

Mastering American Psychological Association (APA, 6th edition) Referencing Style for Educational Leaders

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Abstract

Mastery of the referencing format of the American Psychological Association (APA, 6th edition) is a requirement for the college of education and other social science areas at a southern, mid-state university. This article explored the use of a university-designed online tutorial required for students enrolled in a special online model of educational leadership courses offered from Spring II 2018 to Fall I 2019, and whether use of the tutorial influenced the required key assessment scores for these courses requiring mastery of APA. It should be noted that the tutorial did not and was not expected to take the place of the APA manual, but was designed to ensure students were aware that mastery of APA was an important and critical component of their submissions, and that the APA manual should be consulted regularly in all of their writing submissions and key assessments.

Keywords: American Psychological Association; referencing style; educational leadership; writing literacy; educational leadership; online tutorial;

The importance of citations and referencing is discussed regularly throughout college as a means of crediting proper sources and for avoiding plagiarism and promoting academic honesty in college/university settings. A majority of assignments employ proper references and citations as part of course completion. Student mastery of the American Psychological Association (APA, 6th edition) is a requirement for submitted assignments in the college of education's educational leadership program.

Students in this specific online, expedited model of the educational leadership program are required to take an online tutorial for each term they are in the program. The tutorial, administered online via the university library, may be taken several times up to a designated due date, after which, the highest score attained is accepted for the tutorial grade. In addition, each course in the program has a required key assessment that not only considers course content, but also the mastery of the APA referencing style. This study considers whether there is a relationship between the scores on the online tutorial and the course key assessment.

Literature Review

Historical Importance of Referencing and Citations

McAdoo and Sheedy (2017) reported that references are included to (a) provide credit to works and ideas of other authors; and (b) to assist readers in finding and reading these prior resources. Noting that the first article about American Psychological Association style was first published in *Psychological Bulletin* (1929), indicating that authors were well aware of the importance of crediting sources. Concerns, however, emerged that the lists were becoming increasingly lengthy and cautioned, "only significant titles, none unknown to the author and none for filling, should be included" (Bentley, Peerenboom, Hodge, Passano, Warren, & Washburn, 1929).

Standardized consistency in references must be considered to help readers to attain benefits of using others' work. McAdoo and Sheedy (2017) posited that consistently formatting references is considerably more than just rule following, describing two critical benefits: (a) when references are formatted in a standard manner, it promptly communicates the source type; and (b) details are critically important today as at any time. References in APA style typically include author, date, title, and source as the four elements. A benefit of this is a consistent format and inclusion of the proper elements provides a template for any new references an author would need to create.

In the library guides at MIT (2020), citing of research sources is deemed important for numerous reasons: (a) to indicate to the reader that proper research has been conducted using sources listing to retrieve information; (b) to become responsible as a scholar by giving proper credit and acknowledgement of other researchers' ideas; (c) to avoid the issue of plagiarism with quoting words and ideas provided by other authors; (d) to allow readers to trace the sources used employing accurate citing in the paper via footnotes, a bibliography or reference list. It is important to note that APA formatting employs the use of specific types of in-text citations and an accompanying References page, listing all sources in a specified format depending on the source type.

Use of APA in the Social Sciences

While there are many different styles of citations continuing to evolve due to technological and resource varieties increasing, in general, citation styles are established by a governing body within a discipline, offering rules and conventions, which best align to that profession or subject area. The social sciences is one area where the APA style is used (SNHU, 2020; Masic, 2013).

University Requirements and Policies to Avoid Plagiarism and Online Tutorial

APSU (2020) indicates that the university “promotes values and attitudes reflective of solid academic character and integrity.” Students at the university have the expectation that any work completed is their own and that research undertakings are implemented independently of others, except as appropriate. This statement is inclusive of plagiarism (a tutorial is also provided by the university) which indicates the prohibition of “adoption or reproduction of ideas, words, statements, images or works of another person as one’s own without proper attribution.”

Lynch, Johnson, Sanders, Slaughter, and Gibson (2015), explored a subset of the References pages of annotated outlines submitted to two professors in the introductory EDUC 2100 course. Students were required to participate in an instructional session with the university librarians to familiarize them with educational resources available in the library. This session is in preparation to finding scholarly sources for, and creating, an annotated outline using the American Psychological Association (APA), 6th edition formatting style. The librarians incorporated information literacy concepts into each session and professors provided a model paper to the students. The researchers concluded that despite the information they were provided by the librarians and professors, more information and intervention was needed to ensure ethical use of information and citation accuracy in the required APA format (Lynch, Johnson, Sanders, Slaughter, & Gibson, 2015). While an online tutorial existed for academic honesty, in 2017, an online tutorial for APA, 6th edition was developed by several faculty and staff of the university. More recently, the tutorial has been updated to APA, 7th edition (McConnell, et al., 2017, 2020).

