Stan Orchowsky: Good afternoon everyone. It is 2:00 here in the nation's capital. My name is Stan Orchowsky and I'm the research director for the Justice Research and Statistics Association. It's my pleasure to welcome you this afternoon to our webinar, How to Write a Criminal Justice Research Report.

Stan Orchowsky: This is one of a series of webinars offered by JRSA. All of these are available on our website, www.jrsa.org. You can also learn more about the organization, about the statistical analysis centers, and you can also sign up to become a member of JRSA by going to our website.

Stan Orchowsky: Before we go any further, I want to thank our partners at the Bureau of Justice Statistics for helping us to make this webinar possible. Before we launch into the webinar, let me do a few housekeeping and logistical items.

Stan Orchowsky: We’re going to be recording today's session for future playback. The link to the recordings will be posted on the JRSA website and so if there's somebody that you think should attend the webinar but can't do it right now, it will be on our website certainly by tomorrow.

Stan Orchowsky: Today's webinar is being audio cast via the speakers on your computer and teleconference if you have speakers or headphones and we recommend listening to the webinar using those. To access the audio conference, select Audio from the top menu bar and then select Audio Conference.

Stan Orchowsky: You can view the call-in information once you're there or join the audio conference via your computer. We've muted all of the phones. If you have a question or want to communicate with us in any way you can submit your questions using the chat feature on the right side of your screen. You can select host from the dropdown menu next to the textbox. The session is going to be roughly an hour today or maybe a little longer, depending on how long it takes me to get through all my slides.

Stan Orchowsky: If you have technical difficulties or get disconnected during the session, you can reconnect using the same link that you used to join the session initially. You can also contact WebEx tech support at 1-866-229-3239.

Stan Orchowsky: In the last five minutes of today's webinar, we're going to ask you to complete a short survey and the information you provide will help us plan and improve future webinars and meet our reporting requirements so we would appreciate if you would stick around to answer that.
Stan Orchowsky: All right. Well, today's webinar is really born from my interest in trying to help folks write a good research report. This comes from 25 years of reading reports that folks who have worked for me have written plus additional years of reading student papers and so forth and my goal is to try to distill for you as best as possible some of the key elements associated with doing that. There really two pieces to this that I want to get into. One is the structure of the reports and another is the technical aspects of the writing. Both of these represent challenges in terms of how to present this material and both of them, obviously, we could spend semester on each just going through that, so we're going to be a little bit selective in our approach today.

Stan Orchowsky: Because my background isn't psychology, this is my sort of Bible which is the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. If you don't have a copy of this, I think it's well worth the expense to buy one. This really does a very nice job, in my opinion, of laying out not only the rules, if you will, of how to do references and footnotes and so forth but also, how to write clearly and concisely some of the mechanics of style, displaying results and tables and figures and so forth.

Stan Orchowsky: Not everybody uses APA format but it's important that you use some formats. If you don't want to use APA you can certainly use one of the others that are available out there but there's a lot of information in the publication manual that goes well beyond the specifications of what the APA style is.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, so I wanted to talk a little bit about the components of the research report and this comes ... Oh, I guess I should have added. Part of the reason for showing you the manual is because a lot of what I'm going to talk about this afternoon has been stolen straight from the manual.

Stan Orchowsky: When you look in the manual and of course, the manual is oriented toward academic journal articles and when we think about the introduction to those articles, this is the advice that's offered in the manual. To cover the point of the introduction, to cover the problem and why it's important or why it's being studied, so a direct statement of why is this 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?

Stan Orchowsky: Those two, the second and third points in particular, are key elements. If you remember back to your introduction to whatever science you took
and the sort of scientific method, it's very important to basically start with research and from ... I mean start with research, start theory and from theory, develop a set of hypotheses that can then be used to test the theory. That's one key piece and the other key piece is building on knowledge so that in science we have a study that's designed to contribute to the body of knowledge by either replicating previous studies or adding on to previous studies so it's important from that sort of scientific perspective to talk about bullets two and bullets three and then of course, once their hypotheses are set out, how does your particular study or design relate to the hypotheses and then what are the theoretical or practical implications of the study.

