about the content. This is the subject of the next section.

## 2.4 Critical Thinking

In the previous chapter we said that tertiary essays in most subjects, but especially in psychology, require you to demonstrate the skill of critical thinking. Critical thinking is not nit-picking or disagreeing with what you read. It is showing that you understand the strengths and weaknesses as well as the main ideas of the work in question. For the purposes of preparing a research report or essay in psychology, a definition of critical thinking is “a logical and rational process of avoiding one’s preconceptions by gathering evidence, contemplating and evaluating alternatives, and coming to a conclusion” (Smith, 1995, p. 2). This is essentially the generic skill of demonstrating your awareness

is a good case for arguing that you should be able to make the required emphasis by the appropriate use of language. The writing style in this book is also more conversational than you should use in a research report or essay, because this book is essentially an instruction manual and was written as if you were being spoken to. A research report or essay, however, is a formal report and so should not be chatty or frivolous.

Use the same size and style font throughout your written work. Do not use larger font sizes for headings. However, note the use of bold type in headings, described in the Method section of Chapter 5. The *Publication Manual* of the APA expects you to use a 12-point serif font, such as Times New Roman.

Your tutor or lecturer will probably be able to easily call to mind other examples of writing style that bother them. While not of great significance in terms of marks, the presence of such irritants may just tip the balance to your disadvantage if the marker is judging whether the assignment is worthy of, say, a high Pass or a Credit grade.

## 2.7 Using the Correct Tense

An element of writing style that often confuses students is the tense used. The rule of thumb is that research reports should be written in the past tense. You are reporting research and theorising that it has already happened. This even applies to your own hypotheses which were developed before conducting the research (see Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4 for examples of aims and hypotheses). However, there are exceptions. The exceptions occur when you refer in your report to something that is happening at the time the reader is reading your report. For example, in the Method section you might say, “The questionnaire used is included as Appendix A.” Present tense is used because it is true as the reader is reading. Similarly, in your Results section you might say, “These results are summarised in Table 2”, since it is also true as the report is being read. Finally, in your Discussion, having reported (in the past tense) whether or not your hypotheses were supported, you could say, “These results suggest that . . .”. In this case, present tense is used because, although the results were supported (or not), they have implications for the present and future. In the same vein, you could say at the very end, “In summary, this study indicates that people judge corporations more harshly than individuals”, because it is a statement, in the present, of what the study suggests.

Essays are typically written in the present tense, except where you are reporting something that has already happened including previous research or an argument that was made. This is because you are trying, in the present, to convince the reader of your point of view. For example, you might say that “Smith (2005) performed a study . . .” when describing what Smith did in the past, and “Smith (2005) argued that . . .”. In contrast, you might say “I argue, consistent with Smith’s contention”, which mixes these tenses, reflecting that you are active in presenting your argument, based on points of view other than your own.

## 2.8 Inclusive Language

It is important, in the interests of accuracy and equity, to use neutral and respectful language. This means language that recognises people before their group memberships (e.g., people with a physical disability or mental disorder rather than disabled or mentally disordered people). For more on how this should be considered in writing research reports, see Chapter 5 (p. 81).

The emphasis on inclusive language in the 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* highlights the need to address longstanding language biases, such as gender-biased language, which has accepted the use of masculine nouns and pronouns when the context includes both genders (e.g., mankind, chairman). Much research, especially Martyna (1978), suggests that readers of both genders think of male persons even when the context suggests that both genders are included. The best solution is to use plural pronouns. Instead of writing “The individual who displays prejudice in his personal relations is . . .”, write “Individuals who display prejudice in their personal relations are . . .”. Avoid using s/he, since it is impossible to pronounce, and he/she, which disturbs the flow of the writing. Further examples of gender-neutral writing are presented in Figure 2.1. On the other hand, avoid carrying this sensitivity to extremes. If all your subjects are male, of course you should use “he” and “him” when referring to individuals among them.

For the use of gender-neutral language other than pronouns, a thesaurus should help keep you out of trouble. Don't use the collective nouns “man” or “mankind”, use “people” or “humanity”. Don't write “man an observation station”, say “staff” it. Children need “nurturing”, not “mothering”.

