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APA Heading Levels

APA style uses headings to help organize papers. The headings indicate the topic of a section. Most papers only use one or two levels, but more complicated papers can use up to five levels. How many levels you use dictates the format of your headings. Subheadings must have at least one other subheading at the same level. For instance, if the paper is about strong leadership in organizations, the main sections discussed in the paper might be “Characteristics of a good leader,” “Weaknesses of poor leaders,” and “Examples of good leaders,” and “Conclusion.” All of these main headings would be level one (centered, bold, upper and lowercase, and not italicized). If the author breaks the sections up just one step further, level two subheadings would be used (flush left, bold, upper and lowercase). Examples of subheadings of the first heading, “Characteristics of a good leader,” might be “Fair,” “Honest,” “Accessible,” and “Good communicator.” Each of those subheadings could be broken down further (under “Fair,” for example, one might have sub-sub headings “Equal Opportunity,” “Clear policy handbook,” etc.). Formatting depends on how many levels are used.

The title of the paper does not count as a level. The title is centered and uses upper and lower case. It is not bold or italicized or in a larger font. APA does not include an “Introduction” heading because it is assumed that papers begin with an introduction. The conclusion, however, should include a heading if headings are used. Do not include extra spacing above or below any headings—the entire document is double-spaced.

Most papers use only one or two levels of headings. Headings should be brief; most are just two or three words. Do not use numbers or letters to label headings. The best way to figure out how to format your headings is to determine how many levels are in your paper and use the chart on the next page.

NOTE: This handout was last updated September 11, 2009, and reflects the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

Chart of Levels of Headings, Positions, and Formatting

For one level of division:

Level One Heading

For two levels of division:

Level One Heading

Level Two Heading

For three levels of division:

Level One Heading

Level Two Heading

Level three heading.

For four levels of division:

Level One Heading

Level Two Heading

Level three heading.

Level four heading.

For five levels of division:

Level One Heading

Level Two Heading

Level three heading.

Level four heading.

Level five heading.

Level One Heading (centered, bold, upper and lowercase)

Level Two Heading (flush left, bold, upper and lowercase)

Level three heading. (indented, bold, upper and lower case, *text follows immediately after the period*)

Level four heading. (indented, bold, italicized, lowercase except first letter and proper nouns, ends with a period, *text follows immediately after the period*)

Level five heading. (indented, italicized, lowercase except first letter and proper nouns, ends with a period, *text follows immediately after the period.*)

Sample paper using three levels of division:

My Bicycle Trip to Pennsylvania (title)

The paper begins with an introductory paragraph, which does not need the label “Introduction.” It should inform the reader of the paper’s main objective.

Preparing for the Trip (level 1, centered, bold, upper/lowercase)

There were many steps I should have taken to prepare for my bicycle trip, but back in 1979 I was a free spirit and pretty much just set off on my adventure. This section will explore ways in which I was successful in preparation, as well as indicating some ways I wish I had prepared better. The subsections will go into detail.

Routing the Trip (level 2, flush left, bold, upper/lowercase)

This section could go on for several paragraphs, but because this is an incomplete paper, it is only two sentences. Note there is no blank line between chapter headings.

Maps are helpful. (level 3, indented, bold, italicized, only first word is capitalized, ends with a period, text follows after the period) Actually, I only knew that my final destination was Pennsylvania. I picked up maps from gas stations after I crossed state lines.

Bed and breakfast (B & B) reservations. (this is my second level 3 heading) The joy of bed and breakfasts and youth hostels is that you do not have to make reservations. It was, however, quite helpful to have a booklet listing youth hostels across America. This section could have separate paragraphs about the differences between B & Bs and youth hostels.

Setting Off! (level 1, centered, bold, upper/lowercase)

This section will describe my emotions when I said goodbye to my parents, how they took a photo of me, how in retrospect I was brave to set off without knowing where I was going besides the final destination, four states away (I took a ferry across Lake Michigan). I will include several level 4 headings to help the reader understand the organization of my paper. Since it is a personal piece, I will try to balance action with emotion.

Saying Goodbye to Friends (level 2, flush left, bold, upper/lowercase)

See the outline on the next page for how my headings would be organized. Space limitations make this sample incomplete but there should be *at least two headings for each level*.

Conclusion (level 1, centered, bold, upper and lowercase)

The conclusion reiterates the main points of the paper. It should not be too long or too detailed. It sums up what the author hoped the reader would learn from reading the paper.

Sometimes the conclusion adds a few words about the future. This paper might end with words about how I look forward to my next bicycle trip—which I do!