Methodology

The researcher considered the scores for a university-designed, online and required tutorial on the basics of APA, 6th edition and compared them to the scores on the key assessment for the educational leadership courses in a specific model of online instruction, implemented via the military-based campus of the university, to determine impact and correlation. Mastery of the APA referencing format was expected for the key assessments for each course. Causality was not considered in that students were still encouraged and expected to access the manual as the definitive word on the proper use of APA. Students who may have applied use of the manual in completing their assessment would be expected to have mastery of the format. The online tutorial was not intended to replace the use of the manual, but mainly to focus on the fact that the APA, 6th edition formatting style was a requirement within the education department and other departments across the university’s campus.

The educational leadership program at the university consists of ten specified and state-sanctioned courses, each having a key assessment requiring mastery of APA. Students were required to take the online tutorial for each term of the program beginning Spring II 2018, Summer III 2018, Fall I 2018, Spring I 2019, Spring II 2019, Summer III 2019, and Fall I 2019. The program was a university-approved, expedited model utilizing external recruitment of cohorts by a contracted partnership group, allowing students to complete a Master’s degree (MAEd.) in Educational Leadership and administrative licensure for Tennessee schools upon completing all state requirements, including the PRAXIS School Licensure Exam and 300 hours under the mentorship of a practicing school administrator.

Two of the courses were excluded due to the researcher not having access to those courses to obtain the score or the course professor did not utilize the APA tutorial module for their specific course despite the expectation. In addition, students whose scores were generated, but were not in the online leadership cohort model were excluded from the calculations. The researcher used the Pearson *r* correlation to test whether the APA tutorial score correlated with the APA portion of the key assessments in the courses reviewed for the specific online model of the educational leadership program.

Results

The researcher considered the scores for a university-designed, online and required tutorial on the basics of APA, 6th edition and compared them to the scores on the key assessment for the educational leadership courses in a specific model of online instruction, implemented via the military-based campus of the university, to determine impact and correlation. The data were analyzed using SPSS statistical programs to determine if there were statistical significant correlation among the scores across the entire period of the online educational leadership cohort model (five terms from Spring I 2018 – Fall I 2019).

The following tables indicate the SPSS results of the exploration across the courses in the online educational leadership model, providing descriptive statistics and using the Pearson r correlation algorithm. There were no correlations generated between the scores attained on the required online APA, 6th edition tutorial and the scores attained on the key assessment for the accessible educational leadership courses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
APA Tutorial Score	97.5926	13.72715	54
Key Assessment Score	96.9630	3.14410	54

Table 2. Pearson Correlation between APA Tutorial and Score on Course Key Assessments

		APA	KA
APA Tutorial Score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.055
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.695
	N	54	54
Key Assessment Score	Pearson Correlation	-.055	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.695	
	N	54	54

Discussion & Conclusion

It has been determined that specific formatting of referencing and citations are critical elements for professional writing. This study looked at one body of evidence where a required APA, 6th edition online tutorial developed by university faculty and staff provided scores that could be compared to APA referencing mastery on key assessments for courses in an online educational leadership model at the university.

Additional study should be conducted with other programs or departments with similar requirements to determine if the results hold true for those groups, as well. The benefits of a required tutorial allows the professor to gauge to some extent, a student's mastery of the APA format. In addition, the tutorial at this university has recently been updated to the 7th edition, which will provide more data and more researchable opportunities to be reviewed as it is used in the leadership as well as other programs. While the tutorial does not take the place of the association's publication manual, it is one tool to drive home the point that referencing and providing citations are critical elements of professional writing and especially writing for publication purposes (McConnell, et al., 2017, 2020).

In addition, a grading protocol standard relative to APA referencing style should be explored across faculty within the department to ensure grading alignment. An APA score could be added to assignment rubrics separate from content area expectations of the assignment. This would help in isolating the proper use of APA formatting for the assignments. This is one limitation of this study, in that most of the courses were taught by the same faculty (including adjunct faculty), however, differences in grading of the key assessments may have affected the results.

Further study could also include a more in-depth qualitative analyses of the key assessments to determine the extent of APA considerations made in the assessment of the key assignment. Students are rarely cognizant of the importance of a specified format for giving credit to the work others have done. Some comments received from students are that they do not see the necessity or importance of the detail of the referencing style or sometimes made excuses for not taking the responsibility of learning the style. Therefore, it is extremely important for instructors and professors to intentionally stress this component to students. The earlier this occurs in the student's educational career, the better the concept is inculcated into the student's success for technical, professional writing.

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