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# Writing in Psychology

## What is Psychology?

We call our field **Psychology**. In general, this field is rooted in the study of **behavior as well as the factors/mechanisms/properties that support behavior**. Goals for our work include systematic analysis, evidence-supported theory, practical application, and improvement of quality of life.

This field, however, includes **subfields** such as cognitive, biopsychology, developmental, clinical, social, and comparative psychology. In our department we are subdivided into Clinical, Social, and Brain, Cognitive, & Developmental (BCD - experimental). These subfields differ in terms of the types of questions we ask, the participants/subjects we work with (e.g., humans versus non-human animals), the methodologies we use, and the types of analyses we conduct.

We have some **fundamental ways of looking at behavior and/or doing research**; the main method is the scientific method. Methods for conducting our work tend to include observation, surveys, case studies (clinical), behavioral and/or brain manipulations (experimentation).

Newcomers to our field of study are often confused by hypothesis testing, probability, significance, and what counts as evidence.

There are some **threshold concepts** that are essential for anyone to understand if they want to work in our field (no matter what subfield one might later study), and those include:

- **significance testing,**
- **effect size, and**
- **behavior as a process (dynamic).**

Of course, subfields have their own, additional, threshold concepts. For example, in the biopsychology subfield, one threshold concept requires an understanding that cells in the nervous system communicate with one another by both electrical and chemical mechanisms. In the canine cognition subfield, additional threshold concepts include an understanding that dominance theory is not supported, behavior changes when emotion changes, dog brains are different from human brains and thus cognitive and socioemotional processes may be different, vision is secondary to olfaction, distance increasing signals can be confused with many other meanings due to faulty transfer of knowledge of human signals. In Human Factors (applied cognitive) it is a threshold concept to realize that the designers are not the typical users, so the researcher’s goal is to make sure that the designer, user, and system all have the same perspective.

There are some things people in our field value, either implicitly or explicitly. Our threshold concepts suggest/imply these values, but if we state them directly, we might say that our field tends to value **reproducibility of findings, validity of our methods, statistical analysis of our data, evidence-based practices, theory-driven questioning, controlled experimentation, objectivity, and peer-review of research**. We tend not to value or prioritize profitability and creative expression. There are sometimes disputes about our values, and those disputes might include/center around what to prioritize in presenting research (e.g., a “provocative/sexy” story, or a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the question).

## What Does Psychology Value in Writing?

Our values, goals, threshold concepts, and methods of study are all embodied in what and how we write.

We tend to write in genres such as grant proposals, research articles, conference presentations, and books. We rarely write genres such as policy proposals, letters to the editor, trade magazines, or city planning.

The writing processes for the genres we produce vary; for example, the research article genre might require background research and data, while the review article genre might entail years of your life and connection to a librarian.

“Effective” or “good” writing in our field varies by genre and purpose, but overall we tend to like or expect to see well-reasoned and researched arguments that are supported by published literature. Some of the characteristics of “good” writing for specific genres might include: for the genre of research articles, good writing is objective, specific, explicit, and integrates material; for the genre of a theoretical viewpoint, good writing is provocative, novel, and has few hidden assumptions (particularly for more general outlets).