Outline for a paper with three heading levels

My Bicycle Trip to Pennsylvania (title) (does not count as a heading)

I. **Planning My Trip** (level 1)

A. **Routing the Path** (level 2)

Maps are good. (level 3)

Reservations at bed and breakfasts. (level 3)

B. **Obtaining a Passport** (level 2)

Need a passport to Canada. (level 3)

Turnaround time has been extended. (level 3)

II. **Setting Off!** (level 1)

A. **Saying Goodbye to Friends** (level 2)

B. **The First Day** (level 2)

Flat tire. (level 3)

Dunkin' Doughnuts surprise. (level 3)

III. **What I Would Have Done Differently** (level 1)

Don't Forget Insect Repellent (level 2)

Look up Relatives Before Setting Off (level 2)

Tool Kit (level 2)

IV. **Highlights of the Adventure** (level 1)

Paradise, Pennsylvania (level 2)

Fairyland. (level 3)

Getting lost is not always a bad thing. (level 3)

Ferry Ride (level 2)

The waitress. (level 3)

Finding an antique ink pen. (level 3)

V. **Conclusion** (level 1)

Note: Each subheading must have at least one counterpart at the same level within a section.

Note: There is no heading labeled "Introduction" because APA style indicates it is not necessary, since all papers begin with an introduction.

Sample paper (incomplete) using two levels of division:

Sports in America (this is my title)

I begin my paper with my introduction. My introduction will grab the reader’s attention and lay out the main parts that will be covered in my paper. The first paragraph does not go into detail and is not too long. For example, I may tell my readers that I am a sports fanatic and both like to participate in and observe sports. Sports come in many varieties. This paper will cover indoor and outdoor sports in America.

Indoor Sports (this is my first level one heading)

I will have a short paragraph elaborating on indoor sports, and then I will go into my second level of headings, giving a heading to each individual sport I write about.

Ping Pong (this is my first level two heading)

Ping pong, one of my favorite sports to play, is sometimes called a recreation, rather than a sport. I will discuss many aspects of ping pong.

Board Games (second level two heading)

When you have a subheading of the second heading (which in APA heading is called the third heading) it is flush left and italicized. APA does not label any of the headings level 2 unless there are four or more levels. Most papers only need two or three levels of headings.

Outdoor Sports (level one)

Remember that if you use a level of heading, there must be at least one other heading of that level in the section. If I have a heading for an outdoor sport, such as horseshoes, I must include another heading of the same level, such as sailing. I could have another level 1 heading titled “Sports that can be Played Both Indoors and Outdoors,” but there is not enough room on the page to include it. After a section heading, there should be at least one paragraph before you have a section heading of another level. More than one is preferable.

Conclusion (this is my third level one heading)

Remember that the conclusion sums up the most important points of the paper. No paragraph should only be one sentence long.

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Title (centered, upper and lower case, doesn’t count as a heading level)

First Level (centered, bold, upper and lowercase)

Second Level (flush left, bold, upper and lowercase)

Sample paper (incomplete) using one level of heading.

This sample paper will not label the levels of headings but you can figure them out. Also, according to the chart, the level one headings would be centered, not italicized, not bold, and use upper and lower case letters.

Crime Prevention in Adolescent Youth (title)

Here is the opening paragraph. I do not include a heading for the introduction. Ideally, the introduction will be similar to an abstract, which lays out the main points of the paper. If a person is interested in reading a few papers on the subject of crime prevention in adolescent youth, for example, that person may go to a database to find articles, and to decide which articles to look at, he or she might read the abstracts. Abstracts tell in a nutshell what the paper will be about and hopefully, grab the reader's attention. A reader may look at the abstract and decide it is interesting enough that he or she wants to read the whole paper—an introduction should have that appeal as well.

How Crime has Changed Since 1980

This section will lay out what crime used to look like and what it looks like now. If I were going to go into detail about different aspects of crime, I might add another level of headings. This is a simple paper, though, and I am sticking to one level.

Sections should have at least two paragraphs, just like paragraphs should have at least two sentences. Due to limited space, this sample paper doesn't always follow that guideline.

How Education Helps Deter Crime

This section will also have at least two paragraphs. I am only writing one short one here so I can have another example of a new heading and allow room for my heading of conclusion.

Family Involvement

Headings help readers know when new ideas are introduced. This section will focus on how family involvement is related to crime or crime prevention. The reader knows what to expect because of the heading. The first paragraph of the section will contain a topic sentence.

Conclusion

Conclusions should not be terribly long. Do not introduce new topics in the conclusion that were not covered in the paper, in general. Conclusions often (but not always) include a forward-looking thought. I hope this handout has been helpful. Send corrections or suggestions to the Writing Center at writingcenter@csp.edu. ©2006. Last updated 9-11-2009.