



Boom

Writing Psychology Research Reports

PETER A. STARREVELD (EDITOR)

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Fourth edition

Peter A. Starreveld *editor*

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Foreword

No degree programme in psychology would be complete without some instruction on academic writing. It is not only students who must produce pieces of academic writing over the course of their studies (e.g. when completing a Bachelor's or Master's programme); psychology graduates, too, are expected to write effectively to communicate developments in their field.

This book offers practical guidelines for writing academic psychology texts, and is based on the two writing manuals used during the first two years of the Bachelor of Psychology programme at the University of Amsterdam. These two manuals were produced under the guidance of Christiaan Hamaker, who inspired, initiated and – until the summer of 2004 – coordinated the programme's writing units. Under his direction, Kilian Bennebroek Gravenhorst created a guide to writing a literature review, which Christiaan Hamaker adapted himself some time later. He also authored the guide to writing empirical research reports.

Over the years, feedback was incorporated into these manuals from students and lecturers, to whom I am greatly indebted. The following lecturers (listed here in alphabetical order) also made substantial contributions: Bianca Boyer, Vittorio Busato, Petra Grijzen, Jessica van Sluis, Marcia Meerum Terwogt, Sanne Kateman, Katharina Kouwenhoven, Laurens Polder, Mariëlle Slierendrecht, Guido Valk, Jos Verbrugge, Roeland Voskens, Natascha Weitenberg and Koen Wirtz.

At the request of the book's users, this fourth reprint uses decimal points instead of commas (as is common in Dutch) when listing numeric data. Chapter 2 has updated the use of the digital object identifier (DOI), and the section on layout (2.6) has been supplemented with more information on displaying statistical results. The information on literature search engines in Chapter 3 has been updated. At users' request, Chapter 4 also includes a comprehensive treatment of writing an academic summary, including a sample accompanying assignment and a completed example (see Section 4.4 and Appendix A). Alterations made to Chapter 6 reflect changing research attitudes, by including a) a sharper distinction between confirmatory and exploratory studies and their associated analyses, b) the

recommendation to always include a measure for the effect size when reporting the results of statistical tests and c) an example of how to report Bayesian test results. Chapter 6 also includes greater detail on the necessary preparations before conducting research; in order to write a coherent, convincing introduction, the writer must first obtain a thorough overview of the relevant research domain. Lastly, the sample report in Appendix B has been revised in accordance with the recommendations in Chapter 6, and Appendix C includes updated DOI references and sample references to digital sources such as blog posts, tweets and streaming video.

The purpose of this book

Academic writing is a practical skill – it cannot be learned from a book (not even this one!).

You learn to write scientifically in practice, simply by doing it a lot, by taking a critical look at your own work and by receiving feedback from others. Nevertheless, recommendations can still be given on how to structure the content of academic texts, the most important of which are given in this book. Practising these instructions and putting theory into practice will ultimately result in an effective academic text. Completing a piece of academic writing can be a very fulfilling experience. I hope that this book will help you along your way!

Peter Starreveld
June, 2018

Table of Contents

1	Scientific Reports	9
	1.1 What is a literature review?	9
	1.2 What is an empirical research report?	10
	1.3 The content of this book	10
	1.4 Criteria applicable to all reports	11
2	Academic Writing	13
	2.1 Structuring an academic text	13
	2.2 Academic style	15
	2.3 Style and spelling guidelines	16
	2.4 References and quotations	21
	2.5 Reference list	24
	2.6 Formatting	28
3	How to Write a Literature Review	35
	3.1 Selecting a topic	35
	3.2 Formulating a problem statement and provisional research question	36
	3.3 Searching for literature	37
	3.4 Overview of search engines	41
	3.5 Writing a plan	47
4	Research Descriptions	59
	4.1 The structure of a research article	59
	4.2 Writing descriptions of scientific research	61
	4.3 Steps for writing a research description	65
	4.4 Writing a scientific summary	66
	4.5 Writing related research descriptions	68
5	Writing a Literature Review	69
	5.1 The structure of a literature review	69
	5.2 Elements of a literature review	70
	5.3 Checklist/evaluation framework	80

6	Writing a Research Report	85
6.1	Preparation and process	87
6.2	Abstract	88
6.3	Introduction	88
6.4	Method	90
6.5	Results	92
6.6	Discussion	97
6.7	Reference list	101
6.8	Appendices	102
6.9	Checklist/evaluation framework	102
Appendix A	Example Scientific Summary	107
Appendix B	Example Research Report	111
Appendix C	APA Reference List Guidelines	121
	Reference list	135
	Index	137
	About the Author	141

Scientific Reports

1

Before conducting any scientific research, it is always essential to develop an understanding of the current state of knowledge in a particular field. This knowledge is embedded in scientific literature, making literature study an integral component of scientific endeavours. The most important sources for a literature study are journal articles and books (or book chapters) that either include research reports or critically examine or review others' research. Anybody conducting scientific research therefore needs to be able to locate, read, understand and critically evaluate such publications, in order to compare them and incorporate them into a report. Two important types of academic reports are literature reviews and empirical research reports. A literature review reports the findings of a literature study and describes the current state of scientific knowledge concerning a specific research question. An empirical research report, on the other hand, brings new information to the existing body of scientific knowledge. Both report types also include an evaluation of the information being presented.

