Anthropology (../anthropology/index.html)

Art History (../art-history/index.html)

Family Science and Social Work (../familyscience/index.html)

Geography (../geography/index.html)

Gerontology (../gerontology/index.html)

History (../history/index.html)

Latin American, Latino/a, and Caribbean Studies (../Iatin-american-studies/index.html)

Philosophy (../philosophy/index.html)

Political Science (../political-science/index.html)

Project Dragonfly (../projectdragonfly/index.html)

Psychology (index.html)

Teacher Education (../teachereducation/index.html)

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). Professional writers in our field must provide evidence for their claims. We understand evidence to include prior data collected via IRB- or IACUC- approved experiments and published in peer-reviewed outlets. We generally do not expect or accept casual surveys or testimonials as evidence.

Professional writers in our field are understood to be credible when they provide a thorough literature review and have a good reputation based on prior work. They are often not seen as credible when they misrepresent previous work or omit important background research.

The citation practices we use in our field also embody our goals, values, and conventions. We tend to use APA citation style(s) in our formal writing. This kind of citation style values/prioritizes the authors and year because we as a field value/prioritize knowing who did the work (we may know what lab they were trained in) and when it was done in order to contextualize it in the development of the idea. Writers in our field are expected to do certain things when citing outside material. Some of those expectations can seem strange to newcomers, for example: citing at the end of a direct statement without mentioning the authors in the sentence text. We do these things because we need an efficient way to identify prior work and trace the development of an idea through authors over time.

How Does Psychology Incorporate Writing Into Its Courses?

Not every student in our classes needs to be able to write the way professional writers in our field do. However, depending on the reason you are taking our courses, we want you to be able to do different things with writing. For example:

- Undergraduates taking Miami Plan or elective courses in our field should recognize the need to use prior research to make a case about our writing and try to do/understand/practice evidence-based arguments when they write for us. We think this will be useful to them later even if they are not our majors because being able to make an effective evidence-based argument is a transferable skill that is useful in many contexts.
- Undergraduates majoring in our field should recognize the importance of convention about our writing and try to do/understand/practice the structure of a literature review and APA style when they write for us. Over time they will need to become skilled at making a well-reasoned and well-supported argument using the technical writing conventions of the field because research proposals and reports require these skills.
- Graduate students in our program should recognize the importance of developing a compelling "story" or main message in our writing and must understand how to reach a specific audience when they write for us. By graduation, they need to be able to effectively communicate across a number of genres in our field because they will be mentoring students in these same skills and they may be responsible for securing funding their own lab in the future.

Overall, when students are learning to write and read in our field, they will benefit from frequent and early feedback, reading many examples of this type of writing, learning about the explicit conventions and then practicing them (how to talk about prior research, cite sources, etc.).