Teaching APA

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Abstract

As liberal arts institutions, we look to create well-rounded students who take a variety of classes as opposed to just focusing on classes that are only related to their major. Undergraduate college students most commonly use the two citation styles MLA and APA. However, most college research writing classes teach only MLA. To prepare our students for the research papers they will be assigned during their college experience, we should teach both citation styles.

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As liberal arts institutions, we look to create well-rounded students who take a variety of classes as opposed to just focusing on classes that are only related to their major. Undergraduate college students most commonly use the two citation styles MLA and APA. However, most college research writing classes teach only MLA. We teach MLA style because educators realize the importance of understanding the proper way to compose the prose text of a research paper, the ability to judge the credibility of a source, how to balance and integrate research material with the author’s own ideas, and also the intrinsic value and need college students have to know how to properly cite sources. This skill will help students in a majority of their classes because many require a research paper assignment; though we understand the importance of proper citation, we only teach one style when the majority of our students will use both MLA and APA format during the course of their college journey. To prepare our students for the research papers they will be assigned during their college experience, we should teach both MLA and APA citation styles.

The task of learning and applying proper APA style is not an easy task. The difficulty students have when learning APA has been noted by numerous educators. According to Ault (1991), “Writing APA-style journal articles or research reports is a complicated task for undergraduates because they are creating and organizing the prose while trying to follow format conventions” (p. 45). Students are trying to apply the knowledge of how to write the text of a research paper in addition to following the citation format; many times this causes errors in both the text and citations of the paper. Franz and Spitzer (2006) note “students often express frustration with formatting a manuscript according to predetermined guidelines, which can become the focus of their efforts and undermine the quality of their prose” (p. 13). Because most students are unfamiliar with APA format, their first attempt at using the style many times results in a paper that is lacking in both content and form. The inability to properly cite using APA format was noted in doctoral students as well. Van Note Chism and Weerakoon (2012) conducted a study because they were so surprised by the mistakes found in their graduate students’ APA papers. They write, “Puzzled by the poor performance of talented students on a routine exercise involving correcting bibliographic citations, we undertook a study of the reasons for these challenges” (Van Note Chism & Weerkoon, 2012, p. 27). The authors were surprised the students were having difficulties because it was ruled out their errors were due to the factors of laziness or motivation on the part of the students (Van Note Chism & Weerakoon, 2012). These articles show APA difficulty is a common problem, but they also agree it is possible to learn the conventions of the style.

Van Note Chism and Weerakoon (2012) conclude with recommendations for helping students learn APA. They state it is not enough for instructors to note the conventions of APA style and expect students to be able to properly produce papers in APA format because many aspects of the style “seem arbitrary in some ways and are patterns to follow, rather than internally consistent logical systems” (Van Note Chism & Weerakoon, 2012, p. 28). In my college research writing classes where I teach APA, my students concur with this statement. Students often have difficulties remembering things such as not capitalizing all major words of titles and no use of quotation marks around names of articles on the References page but in the text of the paper to capitalize all major words and indicate a title of an article by putting it in quotation marks. Another source of common confusion is the use of the “&” symbol for the References page and in-paragraph citations but spelling out “and” in the body of the paper. It is the inconsistencies of the style that confuse students, but with proper instruction and lots of practice, students can learn proper APA style. Van Note Chism and Weerakoon (2012) agree and found:

practice seemed to improve performance, showing that familiarity and attentiveness to

the task were important success factors. A key recognition, however, was that while

performance on some APA style citation tasks seem to improve with practice, others

require explicit repeated modeling of elements that seem quirky, complicated, or

contradictory to prior experience, which take longer to master. (p. 35)

In my classes, students are given model APA papers to follow, have practice sheets they must complete during class time, share their papers with their peers for APA help, and are quizzed on APA format. With these methods of teaching, my students consistently master APA format in the first half of the semester and produce model APA papers.

Teaching both APA and MLA documentation styles is a difficult task, but it can be done in a typical 15-week semester. Following Van Note Chism’s and Weerakoon’s (2012) advice, modeling the proper format is a key. I provide my students with a model paper in APA format the first time I introduce the topic. Students then examine, with my guidance, the cover page, the Running head, the Abstract, the body of the essay, and the References page. We discuss the major sections and unfamiliar elements of the paper. This is the first model paper they see.

After discussing the model paper, I write on the board the proper APA References entry for our textbook. We talk about what the order of the information, such as the date in a prominent position, says about the audience and expectations of the style. After the discussion, I handout an instructional worksheet on how to create an APA References page for different types of sources. We go over and talk about how to identify where a source came from (Web site versus print sources) because that determines the format for the entry. This handout is intended to be used by students when they are completing their own References pages.

After all the discussions, students get to use APA style. Students are given a worksheet where a number of different sources from different mediums need to be put in proper APA format. This first exercise we do together as a class. I ask for a volunteer to write the information on the board, but the class instructs the volunteer. I let the students know that for each class going forward, they need to be prepared to use the APA handout to complete an assignment like this. In the beginning of class, students are given a new worksheet that contains all the needed source information and that information must be used to put approximately ten sources into correct APA format. This beginning activity can be done alone or in pairs. After the class finishes the assignment, student volunteers (or I may need to volunteer some students) put the “answers” on the board. The class then comments if the entries are in correct APA format. The class the final copy of the APA research paper is due, the students are given a quiz which is in the same format the daily worksheet exercises are done; the only difference is students must complete the quiz on their own, but they are allowed to use the APA handout that was given the first class APA was discussed.

In addition to the practice of putting sources into correct APA format, during class I also stress the other particulars of APA style. For example, I explain the inconsistency in the capitalization of titles in the body of the paper and on the References page. I also point out the different uses of the word “and” and the “&” sign. One lesson explicitly explains how to format a Microsoft Word document to add the “Running head” to the title and body pages of the paper. I tell students to make a list of things they need to look for when proofreading APA papers as opposed to other papers. Then, I encourage students to actually use this list before they turn in the draft of the APA research paper.

Before the first draft of the APA research paper is due, students get another model APA paper. This paper includes a title page, abstract, body, and References page in perfect APA format. The students drive the conversation and questions about format knowing their draft is due the next class. Again, this model paper is used to reinforce exactly what an APA research paper should look like. It is my hope that students use this as a guide when creating their own papers. The week the paper is due, before students turn in the draft, they peer review a classmate’s paper paying particular attention to APA formatting. I explain to students APA corrections can be done on the draft using pen, but those corrections must be made to the paper in the final draft.

This teaching method uses modeling, discussion, practice, peer review, and example to reinforce the importance of using APA format correctly. While my students complain each time they are handed an APA practice sheet and moan when they have to take the APA quiz, I have had so many former students thank me for teaching APA style. Most of these students are the only ones in their social science classes who know how to format a paper in APA style. They express their gratitude and let me know the high grades they receive on the APA assignments. One student wrote, “You made APA so much simpler to understand. It has already helped me in my other classes.” I use the exact same format and lessons when teaching MLA the second half of the semester. While at first there is some confusion and mixing of APA and MLA formats, by the end of the semester, most students produce two passing research papers, the first one in APA and the second one in MLA format.

Teaching our students how to write a research paper is an important part of their college career. By limiting their exposure to only MLA format, we are doing them a disservice. Both MLA and APA formats should be taught in all college-level research writing classes to give our students the tools they need to succeed in liberal arts institutions.

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