

## **Helping Graduate Counseling Students Embrace Academic Writing: Beyond a Book Review**

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### **Abstract**

Both graduate students and faculty are continually faced with the challenge of academic writing. For a number of reasons, graduate counseling students are resistant to learning and applying APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition guidelines to their academic writing. This article seeks to lay a foundational understanding of the importance of graduate academic writing and provide a review of a possible resource for professors to use to supplement the APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition publication manual.

*Keywords:* academic writing, graduate students, APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, graduate counseling students

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Academic writing continues to be a source of contention for both students and faculty. Students do not seem to appreciate the need for APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition guidelines and professors can't seem to effectively communicate the importance of academic writing to their students. The significant impact of academic writing skills on academic success is indisputable. Gunn, Hearne, and Sibthorpe (2011) declared academic writing is part of an academic skills set which includes "critical thinking, reflective writing, reasoned analysis, problem solving and information literacy" (p. 1). Elder and Paul (2006) substantiated this stand by linking substantive writing with "writing for a purpose, avoiding impressionistic writing, writing reflectively, and writing to learn" (p. 38). Graduate faculty want their students to be successful in their educational pursuits and particularly in the formation of their academic writing skills. This is not an exercise in futility or an application of busy work. It is to develop, increase, and hone the graduate students' ability to use critical thinking capacities, research inquiry, and academic writing skills. This is particularly true for graduate counseling students. Students who are enrolled in graduate counseling courses are immediately introduced to the importance of research and evidence-based therapy and therein the difficulty begins.

### **Background of the Problem**

Why is academic writing so problematic, particularly for graduate counseling students? First, graduate counseling students who enter a master's level program come from different undergraduate disciplines. Counseling tends to incorporate learning, understanding, research, and scientific methodologies from a wide array of disciplines, it is important for future counselors to understand the interconnections of these disciplines. West (2012) discovered through his research that many counseling and psychotherapy students transitioning from a Bachelor's degree to a Master's degree had no previous academic writing experience. The research focused on the idea brought to their attention by students from different academic fields. The students maintained they needed a better comprehension of the writing experience because of the change in disciplines (West). The variety in those academic fields makes for an important element in becoming a well-informed counselor. Elder and Paul (2006) explained the significance of this when they declared: "One should also be able to explain in writing how fundamental concepts between disciplines overlap or conflict" (p. 38).

Second, graduate counseling students are often more focused on learning their field and the intricate content of the material than they are the mechanics of technical writing. They may reason academic writing is more of a chore than a fundamental process to help them master their field and its content. With more demands to show evidence-based therapeutic interventions (particularly for third-party payers), graduate counseling students need to know how to read the research and technical papers associated with counseling for even loftier purposes. The American Counseling Association's 2014 Ethics Standards state: "Counselors who conduct research are encouraged to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession and promote a clearer understanding of the conditions that lead to a healthy and more just society (p. 15). Researchers such as Elder and Paul (2006) asserted the connection between thinking and writing which makes acquisition of knowledge more meaningful.

Third, graduate counseling students often do not make the connection between technical writing expertise and their own professional development. McDonald (2011) asserted the importance of academic writing for graduate counseling students by noting, among other things, effective writing develops a professional voice and enhances development of advocacy skills. The ability to write in a professional manner enhances the student counselor's comprehension and synthesizing skills, which models for the client and develops within the student tangible connections between writing and clinical expertise.

### **The Importance of Academic Writing**

The capacity to effectively write in an academic format is important on a variety of more universal levels. First, academic writing affords the student (undergraduate, graduate, or post-graduate) an opportunity to review, categorize, theorize, encapsulate, and even apply research-driven information to their personal and professional lives. Second, academic writing facilitates communication between the writer and the reader. Thoughts are just that until they are placed in written format and it's that format that determines how effective communication is going to be between the writer and his/her audience. Defazio, Jones, Tennant, and Hook (2010) asserted effective academic writing "involves learning, comprehension, application and synthesis of new knowledge" (p. 34). Third, academic writing is the framework for problem solving. Miller and Parker (2012) maintained the significance of a relationship between the writer and reader of a

journal article that would lead to problem-solution approach. In effect, academic writing can lead to answers of academic inquiry and practical application problems. Fourth, the ability to write and communicate in an academically technical format has been found to affect career success. Defazio et al. (2010) emphasized “the majority of students do not possess the skills necessary to effectively communicate in a written format that will enable them to become successful upon graduation” (p. 34).