Stan Orchowsky: Now, for the kind of work that we do and when I say we, I'm talking about applied researchers. JRSA as some of you may know is a membership organization and our primary members are state statistical analysis centers which are state offices that conduct research and do statistical analysis on the criminal justice systems in their states. When I think about us applied researchers and JRSA's primary constituents of SACs, a lot of this doesn't apply to the kind of the work we do.

Stan Orchowsky: By way of illustration, a little while back, we at JRSA have a research committee and we surveyed our state statistical analysis centers and asked them, what are the most common sources for you that research topics come from? And these are the top answers.

Stan Orchowsky: Most people said that their research topics were self-generated. The next most common answer was that they're generated by the parent agency, which for most SACs is a state administering agency which is the state agency that's responsible for giving out federal Byrne JAG money and also, in many cases, other federal funding streams as well, juvenile victims and so sort.

Stan Orchowsky: Request from the governor's office, from the state legislature or from another state or local agency like at corrections, Department of Corrections or a local law enforcement agency. When you think about that in mind especially beyond the first one but certainly the rest of them, these are very specific audiences that are not very concerned about growing the body of scientific knowledge around criminal justice. They have their own particular concerns and so the purpose of the introduction that you will find in something like the APA manual is very different when you put it into the context that most of use applied researchers are working in.
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Stan Orchowsky: With that in mind, I developed an alternate set of issues that should be addressed by the introduction to your research report. Certainly stating what the problem is I think is important. For your reader, understanding who requested the study and why the study was requested. If you were asked by the legislature to study some particular issue or problem, why, to the best of your understanding was that ... Did that request come and why did it come to you? What parameters or constraints if any were placed on the problem or study by the requester.

Stan Orchowsky: I mean, often because we're not, if you're generating your own work, that's fine and that's one thing but if it's coming from somebody else, often there are in fact certain things that they want you to look at and certain things that they don't want you to look at and back in .... When you're looking at a research study from the outside, you may wonder, well, gee, that's awfully narrow. Why was the focus so narrow? Why did they pick that particular focus, look at that and not something else? It's important for the reader to understand if there were in fact constraints that were placed on you as a researcher.

Stan Orchowsky: Conversely, if you decided to expand the scope of the study beyond the original problem, how was that done and why was that done? This is something that I have seen happened from time to time. Generally speaking as, a researcher I think I would prefer that someone come to me with a problem and not a solution. If someone comes to me with a problem then I will do my due diligence and then design a study that's designed to address their problem and I would prefer that they not provide me with the context or the direction that that particular study should take.

Stan Orchowsky: Understanding why we chose to broaden the questions or broaden the scope of the study I think is very important not only for your reader but, in many cases, for your requester. I remember a long time ago sitting on a hearing in Virginia where I lived and used to work where the chairman of some committee and fortunately, this wasn't somebody that I ... it wasn't me and it wasn't somebody I worked with, said to somebody who presented a series of research questions.

Stan Orchowsky: Well, I don't know why you looked at all that stuff, that's not what we asked you to do. We asked you to just look at X. This person being a good researcher had taken X and expanded it to encompass more nuanced and to be more comprehensive than the legislative committee has originally
asked for. I think explaining that can help offset that concern and then of course, what are the research questions?

Stan Orchowsky: You may not have hypotheses specifically, you may not have hypotheses that are tied certainly to theory but you have a set of research questions. I think most folks would recognize this kind of elements as being part of the introduction and context to the report but I just want to draw that clear distinction, particularly between the applied research report and the more, the research article, if you will.

Stan Orchowsky: Now, having said all of that raises the question of the literature review, in my mind at least. Traditionally, the literature review that you will find in every journal article and that you're forced to write for every grant proposal is designed to summarize the body of knowledge so that the reader can see how your study contributes to, adds or expands upon the growth of a cumulative science. That's a quote from the APA manual but it gets to that point that I was making earlier about the body of research.

Stan Orchowsky: This is generally, as I just mentioned, not really why we are doing what we are doing. Oftentimes, you will see that there is no literature review in applied research report. However, there's a couple of reasons that you might want to consider doing this. The other main function of the literature review is demonstrating a continuity between previous work and present work. It's difficult for me to see personally launching into a project, a study without knowing what's come before. If nothing else, even if I don't care about the previous research per se or the theory, I would want to know what was done and how, particularly how it was done. What variables were looked at, what outcome measures were looked at, what methods were used in terms of collecting data. What instruments were used, what analyses were performed and so forth and so on.