1.1 What is a literature review?

A literature review is an informative text (an exposition) describing the writer's standpoint regarding a particular question. After studying the scientific literature available on a particular topic, you will have reached a certain conclusion. The literature review is an attempt to convince the reader that this conclusion is correct, by explicitly providing the evidence for your conclusion in a coherent and persuasive discussion of the material.

The evidence in this case consists of three aggregated argument types. The first type comprises facts (i.e. research results) reported by others. The second type consists of the interpretation of these facts by others (usually either in the form of a new theory, or by modifying, refining, or fully or partially proving/disproving an existing theory). The third type of argument comes from your own evaluation of the scientific

merits of the first two argument types. Your exposition will combine these three types of arguments in such a way as to create an argumentative structure leading inevitably to your personal conclusion. It will be scientifically sound if all the available key facts and interpretations on the subject have been considered and your positioning and evaluation of them is logically correct.

1.2 What is an empirical research report?

An empirical research report is an informative text (an exposition) presenting new facts pertaining to a particular question. The introduction to this type of report will always include a succinct summary of information pertinent to the relevant field of research. The three types of arguments listed in Section 1.1 will apply here too; however, in this case they must reason coherently and convincingly towards the conclusion that a key question remains unanswered – a question that you have investigated by making certain observations. The report will describe exactly how you did so, and what the results of the investigation were. Next, you will interpret the results, outline their relevance to the field of research you described in the introduction and provide a commentary on the results. The exposition will be scientifically sound if a) the literature review provides a succinct but thorough summary of the field of research; b) the research design is sound and the data obtained has been analysed correctly; and c) the interpretation of the results is indeed supported by the facts.

1.3 The content of this book

This book examines the various components of both types of reports, and is therefore a manual for writing both literature reviews and scientific reports of empirical research. This first chapter sets out a number of general criteria that apply to written reports. In order to write an academic text on a particular topic, you must create a cohesive written exposition that combines words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into sections and sections into a complete academic text. The rest of this book provides tips and instructions relating to all of the above levels. Chapter 2 offers a number of general recommendations for the structure, style and layout of academic texts. Chapter 3 describes how to choose the topic of a literature review, how to search for scholarly literature on a particular question and how to plan your review. Chapter 4 looks at how to describe

empirical research in an effective manner. Descriptions of this kind form the crux of a literature review, and are also included (albeit more succinctly) in the introduction and sometimes also in the discussion sections of empirical research reports. This chapter also provides instructions on how to create a scientific summary that can be used as preparation for writing both a literature review and an empirical research report. Chapter 5 looks at writing the full literature review itself. In a very condensed form, the literature review is also part of the introduction to an empirical research report. Chapter 6 outlines exactly how to create such a research report. Appendix B presents a sample research report.

1.4 Criteria applicable to all reports

There are some criteria that apply universally to all reports. They are given here at the very beginning, so that they are not obscured by the discussion of the other elements. These general criteria are as follows:

- *Accuracy*
The content of the report must be correct. Both literature reviews and empirical research reports must present information taken correctly from the articles under review; in an empirical research report, the experimental results reported must also correspond accurately with the results obtained. Accuracy also means that information contradicting your position cannot be omitted.
- *Clarity*
The report must be easy to understand. A literature review must give the reader (who is not familiar with the original publications) a clear understanding of what was studied and how, as well as the researchers' conclusions. The same applies to empirical research reports, but with the additional requirement that a reader must be able to reproduce the study being reported on.
- *Structure*
The report must be structured clearly and logically, with the various sections linked in a cohesive manner. An effective title, a standardised layout and informative sub-headings are part of an effective structure.
- *Language*
The report must be written in good English, with correct use of spelling, grammar and division of paragraphs. The style of the report must also be objective and impartial, and present as much information as possible using the fewest words.

- *References*
The report must correctly cite the publications on which it is based, and include a list of references in the proper format.
- *Layout*
The layout of the report must be in accordance with the rules of the American Psychological Association (APA).
- *Originality*
You must write the report yourself. Copying or paraphrasing others' work (or your own prior work) without citing the source is not permitted.

Writing Psychology Research Reports

Writing academic texts is an important skill for students of psychology and educational theory, whether in the course of their studies or thereafter, when they are active practitioners.

Writing Psychology Research Reports teaches students how to comply with currently prevailing standards when writing reports of literature studies or experimental research. Step by step it takes the reader through every aspect of writing up a literature study or composing a research report. It deals with every angle, from choice of subject to setting out their own or other people's research results and applying APA citation norms. The many tips and tools make it a useful reference work for professional practitioners.

Peter A. Starreveld is associate professor Psychology and manager content of the general part of the bachelor study Psychology.

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