How to Write a Criminal Justice Research Report

Stan Orchowsky
Research Director
JRSA

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Introduction/Context

- What is the problem and why is it important/being studied?
  - Why is this problem important?
  - How does the study relate to previous work in this area?
  - What are the hypotheses and objectives of the study and what, if any, are the links to theory?
  - How do the hypotheses and research design relate to one another?
  - What are the theoretical and practical implications of the study?
Most Common Sources for SAC Research Topics

- Self-generated
- Parent agency (State Administering Agency)
- Request from Governor’s office
- Request from state legislature
- Request from other state or local agency (corrections, law enforcement)
Introduction/Context

- What is the problem?
- Who requested the study and why?
- What parameters/constraints, if any, were placed on the problem or study by the requestor?
- How and why was the scope of the study expanded beyond the original problem (if applicable)?
- What are the research questions?
The Literature Review

- Summarizes the body of knowledge so that the reader can see how the current study contributes to (adds to or expands upon) “the growth of a cumulative science”
- Demonstrates the “logical continuity” between previous and present work
- Shows what was done previously AND HOW IT WAS DONE (variables, methods, analyses)
Methods

• Describes in detail how the study was conducted:
  – How key elements were conceptualized (program success defined as reduced recidivism)
  – How key concepts were operationalized (recidivism defined as rearrest within six months)

• The reader can:
  – Evaluate the appropriateness of the methods used;
  – Assess the validity and reliability of the results;
  – Replicate the study.
Methods

- Participant characteristics
- Sampling procedures and size
- Measures/data sources
- Procedures (how data were collected and prepared)

**FIND THE RIGHT LEVEL OF DETAIL**
- There’s no whining in research report writing
Results

• Describe missing data and other anomalies
• Organize by hypotheses/research questions
• Test for statistical significance where appropriate
• Present data, but don’t discuss or present conclusions
• Use graphics effectively and judiciously
Use Graphics Effectively and Judiciously

• If a picture is worth 1,000 words, you don’t need a picture AND 1,000 words
• Not everything deserves a graph
Shameless Plug

Displaying Data Webinar
Thursday, October 20, 2:00 PM EDT
Discussion

• Evaluate and interpret the implications of findings
• Organize by hypotheses/research questions
• Relate to literature
• Acknowledge limitations of study/findings
• Avoid presenting new data/analyses
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Conclusions should be offered if they were not covered in the discussion section
• Recommendations should be offered if possible/appropriate
Report Content/Formatting

• Consider using technical appendices for:
  – Lit review
  – Methodology details
  – Statistical analyses

Or consider putting this material online

• Write for a wider (national) audience
• Include date on cover page (month, year)
• Include funding source and required disclaimer
Writing Style

• Report writing is formal writing
  – This is different than speech
  – Writing must be formal to ensure the reader understands what is being communicated

• Passive voice should be avoided (You should avoid using the passive voice)

• Good writing tells a story (the story of your research project)
Writing Style

- Each paragraph starts a new topic/aspect of the topic
  - the last sentence should not “launch” the next topic/paragraph
- The first sentence of the paragraph states the new topic/aspect
  - Subsequent sentences clarify, expand upon, explain the topic
- Maintain continuity of ideas through the use of transitional devices like:
  - Time links (then, next, after, while, since)
  - Cause-effect links (therefore; as a result)
  - Addition links (in addition, moreover, similarly)
  - Contrast links (conversely, nevertheless)
Writing Style

• One thought per sentence
• The thought can be clarified (*and, since, especially*) or qualified (*but, although, unless*) using a comma or semi-colon
• Sentences are complete when they:
  – Contain a subject and a verb
  – Can stand by themselves.
Writing Style

• Not so good:

The project employed a “train the trainer” model. Meaning, stakeholders are trained to become trainers for other stakeholders.

• Better:

The project employed a “train the trainer” model; that is, stakeholders are trained to become trainers for other stakeholders.

The project employed a “train the trainer” model in which stakeholders are trained to become trainers for other stakeholders.
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes (a layperson’s perspective)

• Single vs. plural possessive
  
  *The juvenile’s parents were…
  
  *The juveniles’ parents were…*

• Past tense is used to refer to an action or condition that occurred at a specific time in the past, including:
  
  – Literature cited [*Orchowsky (2016) used the same method…*]
  
  – Your own results (*inmates’ behavior changed…*)
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes

• When using pronouns, be sure your subject is clear
  The goal of this project is to identify the needs of crime victims and train the service provider community to leverage their skills to meet their wide range of needs.

• Which vs. that: (that = essential info; which = further info)
  – The study used an experimental design, which involved randomly assigning subjects to conditions.
  – The study used an experimental design that was implemented across three sites.
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes

• Anthropomorphism: attributing human characteristics to inanimate sources

  The program was pressured by judges to accept low-risk offenders IS INCORRECT

  The program staff were pressured by judges to accept low-risk offenders IS CORRECT

  SACs reported a variety of technical assistance needs.
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes

• Subject-Verb Agreement
  – Singular and plural must agree, even when there’s an intervening phrase beginning with words like together with, including, plus, and as well as.

  *The number of offenses as well as the seriousness of offenses increases with age.*

• Misplaced Modifiers
  *Staff interviewed victims using their new listening skills.*
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes

• *i.e.* vs. *e.g.*
  – *i.e.* = *id est* (that is): used to elaborate, explain or clarify an idea or point that has been expressed

  *The state-mandated age of consent (i.e., 18 years of age)*

  …

  – *e.g.* = *exempli gratia* (for example): providing an example (one of many) to illustrate an idea or point

  *The state-mandated age of consent is an important consideration in a number of legal instances (e.g., charging in sexual assault cases).*
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes

- *me* vs. *I* when referring to more than one

  What’s correct for one is correct for more than one

  My fellow authors and *I* would like to thank…

  The editors invited *my fellow authors and me* to attend a signing party.
Common Grammar/Usage Mistakes

• Quotation Marks
  – Periods and commas are placed inside quotation marks. Other punctuation marks are placed inside quotation marks only when they are part of quoted material.
    • The “placebo effect,” which was a critical component of this study…
    • We attribute this finding to the so-called “placebo effect.”
    • What exactly is the “placebo effect”?  
    • Orchowsky (2016) asks: “what is the placebo effect?”

• Footnotes: all punctuation goes before footnotes.¹
Common Spelling Mistakes

- principal vs. principle
- capital vs. capitol
- stationary vs. stationery
- affect vs. effect
- Spell out numbers one through nine
- Prefixes that are not hyphenated:
  - Bi (bilingual)
  - Co (coworker)
  - Extra (extracurricular)
  - Meta (except meta-analysis)
  - Multi (multivariate)
  - Non (nonsignificant)
  - Pre and post (pretest; posttest)
  - Quasi (except quasi-experimental)
  - Re (reevaluate)
  - Socio (socioeconomic)
Final Thoughts on Style

• Be consistent with formatting, spelling, use of tenses, etc.
• Don’t be afraid to rewrite (if you’re having trouble with a word, consider rewriting the sentence)
• Proofread (multiple times, and get someone else to proofread)
• Prepare an outline of the final report at the outset of the study
• The goal of good writing is to make the report easy for the reader to understand; the writing should not distract from the findings