Stan Orchowsky: I certainly think doing a literature review is critical. Now, in my personal opinion, if you're going to go to the trouble to do it, it doesn't make much sense to me not actually include it in the report. I do think that the literature ... Now, even though your audience, if your audience is the governor's office, may not care about the literature review, I think that it's certainly important for your own edification if for no other reason.

Stan Orchowsky: I would encourage you to do that. You can certainly find an awful lot of information on JRSA's website as well as links to other sources about a number of particular topics but I think it's important at least that you have that background even if you choose not to put it into your actual
report. We'll talk a little bit later about some alternatives for where to put these kinds of things.

Stan Orchowsky: Then next up is the method section. Again, it doesn't matter what you label these but these are how they're traditionally labeled, at least in APA style. The method section describes detail of how the study was conducted and particularly how key elements were conceptualized. By conceptualization, we're talking about how did we go about figuring out what our concepts were in relation to a particular study or problem. For example, if we're looking at a program evaluation and we want to measure something like program success, well, we need to conceptualize that. What do we mean by program success?

Stan Orchowsky: Program success may be defined in terms of reduced recidivism so that's a conceptualization. Part of what's important here is explaining to people how setting the groundwork and getting everybody on the same page, if you will, about how these things are going to be thought of. Similarly, once we have those concepts identified, how are they going to be operationalized and by that, we mean what are the operations that are associated with actually measuring those particular concepts.

Stan Orchowsky: If the concept is recidivism, then the operationalization might be a definition of recidivism as rearrest within six months. By laying this out in detail and of course, in APA style, there'll be many other kinds of things. If you're doing the randomized control trial, for example, you'll have a number of other things that you'll have to explain but regardless, the point is that the reader can evaluate the appropriateness of the methods that you used, assess the validity and reliability of the results and probably less important for our purposes here, replicate.

Stan Orchowsky: Again, if you think about the traditional scientific model, replication is one of the key elements there in terms of experimentation. Traditionally, in referee publications, you want to provide enough detail in the methods section so that somebody can replicate what you're doing. Again, I think a little bit less of a concern in what we're looking at.

Stan Orchowsky: These are some of the things obviously that you would put in here, participant characteristics. If you did sampling, what the procedures were, sample sizes, what the measures were or often, in our case, we're looking at secondary data sources so what those data sources are, criminal history records and so forth. You might want to include a
discussion of some of the limitations of those data sources or you might want to save that for a later section of the report and then procedures.

Stan Orchowsky: How the data were collected. How the data were prepared which will be relevant whether the data are collected from surveys or collected from questionnaires of program participants or whether the data are secondary data collected from repositories and so forth.

Stan Orchowsky: The trick here, I think and especially for us as applied researchers, is finding the right level of detail. Obviously, your audience and actually, this is a good place to point out that what I'm not going to talk about this afternoon are things that I assume you already know like executive summaries that I'm sure you're all familiar with where your 100-page report is condensed down to a 10-page report or five-page summary or ideally, even less than that. Summaries, writing executive summaries, writing abstracts, is something that I assume you're familiar with and we're not going to really get into.

Stan Orchowsky: That's an art by itself but in the actual body of the report, finding the right level of detail so that that your reader can understand what you've done, I think is a bit of a challenge. Again, just anticipating what's coming, there's always options for taking this level of detail and putting it somewhere else so that it doesn't necessarily need to be in the body of the report. But even if we're not doing "scientific research" not really doing research that necessarily is designed to contribute to that body of knowledge, we're still researchers and we still need to report our procedures, our methods, in a way that allows our readers to judge whether or not what we're doing makes any sense. Part of the reason for the lit review is also to do that so that the reader can see how what you're doing jives with what's been done before, especially if the reader isn't necessarily completely knowledgeable about whatever area your study is in.

