



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

**Stanislaus**

**Master's Thesis/Project  
Doctoral Dissertation  
Tips for Formatting and Writing**

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This document includes tips for formatting and some general writing issues you may encounter with your thesis/project/dissertation. Also, formatting templates (Microsoft Word documents pre-formatted according to the University Preparation Guidelines) are available on the Graduate School Website. You may choose to use one of these templates or, following the preparation guidelines, format your thesis/project/dissertation on your own. Please consult the Preparation Guidelines throughout this process.

### TIPS FOR FORMATTING

- **Setting up the Table of Contents.** Use leader dots, not periods, to line up chapter material with page numbers. In many word processing programs, leader dots are found under the tabs format option.
- **Tabs.** Use the tabs feature in your word processor to indent paragraphs uniformly.
- **Page numbering.** The best way to number pages is to use the header/footer feature contained within most word processing software. Using this feature will insure that the pages numbers are formatted consistently throughout the thesis/dissertation. It will also allow the document to auto-correct page numbers if the thesis/dissertation is repaginated. In many word processing programs, the page numbering feature is found under the insert menu, page numbers. On most pages in the thesis/dissertation the page number should be place on the upper right corner of the page. The number should be 1” from the right edge of the page and 1” from the top edge of the page. If placed properly the number will align with the right text margin of the page and be about 1/4” above the first line of text on the page. There are exceptions to the page numbering pattern; so consult the preparation guidelines.
- **Hyphenation/Dashes.** If you are using APA style, consult section 4.13 of the APA manual’s 6<sup>th</sup> edition regarding hyphenation. For a style other than APA, consult equivalent section in manual. *Most importantly, be consistent and construct the hyphenation in the same manner throughout the document.*
- **Block quotations.** Block quotations are indented 1/2" from the left margin (the same position as a paragraph indentation). Do not indent the right margin. Type subsequent lines flush with the first indent. If there are additional paragraphs in the quotation, double space between paragraphs and indent the first line of each paragraph five spaces from the margin of the quotation. Do not use quotation marks. A full citation of the source is used after the final punctuation.
- **Epigraphs.** When an epigraph is used at the beginning of a chapter, it may be blocked on the right half or two-thirds of the page, or centered. Do not use quotation marks; single space the quote. The name of the author of the quotation and the title of its source are given below the epigraph and are listed in the reference section.
- **Verb tenses for the Abstract and chapter sections.** Suggested verb tenses for the Abstract and chapters are as follows:

Abstract	Past
Chapter I (Introduction)	Present or past
Chapter II (Literature Review)	Present or past
Chapter III (Methodology)	Past
Chapter IV (Results)	Past
Chapter V (Discussion)	As appropriate

Most style manuals, including APA and MLA, contain extensive guidelines for grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and other general writing concerns. It is highly recommended that students review the applicable style manual thoroughly for guidance in these areas.

### TIPS FOR WRITING

- **Pronoun–Antecedent Agreement:** A pronoun must agree with its antecedent noun in number. A common error is using *they* to refer to a singular noun. It is incorrect to say: “A student was selected because they met the criteria for the study.” The correct form is “A student was selected because he or she met the criteria for the study” or “Students were selected because they met the criteria for the study.”
- **Gender:** Pronouns must also agree in gender with the noun they replace by being masculine, feminine, or neuter. This rule also applies to relative pronouns. The use of relative pronouns is restricted to *who* for human beings only. *That* or *which* is used for animals and things.
- **Neuter pronouns (*it*)** apply to animals unless they are named. If the individual animal is named then use *he* or *she* as appropriate.
- **Who or whom:** The APA has a good trick for remembering when to use who or whom. “If you can substitute *he* or *she*, *who* is correct; if you can substitute *him* or *her*, *whom* is the correct pronoun.”
- **Subject–Verb Agreement:** A verb must agree in number (singular or plural) with the noun despite the number of intervening phrases.
- Do not use simple pronouns such as *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* alone. To do so will create ambiguity in your sentences. Clarify the material by writing “this book, these students, that project” etc.
- **In or Within:** *In* means to or toward the inside or to have a position of influence. Examples are “went into the house,” “in the office.” *Within* means of the interior, such as “within the mind,” “within the next hour,” or “within the enclosure.”
- **That or Which:** *That* is followed by material that is essential to the sentence. *Which* is followed by nonessential information, which is informative but not essential to the sentence.
- **Ending a sentence with a preposition.** Avoid sentences such as “Whom do you want to go to the store with?”
- **Misplaced modifiers:**

Incorrect usage: Place an adjective or adverb as close to the noun or verb it modifies as possible to avoid unclear sentences.

Correct usage: Place an adjective or adverb as close as possible to the noun or verb it modifies to avoid unclear sentences.
- **Dangling modifiers:** A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a subject, where the subject is not clearly stated.

Incorrect usage: *After eating dinner, the dishes were done.* (*The dishes* are the subject of this sentence, yet the dishes did not eat dinner. Therefore, *after eating dinner* is a dangling modifier, a modifier without a subject.)

Correct usage: *After eating dinner, John did the dishes.*

- Split infinitives: For example, *to effectively use* is incorrect. *To use effectively* is correct.
- Do not join words with virgules (ex. he/she instead of he or she). This style is too informal for a scholarly paper.
- Dates: The plural of dates is formed by adding an s. An apostrophe is not used. The correct form is 1960s, not 1960's. To indicate a date range use an en dash, not a hyphen. The correct form is 1960–1971, not 1960-1971.
- Titled or Entitled: *Entitled* means that you have personally given a name to something such as an article or a book. *Titled* means that another person has given a name to something such as an article or a book. For example: I entitled my article “Yes, the Little Things Count.” The article by Williams was titled “Yes, the Little Things Count.”
- Consistency: An important reminder is to be consistent in the presentation of your thesis/dissertation. For example, if you number items in a series, use the same format throughout. If you capitalize a certain word, do so whenever that word occurs.
- The word “data” is always plural. *Data are*, not *data is*.