The issue of sexist language is not trivial. It is vital in the interests of equity. It is also an important part of good communication. Unless you intend your message to refer to one gender only, you need to choose your words carefully so that it is quite clear that you are speaking of people in general. Ask your proofreader to watch out for language that is gender-exclusive, when the exclusion is not justified.

## 2.9 Proofreading and Redrafting

**Always proofread drafts.** A distressing number of research reports are handed in for marking without being proofread. This behaviour is throwing marks away. It indicates to the marker that you do not care very much about the presentation of the report or have poor time-planning skills. Apart from minor evidence of carelessness, such as typographical errors (typos), it is not unusual to find some rather strange expression in undergraduate reports, such as long sentences, erratic punctuation, or the misuse of psychological jargon. A sign that you have done a good job on your report is that your work could be read and understood by a non-academic. We will say more in Chapter 4 about having a friend, parent, or sibling read your work to indicate just how clear your writing is. If they find that something you have written is unclear, don't argue with them or try to clarify the problem verbally – you won't

- ✗ **Original:** “If a subject has a strong tendency to give socially desirable responses in self-description, is it unreasonable to believe that he may also reveal this tendency in his behavior in a learning situation where he is aware of what would be considered socially desirable, namely to learn fast, to do his best?” (Edwards, 1957, p. 89)
- ✓ **Revised:** If participants have a strong tendency to give socially desirable responses in self-description, is it unreasonable to believe that they may also reveal this tendency in their behaviour in a learning situation where they are aware of what would be considered socially desirable, namely to learn fast, to do their best?
- ✗ **Original:** “With sufficient analytical subtlety we can tease out the connections from the behaviour of the man in his actual life situation – without the false situation of controlling and manipulating.” (Cattell, 1965, p. 20)
- ✓ **Revised:** With sufficient analytical subtlety we can tease out the connections from the behaviour of people in their actual life situations – without the false situations of controlling and manipulating.
- ✗ **Original:** “The goal of the individual includes his expectations for the future, his wishes, and his daydreams. Where the individual places his goals will be determined fundamentally by two factors, namely, by the individual’s relations to certain values and by his sense of realism in regard to the probability of reaching the goal.” (Lewin, 1948, p. 113)
- ✓ **Revised:** The goals of individuals include their expectations for the future, their wishes, and their daydreams. Where individuals place their goals will be determined by two factors, namely, by the individual’s relations to certain values and by their sense of realism in regard to the probability of reaching the goals.

**Figure 2.1.** Examples of gender-neutral language.

have this opportunity with your marker! If they have read it conscientiously, they are always right – by definition the writing is unclear. Even if their suggestions for fixing it are wrong or stupid, readers are never wrong if they have found something unclear.

You may ask a fellow student to proofread for you, as long as they are not writing the same research report or essay. Of course, this means that you should also be prepared to do the same for them. This is essentially what happens in the real world of publishing. Writers usually get peer reviews before submitting their work for publication. Some students see their fellows as competitors, particularly third-year students. This is unfortunate and is inaccurate – your mark will not depend on others’ marks. Being prepared to give and receive criticism, and keeping that criticism focused on the writing and not the writer, is good preparation for later work experience.

**After proofreading, what then?** Having received some constructive criticism, you need to start the long task of polishing and rewriting. Since essays are not constrained by the same conventions that research reports are, you may find that an essay will need even more rewriting! Make sure your time management has allowed for this.

**Time management.** Most assignments are set so that you have several weeks before they are due. You should make a timetable of what needs to be done and do your best to stick to it. The checklists in Section 5.11 (research report) and in Section 6.8 (essay) are good starting points. There are no foolproof guidelines, because students work at very different rates. However, experience has shown that students are less stressed if they get some writing done early, and writing can even help to clarify what you do and don't understand. It is easier to correct and elaborate on something already written than to try to hold material in your head then write it all at once. The steps involved in getting started are described in Section 4.4.

**Relation between effort and grades.** A common complaint of many students is that they put an enormous amount of time and effort into their essay, but did not get the grade they expected. Although there is some relationship between effort expended and grade awarded, this assumes that the effort is being applied to things that will help (i.e., that drafts do improve). For example, reading more papers rather than starting writing won't necessarily help your final product, and this is especially true for tasks you find difficult! Redrafting your writing is hard work. Make sure that the feedback you receive is really addressed in the next draft.