Stan Orchowsky: I think it's very important to have enough detail so that a, relatively sophisticated reader or a colleague, let's say, a fellow researcher can understand what you've done. At the same time, obviously, you don't want so much detail that your decision maker, policy maker person just turns off to what you're doing although, obviously, they can skip through that. There's also one other issue I just wanted to mention here which is something that I find, particularly with young researchers, which is the tendency to put in a great deal of detail about what they did, particularly with regard to the preparation of data.
Stan Orchowsky: If, and I think this is something that we've all experienced, especially with secondary data sources where a large amount of cleaning has to be done, matching across data files has to be done and so forth. I think that there is a tendency for particularly young researchers to want to include all that detail in the report perhaps to show how they've suffered. Perhaps to show how much work is involved, I'm not sure. Perhaps just to provide a sequential accounting of the steps that were involved in the project and how the time was spent perhaps to show the potential drawbacks to the data, which is best accomplished in a different way as I said earlier, but it's important that that's stuff not be included. Nobody cares about that stuff and it's not critical to your readers. In other words, there's no whining in research report writing.

Stan Orchowsky: All right, results I think are pretty straightforward, describing missing data and other anomalies in the data, especially main, big ones, like I said, not in detail. Organizing the results by the research questions. Testing for statistical significance where appropriate. Oftentimes, those of us who are in applied research, and it's been a long time since we took our statistics classes, tend to forget how to do that and so that's why JRSA launched its statistical analysis series which you could find the webinars on our website.

Stan Orchowsky: Presenting data but not necessarily discussing the data at this point or presenting conclusions. Now, again this is a traditional academic distinction that's made where the results section is really just results so it's just results. It's not for any discussion of results. That comes later on. I like that approach because I think it lets the reader decide for themselves without your influence one way or another what those results are saying about the topic.

Stan Orchowsky: Then, finally, using graphics effectively and judiciously. Let me just say a word about that, a couple of things. First of all, you don't need both graphics and a description of those graphics. The point of putting in a graphic is this whole picture's worth a thousand words thing so there's really no reason to have both in there. I know a lot of times, especially in this day and age of PowerPoints and Prezi and so forth and short attention spans that people like to put in graphics and particularly think that they need to put in graphics in order to break up the monotony of just having text.

Stan Orchowsky: However, not everything deserves a graph and when you put in really simplistic, silly graphs like the one shown here, it just makes the reader
think that you don't know what you're doing. I think it's very important and obviously, using graphics effectively is a vast, vast topic that you could spend a long time on and is a whole other, I think, skillset. Personally, I'm not that big a picture guy. I'm sort of a left brain guy. I'd rather look at a table. I'd rather read text than look at graphics. A lot of times I look at a graph and it's not telling me personally anything but I think some of that is really literally just a preference.

Stan Orchowsky: I don't want to get in to that too much. I will, however, put in this shameless plug for our next webinar which will be on displaying data which will be Thursday, October 20th, at the same time. From that, I think you will get a sense of we're going to spend an hour and a half just talking about how to display data. This is part of our statistical analysis series and if you're interested in that you can tune in. I don't want to steal any thunder from that and I'm far from an expert myself.

Stan Orchowsky: Now, traditionally, in the APA model you have a discussion section. This isn't always necessarily called that in applied research report but I think something like this is required. This is where you evaluate, interpret the implications of your findings. Generally speaking, again, this is organized by your research questions. This is the place where you can relate back to the literature.

Stan Orchowsky: If you have a literature review, this is the place where you can add some additional literature that you might have uncovered as a result of your results and seeing what you found. You might have gone back so look for, well, hmm, maybe I missed this the first time and so forth. This is also a place where you can acknowledge the limitations of your study and of your findings.

Stan Orchowsky: Just like the results section is not a place for discussing findings, the discussion section is not a place for presenting new data or new analyses. Often, it's tempting to do that but, of course, now that it's so easy to move things around in reports you could always go back to the result section and add pieces in there. I think this is an important piece of things where the findings are put into perspective or at least your perspective for the reader.

Stan Orchowsky: Now I'm a really, really big believer in conclusions and recommendations, and I wrote here recommendations should be offered if possible/appropriate. I realize that not everybody is looking for recommendations. When you're writing for the governor's office or
you're writing for the state legislature, I'm not sure that they're looking for your recommendations. It may be frowned upon but I would encourage recommendations all the time unless you really know that somebody's going to come down on you for doing that. There are a number of reasons for that.

