

Guidelines for Writing APA Style Discussion Sections

APA style manuscripts have a standard format for the flow of ideas expressed in the Discussion section of the manuscript. This format begins with a narrow focus on interpretation of the present research results, broadens in scope to an integration of the current research results with existing research and theory, then concludes with an explanation of future research and applications/implications of the current project. In general, the Discussion section should include the following types of information.

Summarize the results of the current project in words (do not use numerals), and state whether the hypotheses were supported. The Discussion section should begin with an explanation of the results of the research. However, the phrasing of the Discussion section differs from that of the Results section. While the Results section is stated using the names of statistical tests with numerical results as support for claims, the Discussion section should not include numerical results or statistical jargon. The Discussion section should explain the results of the research in terms of the variables and relationships among them.

Explain the results of the current project in terms of existing research and the theory summarized in the Introduction section. After the major results of the project are stated using complete sentences with no statistical jargon, the outcomes regarding the variables under investigation should be explained in terms of existing research and theory on these variables. The outcomes of the current project should be explicitly related to what is currently known in the area. Outcomes that are consistent with existing research and theory should be noted, and conflicting or unexpected results should be explained in terms of the theory or study characteristics that may have affected the outcomes. In the discussion of the research, explain how the present research results are similar to and/or distinct from existing research in the area.

Identify possible confounds or problems with the current study, and explain solutions related to these issues that could be addressed in future research. A research project rarely turns out exactly as predicted. When unexpected events happen with research participants or survey items etc., summarize this information in the discussion of the current project and describe solutions to these issues to be considered for future research projects. Bear in mind that preventable problems with the design of the current research are not appropriate to discuss because these issues should be corrected before the project concludes. For example, if the sample size of the current project is too small, then additional data should be collected to address this concern prior to the conclusion of the project.

Design and describe future studies that could be conducted to expand the information known in the area. The description of future research should not be limited to mere replication of the existing project on a larger or more diverse sample. Instead, descriptions of future research should include an explanation of the variables to be examined and predictions for the future projects based on existing theory and the results of the current project. Descriptions of future research projects are a synthesis of the outcomes of the current project with existing research and theory and an explanation of what is yet to be learned in the area. These descriptions are not mere restatements of the current project with a different sample or another variable.

State the importance of the outcomes of the current research, how the information learned from the research can be applied, and the implications of the outcomes for the theory, existing research, or research participants. Until this point in the manuscript, the explanations of the results of the current research should be consistent with the variables examined in the project. As such, the discussion section should not make claims that are not directly supported by the variables investigated and the analyses conducted. As the discussion of the current project moves to applications and implications, it is appropriate for this portion of the discussion section to step slightly beyond the specific details of the project in its consideration of the broader theoretical and research landscape. In this section, authors are able to consider the relevance of their research to the broader area and describe how the outcomes could be used in the service of others and in theory expansion or revision.