**What to look for when redrafting.** The sorts of things to look for when rewriting a draft are: Is there a clear topic sentence in each paragraph, preferably at the start? Are all your sentences really sentences? Is there only one major point per paragraph? Do the paragraphs vary in length, without being either too short or too long? Avoid single-sentence paragraphs. Are the links between sentences or paragraphs logical or coherent?

Not only should your drafts be read for clarity of argument and expression, your final version should also be proofread for typos or printing errors. The ease with which word-processing programs allow you to cut-and-paste words, sentences, or paragraphs leads to the possibility of all sorts of errors. If you can't get someone else to proofread the final version, leave it for a day and proofread it yourself. Finally, do not forget to keep a copy, either on a USB or cloud-based backup service, or as a hardcopy.

## 2.10 The Physical Presentation of Your Assignment

Your university (e.g., library and the student union) will allow you to access word-processing, internet, and printing facilities if you need them. You should, however, be aware that, if you are working across multiple machines, you will need to check your final submission carefully for formatting errors (e.g., repagination, font changes, orphaned headings, even to make sure the file still opens!).

**Typing, spacing, margins, page numbers.** The following suggestions may sound unduly simplistic, but too often they are ignored by undergraduates and can lead to

unnecessary deduction of marks. First, you may be required to submit electronically or in hardcopy, although the latter is increasingly uncommon. If you are submitting a hardcopy, check your institution's or lecturer's preference for single- or double-sided printing, or the need to use an institutional coversheet.

Regardless of mode of presentation, you should always consult your institution's requirements about line spacing and margins, as well as for indenting (i.e., the first line of each paragraph, except for the Abstract) using the tab key to ensure consistency. You should ensure your pages are numbered in the upper right-hand corner, so that if by some mischance the pages are separated or are carelessly assembled in the wrong order, it is immediately apparent and may save you marks. Use a 12-point serif font, such as Times New Roman. The *APA Publication Manual* expects you to use a serif font, claiming that it is easier to read in print. Many students, used to reading on a computer monitor, tablet or smartphone, tend to use sans serif fonts such as Arial. Check with your tutor or lecturer to see which they prefer. Twelve-point is the smallest easily read size for essays and reports.

Some institutions insist that research reports should be exactly in the format of a submission to a journal. If this is the case at your institution, you should include a running head, repeat the title at the top of the first page of the Introduction, and have no spaces between paragraphs.

**Appendices.** There are no consistent expectations about Appendices in undergraduate research reports, so check with your tutor or lecturer about their expectations. We recommend that for a research report you should include as Appendices all your raw data if you collected them yourself, and all statistical calculations if you have conducted them yourself. You probably do not need to include Appendices for material provided to you by teaching staff, unless you have specifically found a need to refer to it in the research report. Appendices that are included but are not referred to in the research report may be marked down.

Essays do not normally require Appendices. The only exception might be if you have access to a rare or unusual document that would not be available to the average reader. In that case you could include it as an Appendix.

**Getting advice.** Be aware that most lecturers and tutors will not usually read drafts. If you need advice on your work, you should consult your lecturer or tutor with specific questions ready. Lecturers and tutors may be available via consultation hours, although these can be limited, so do not be afraid to have questions written down. Your lecturer or tutor will appreciate your forethought. In addition, most institutions now have discussion boards accessible over the internet through programs like Blackboard or WebCT. Students can “post” questions or comments and tutors, lecturers, and fellow students can post replies. These are a very effective means of communication, since you can access them at your convenience, as can the staff member, and it saves the staff member answering the same question many times, since any other student can read the questions and answers. However, staff monitoring these discussion boards are frustrated if they do find

themselves answering the same question repeatedly, so be sure to glance through previous posts and see if your query has already been answered.

**Submit in a folder?** This would only be relevant for hardcopy submissions, and most institutions do not require this. Check with your lecturer or tutor about whether your report should be in a folder or pocket. In any case, a report is much easier to mark if it is stapled only at the top left-hand corner. At all costs, avoid those folders where each page is in a separate sleeve. Taking pages out individually to write comments on them is guaranteed to try the fairmindedness of any marker! Make sure that your name, your tutor or lecturer's name, the subject and year level, and day and time of your class are clearly marked on the Title Page of your report, and also on the outside of your folder. Figure 5.2 in Chapter 5 shows an example.

Sample pages