Stan Orchowsky: One is, at this point, the study's been completed and you're now the expert and you're in a better position than anybody else in theory to explain to the people who requested your study what it means and what the implications are for policy, for procedure and so forth. I mean that's certainly I think one of the reasons and the other is I'm not sure that … Everybody has their own biases and when you just put the data out there and even if you discussed the data you still run the risk that somebody's going to take the data and reach the wrong conclusions from the data and take actions that in fact are not consistent with the data or misinterpret the data or so forth. By putting a set of conclusions out there and then offering a set of recommendations, you can avoid some of that happening.

Stan Orchowsky: The conclusions piece I think is a little bit optional, sometimes that is covered in a discussion. I just think it helps with the recommendations and so that's why I've put it in here. The other thing I want to say about this is that I have been doing this for a really, really long time and I don't think I have run into very many researchers, particularly younger researchers that have a clue how to come up with recommendations. I think this is a really, really important skill. I think part of the issue is that we are trained or at least my generation was trained that we are supposed to be neutral and our work can speak for itself and others can be responsible for determining what it means.

Stan Orchowsky: I don't understand that perspective personally. I would just assume, take my shot at telling people what it means. Moreover, second of all, I think a lot of the research we do doesn't lead anywhere and this s a problem. We've just presented a bunch of findings and they don't have necessarily policy recommendations or policy implications. I think there's a lot of reasons for that. Part of it is, people asking the wrong questions. If, as I said at the beginning, if that list of whether the governor's office or whoever it is is dictating to you the specific questions and so forth, here's what we want you to look at, instead of coming to you and saying, here's the problem we're having, can you help us figure out what to look at and how to address that then what can happen at the end is that you've ended up doing a study and presenting a bunch of information that
doesn't really lead them where they wanted to go. It doesn't lead to a set of recommendations.

Stan Orchowsky: I think that's another reason. Then third of all, I think this is really difficult and it takes practice and I think most people just don't ever get that practice partly for the other two reasons that I just mentioned. Even if you don't end up putting these in the report or whatever I think it's a really good exercise and I would encourage you to do this to write a set of conclusions. Then what I usually do is it's kind of a pairing thing for me so I'll write a conclusion, I'll write a little bit of a like here's why this is concluded, which is again, it's like a little kind of almost like a paragraph summary of everything that was said before in terms of here's what we found and here's what we think it means so a little piece from the results, a little piece from the discussion. Then based on those conclusions and it's not always a one-to-one correspondence, conclusion-recommendation, but as close as possible to that, here's what we recommend based on that.

Stan Orchowsky: I can tell you it is tough. It's not easy. It's not an easy thing to do but I think the exercise of doing this forces us to make sure that the research we're doing really is relevant to policy. If you've gone through a study and you can't recommend anything as a result then to me, that says something and not something good. I'm a big believer in the recommendation section.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, now, I want to say just a little bit about formatting and I want to remind you that if you have questions, please feel free to type them into the chat box and send them on to me. I mentioned earlier about the literature review, the details or the methodology and then of course, the obvious place that you don't want your reader to get hung up, especially if your reader is a policymaker kind of person is the statistical analyses.

Stan Orchowsky: I like the idea of using a technical appendix or appendices for these things so that they're not cluttering up the body of the report but you can put them later. I've seen it done, and I'm sure you have too, in technical reports. That is a completely separate report and these days you can just, most everybody will be putting their material, their research report up online somewhere on a website and you can consider just putting that on the website as additional material, as supplemental material to your report.
Stan Orchowsky: Yeah, and somebody has written in a comment that organizing the conclusions and recommendations by the research questions so, having the end of the report go back to those original research questions and offer for each one of those a conclusion and a recommendation is a good way of organizing that.

Stan Orchowsky: A couple of other obvious things here. Putting a date on the cover page of the report. I could not believe the number of reports that I've seen that don't have a date on them, which is extremely frustrating. There's no way to reference them. It's not a bad idea to put in ... some people put in suggested citations. Put in the actual citation that folks can use to refer to your report. It's important to have a month and a year on our reports that may not be published in referee journals so that people know exactly when this information came out, including the funding source and a required disclaimer.

