

## Some General and Technical Writing Suggestions

### General:

*Affect* is a verb, *effect* is a noun. One way to remember this is that “affect” starts with an ‘a’ for “action”. Examples: the effects were clear, the independent variable affects the dependent variable, there was an experimenter effect, the experimenter affected the outcome of the study through subtle reinforcing behaviors.

*That* is almost always used instead of *which*. Example: The handout *that* described... *Which* should be used much more sparingly and only used as a restatement that does not change the basic meaning of the sentence. Example: The latest study, *which* has been widely publicized, is a rigorous test of the hypotheses.

*However* should be used in the middle or the end of a sentence rather than at the beginning. Example: Instead of “However, the participants were not debriefed,” it is better to say “The participants, however, were not debriefed” or, perhaps better, “The participants were not debriefed, however,” depending on which makes the most sense at the time and interrupt the flow of the sentence least.

*Since* should only be used when referring time passing (e.g., since the early days before science), and *because* should be used otherwise.

*While* should only be used when referring to something happening at the same time (e.g., while the participants were filling out the questionnaire, the experimenter smoked a cigarette), and *whereas*, *but*, or *and* should be used otherwise.

### Technical:

When reporting results or study procedures, past tense is used. Example: “a t-test *indicated* that the two groups *were* significantly different.”

Never use the variable names when you report results from your analyses (or in the Method section at all). Always use a conceptual term. For example, if the variable name in SPSS is called “RESID” and represents a question about type of living arrangement, use “type of residence” or a similar conceptual term rather than “RESID” in your report.

Spell out number values under 10 if they do not represent precise measurements (e.g., “eight participants” vs. “score of 10.5”) or appear at the beginning of a sentence (“Eighty-four participants responded.”). Use figures if the value is over 10 (e.g., 450 participants), uses decimals (e.g., “9.5”), precedes a metric (e.g., “5 cm”), or if the number modifies another number (e.g., “ten 7-point scale items”).

Use *because* or *because of* rather than *due to*.

The word *data* is plural, not singular. Examples: *Data were* collected; *Data were* analyzed. *Data set* is singular, however. Example: The data set *was* large.

Think about using more formal language:

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <u>not so good</u> | <u>better</u>                                       |
| so,                | therefore, thus, consequently,                      |
| wrong              | incorrect   |
| right              | correct   |
| can't              | cannot (i.e., avoid all contractions)               |
| you                | one, participants, researchers, theorists           |
| ran analyses       | conducted tests, computed values, tested hypotheses |
| big                | large   |
| really big         | very large  |

Think about being as concise as possible:

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <u>not so good</u>        | <u>better</u>  |
| the fact of the matter is | it is true that, clearly, apparently, in fact, evidently |
| due to the fact that      | because  |

Think about being more precise:

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <u>not so good</u>                | <u>better</u>                                    |
| They were friendly.               | The participants were friendly.                  |
| It is the best measure available. | The Hoffner scale is the best measure available. |

(if you find yourself starting a sentence with "it" or "they" or "those," you are probably not being specific enough for the reader).

Use scientific logic in describing results:

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <u>not so good</u>    | <u>better</u>   |
| the theory was proven | the hypothesis was supported, hypothesis was confirmed,<br>the findings were consistent with the hypothesis |

### **Other recommended sources:**

*Publication manual of the American Psychological Association, fifth edition.* (2001). Washington, DC: APA.

(An excellent source for many style and technical writing tips, not just APA style formatting.)

Alfred, G.J., Brusaw, C.T., Oliu, W.E. (2003). *Handbook of technical writing, seventh edition.* New York: St. Martin's Press.