It is important for graduate students in the counseling field to have an understanding of APA and to increase their effectiveness as they move through the counseling programs academic writing requirements. An interesting negative result of the problem of transitioning to APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition writing style may be seen in the issue of academic dishonesty by graduate students. A number of studies have been conducted on a variety of issues related to academic dishonesty which include “students’ demographic characteristics, attitudes toward cheating, personality variables, situational context, and expected rewards” (Kanat-Maymon, Benjamin, Stavsky, Shoshani, & Roth, 2015, p. 1). Students who are prone to cheat find themselves in desperate situations as they are intimidated by academic writing standards and guidelines. In fact, the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual can be overwhelming to a student who has not been exposed to more than a cursory review of mechanical writing skills. Giluk and Postlethwaite (2014) stated the importance of mindfulness training for students prone to academic dishonesty. Getting students to exercise mindfulness and remember the significance of their studies and the need to write at a graduate level for success can be an effective strategy.

But the question remains as to how to promote technical writing among these future counselors. In fact, the answer may involve fundamental actions such as meeting the students where they are and providing more simplified resources. One such resource the authors would like to discuss is Charles P. Kost’s (2015) *Student Quick Reference Success Guide to Writing in the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Style*. This guide is a welcome and practical resource for academic writing.

### **Suggestions for Using the Guide**

The purpose of this guide is to serve as a companion to the American Psychology Associations official Publication Manual, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. It is not intended to replace the unabridged manual but rather serves as an escort through the intricate maze of details associated with writing in APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition style. Incorporating this guide into college course lectures along with syllabus requirements can enhance the student’s knowledge on how to write using the APA format. The guide can teach students the basic fundamentals on how to write general research papers in a shorter amount of time due to this condense version of the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual.

Kost (2015) does an excellent job pointing out the need for academic writing skills. He refers to “learning and implementing the basic components of writing in the APA style” (p. 1). He also proposes his guide will “save the student time and frustration” (p. 1). As graduate professors, we have found this resource to be an excellent resource to be used in conjunction with the main APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual. When we presented this guide to the departmental faculty, each one wanted a copy and determined to make it a mandatory text for their graduate courses.

Professors and students alike will enjoy the easy to read and navigable format that Kost (2015) presents in his abbreviated guide to the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual. In the very beginning of his manuscript, the author makes it clear that it “is not an exhaustive list of all the rules” (p. 1).

That stance in itself would seem to reduce stress for many graduate students who have bought or looked through the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual.

The task of writing can be daunting to students that have little to no experience in organizing a research paper. Kost's (2015) book is a welcome resource for a number of reasons. First, many students come into a program having never had any exposure to the APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition writing style. Second, students have little time to learn all the exhaustive rules that are incorporated into writing a paper. Third, Kost has written a book that will help students learn the basic components that are needed to write a paper at the post-secondary level in a quick and easier way.

### **Reasons for Recommendation**

There are important reasons why we are recommending this guide. The guide is useful to professors and students at every academic level (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral) who are required to follow the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition rules for writing and publication which include being user-friendly, effective graphics displays, and concise format.

#### **User-Friendly**

From the moment one opens the guide, it is clear that it is designed to be user-friendly. The Table of Contents itself does a superb job in organizing the basic information of the more intimidating American Psychological Association 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual. The bold headings include the two main divisions of the guide: Introduction (General Paper Formatting, Tables, Title Page, Abstract, Headings, Mechanics and Structure, Writing Style, Formatting Numbers, Reporting Statistics, Biased Language, and Common Word Errors) and Introductions to Citations and References (Citations, Reference List, and Types of References). These are followed by the sections Table of Contents, List of Tables, List of Figures, Appendices, Assembling a Paper, and Avoiding Plagiarism. If professors and students need a more detailed description on standardized formatting, this quick reference guide provides page numbers that lead back to the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Manual.

#### **Graphics**

Nearly every page has a detailed graphic showing not only the illustration of the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition rule, but where to actually find a more detailed review of that rule in the manual itself. Mostly, the graphics are configured using a page illustration so the reader can clearly see the locations of headings, indentions, margins, spacing, and so forth. The format attempts to appeal to a younger generation of students who are accustomed to more abridged resources.

#### **Concise Format**

Kost's (2015) reference guide is concisely formatted but maintains clear and effective instructions throughout the body of the work. Kost emphasizes the effort to make it a "compilation of the most common mechanics that are required in the APA writing style" (p. 1). This is especially important to students who may feel overwhelmed by the amount of material they are required to read and master at the graduate level.

## Conclusion

In the field of counseling, it is important for students to not only gain the skills necessary to practice counseling, but to also rehearse how to write in order to gain competence. It is important to remember the significance of the need for students, at all levels, to polish their skills in academic pursuits and their abilities to use their critical thinking capacities in research and their abilities to effectively communicate their message to their audience. Kost (2015) has written a book that is a good resource and starting point to help students learn the basic components needed to write a paper in a quick and fundamental way. It is incumbent upon graduate faculty to realize the academic writing dilemma many of their students are confronted with upon arrival into their counseling program. Utilizing a resource such as Kost's *Student Quick Reference Success Guide to Writing in the APA 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Style* equips the professor with another resource specifically designed to promote student academic writing success.

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