Stan Orchowsky: This is also something that's often missing. Particularly, I'm talking to you folks right now in the SACs. You are required if BJS is funding your study through the State Justice Statistics Program, to acknowledge that. That needs to be in there. All of those people who are receiving federal money and the special conditions of your award whether it's the National Institute of Justice or your Justice Statistics or whoever is a statement that says this study was supported by grant number blah, blah, blah, blah. The opinions and whatever are those of the authors and are not those of Department of Justice and the National Institute of Justice. The wording is provided for you and that wording needs to be in the report.

Stan Orchowsky: Finally, back up to the second bullet there, I would like to encourage you and again, this is for all of you who are working at the state level or at the local level, in particular, to write for a wider audience than just the people in your state or in your locality or just the people who have requested the study. Especially in this day and age when everything is going to end up on a web, and so everybody can read your report. I'm not saying this should necessarily alter the content of your report but more like the writing of your report.

Stan Orchowsky: I've seen reports that are just so clearly written for other people in the state that they use language, they use acronyms, they use abbreviations, that only people in the state would know and I would be willing to bet good money that a lot of the people in the state don't know what some of those acronyms are or what some of those abbreviations are. Let alone, somebody else. Once that is on your website and anybody can pick
it up, it doesn't take that much effort to write in a way that somebody across the country who isn't familiar with your state and your systems and your procedures and so forth can understand it.

Stan Orchowsky: Now, I understand this can be antagonizing in some cases and so I don't want you to antagonize anybody, but I just want you to keep that in mind that, and especially for my colleagues in the SACs, keep in mind that you're writing this for a wider audience. I do think somebody's asked me how do you find the balance and I agree. I do think it's a balance and that's why I say I don't want ... If you're writing a report that's been requested by ... If you're an SAA and you're writing a report that's been requested by your director or you're writing something for the legislature, it can be awkward to explain here's how the ... I don't know. Here's how parole works in New Jersey to a bunch of people in New Jersey like the parole board. I mean that is a little odd, I agree.

Stan Orchowsky: However, I would argue, first of all, that even in your own state or your own jurisdiction, the report will probably be of interest to people beyond those who have requested it. While the members of the parole board hopefully know how parole works in your state, I'm not sure everybody in the governor's office knows or in the secretary of public safety's office or in the department of corrections or whoever else is going to be reading that in your state. I would argue that there's a little bit of a case to be made for at least spending a few paragraphs describing it.

Stan Orchowsky: Again, I think that we don't think ... I mean it's not just ... I was going to say we don't think creatively enough but it's not just that. I realize everybody, we're all working against deadlines, we all need to get those final reports out. All of my staff today is not in the office because they're all working on a report that's due tomorrow. I understand how that works but it would be really interesting if we could just take some time and think about putting out like an appendix or something that could go up on the website along with the report that would explain in more detail.

Stan Orchowsky: For example, here's how parole works in our state because I do think that even when and you know the question might just as well say, how do you balance being a researcher, an applied researcher where you're getting your work assignments from your agency director or from the governor's office or from another criminal justice agency in your state with the fact that you're a researcher who has a code of ethics and understands that even though this study may never be published in a journal or a referee
journal that it still is contributing to the body of knowledge. Of course, if you're in a SAC, we here at JRSA, part of our job is to get your work out there to the public.

Stan Orchowsky: The question writ larger is, is how do you find that balance which is also tricky but I think that it's important that some of this stuff so that if you are in New Jersey, you want the people in California to understand enough about how your parole system works. If nothing else, at least just refer them to a document that they can look at online and can explain things because at some point they may be reading your study and wanting to replicate it or wanting to find out is it relevant to them and how can they use this finding.

Stan Orchowsky: Now, of course, you could always put in contact information and they can always contact you and ask their questions and so forth but it really is, I agree, it is a difficult balance and I don't think there's any one answer. I think it depends on where you are.

