Common Dissertation Errors

- Reference Section APA style - usually the references are all over the place, and we have to bleed red ink all over those pages. Most students need to go over their reference section with the current APA manual by their side and make sure everything is "up to code." Basically make sure each entry follows APA format rigidly.
  - References ending in URLs or ERIC numbers do not end with periods (people will enter them as part of the URL and get a 404 "File not found" error).
  - URLs must point directly to the cited work – there should be no hunting necessary. If the website no longer carries that article, you must include the date when the link was accessed for your study.
  - Authors’ initials should consistently be separated by a space.
  - Journal information should be complete - volume number (where appropriate), issue number, and page numbers (unless the journal is entirely electronic).
  - Journal names and Book titles should be in italics. Review APA format for each entry to determine proper italic usage.
  - The Reference section should be double-spaced, with no blank lines between entries.
  - For each entry, answer the question: What type of source is this (e.g., journal article, book, book chapter, reference entry), and find the format for that entry in the APA manual.
  - Do not capitalize every word in the titles cited works, except for journal titles. For articles, and other works, capitalize only the first word of the title, the first word after a colon, and Proper nouns.
  - Generally, do not use “pp.” for pages – just use “p.” (there are case-by-case exceptions laid out in the APA manual, e.g., book chapters)

- In-text parenthetical citations - citations with multiple works should be in alphabetical order by 1st author, and all cited sources should be present in the reference section (except for personal communications).
  - Authors should be separated by ampersands instead of the word "and."
  - Students need to brush up on correct use of "et al." (for 3 to 5 authors, cite ALL authors on the first citation, but for all subsequent citations, use et al.; for 6 or more authors, cite only the 1st author and use et al. (allowances are made for works where the first two or three authors are the same people - it's fairly byzantine, but it's explained on p. 175 of APA, 6th ed.)

- Students should cross-check all citations with their reference section to ensure that each cited work is properly referenced, AND cross-check their reference section with the text to ensure that each referenced work is cited at least once.

- Percentage and % - use percentage when discussing a general (i.e., non-specific) percentage, and % (with a numeral) for specific numbers (e.g.: A vast percentage of the subjects were white. Of the participants, 72% were white). If the number must be written out, spell out "percent" also.

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• Presentation of numerals - if at all possible, avoid starting sentences with numbers. If it absolutely must be done, that number must be spelled out (e.g.: Fifty participants were white). If it is a direct comparison with other numbers in the same sentence, they must be presented the same way (which is why one should avoid starting sentences with numbers (e.g.: Seventy-Six participants agreed or strongly agreed, while One Hundred Twenty Seven disagreed. Compare to: Of the participants, 76 agreed or strongly agreed, while 127 disagreed.) But note:

• All numbers in the abstract are to be presented as numerals, regardless of their position in the sentence.

• General grammar - make sure subjects and verbs agree (see "data" note above), and avoid run-on sentences, sentence fragments, comma splices, hyphenation errors, etc.

• The word "data" is plural - Students need to say "data were" and "data are" instead of "data was" and "data is."

• Avoid subjectivity and hyperbole - research needs to maintain objectivity - saying a situation is "disastrous" or "amazing" or "the worst/best since..." or any variation thereof has no place in an academic work (except in quoted material).

• Once an acronym is defined, that acronym should be used consistently throughout. An acronym must be spelled out the first time the term appears, and then the acronym must be used consistently thereafter. If an acronym is used three or fewer times, it is unnecessary – just spell it out each time.

• Table and figure titles must be formatted correctly. Table format can be found on APA p. 129, and figures on p. 152.

• Tables and figures are numbered in simple consecutive order (i.e., table 1, table 2, table 3; not table 1.1, table 1.2, table 1.3, etc.), regardless of in which chapter they appear in the text.

• Header levels must be formatted correctly. These can be found on APA p. 62. All levels of header present in the text must be represented in the Table of Contents.

• For all dissertations involving human subjects, the letter (or email) of IRB approval (or the letter stating that such approval is not necessary for that study) should be included in the Appendix). Inclusion of the letter is not optional.

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