Stan Orchowsky: It depends on who your funders are or who your requesters are and what their tolerance for this is but I also think you can train them. I think you can train them by starting to do this in your work and getting them used to it. Again, you don't want to be the person who's standing up there before the chair of the subcommittee who's saying, "Why did you do all this other stuff, we didn't ask you to do this stuff" unless you really got the guts to say, "Well, because this is what we thought you needed." At the same time I do think you want to approach this with some A, some integrity, and B, it just makes your job more interesting and fun when you can look at the things that you know you want to look at.

Stan Orchowsky: All right, I want to shift gears here and talk a little bit about writing as a topic. If you have questions at this point, please send them in and we'll just give you a few seconds here to do that while I rev up for this next section. Let me make sure that is the next section.

Stan Orchowsky: This is really difficult obviously. Writing is a difficult topic. I am not an English major, I am a grammarian. I have little formal knowledge or understanding of the mechanics of all of this and I do think it can be very difficult to talk about and that's not really my goal here. However, I have read a lot of writing in my time. I've been around a long time and I've read a lot of bad writing and I'm tired of it. I wanted to do something that would try to convey to you some of the things that I've seen, some of the things that I've learned. Frankly, some of the things that I'd learned just in
preparing for today's webinar and see if I can share some of that to give you some idea of the kinds of things to look for, to look out for to make these reports more interesting.

Stan Orchowsky: This is by no means comprehensive. You could take, obviously, class after class after class in this but I just wanted to cover what I think are fundamentals and some of the things that I have ... Oops, some of the things that sort of bug me, if you will, pet peeves or things that I've seen over the years that I think are the most common issues that perhaps can be avoided.

Stan Orchowsky: The main thing that I see and again, I hate to keep talking about young researchers but at this point I'm pretty old so I guess most everybody is a young researcher compared to me. The main thing that I've seen, this has been going on now for a good 20 years, is that people seem to write the way they speak and that's not what writing is. Report writing and research report writing is formal. When we speak to each other, first of all, obviously, we've got a whole set of nonverbal cues that we can use to infer meaning but also, we're used to speaking in a shorthand style. We're also in an interactive process. If we don't understand something, I can ask you to clarify. I can ask you what do you mean by that. I can say. I'm not familiar with that, what do you mean?

Stan Orchowsky: That's part of why it's easier and I think the other part is we're just more informal. I mean, we don't walk around, for the most part, most of us, speaking to each other in a formal way. We speak in slang. We speak in abbreviated terms because we understand. We understand what we mean even if we're not being precise in our speech. Well, you can't do that in writing and a lot of the writing I see is like that. For example, I can read a paragraph and I can say to myself, "Well, I think I understand what she means by that but I'm not 100% sure." Or sometimes I ...

Stan Orchowsky: I have three possibilities. That's one possibility. Second possibility is I'll read a sentence and I'll say, "Wow, I really don't know what that means. I'm really not sure what that sentence means" and I'll read it a few times and I'm still not sure. The third possibility is I'll read a sentence or a paragraph and I'll think, 'Yeah, I know what that means but that's not good writing." It might be fine for when we're talking, when we're sitting around at lunch discussing a study but it's not the way you write. Writing needs to be formal so I think that's really important.
Stan Orchowsky: I'm not sure how I got the passive voice thing in here but it's just something obviously that we're taught, most of us who go to grad school are taught to use the passive voice, makes us sound more objective and scientific, it's just boring and it shouldn't be used and in fact, the APA discourages this. The use of we and I and so forth is a way to get into the active voice and that is in fact fine. There's nothing wrong with doing that. Getting away from the passive voice is every important.

Stan Orchowsky: Then, finally, good writing tells us a story, in this particular case, it's the story of your project. I once had a colleague a long time ago say to me, "Boy, I really enjoyed reading your report. It was like reading a mystery novel." What a great compliment because that's in essence what it is. It's got a beginning and it's got a middle and it's got an end and you should feel not so much like a mystery but you certainly should feel like that you're hearing a story. I'm sorry, I'm trying to read and talk at the same time, it doesn't work.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, just some basics, because a lot of times I just don't see this stuff. Paragraphs, each paragraph starts a new topic or a new aspect of the topic. This idea of the last sentence launching the next topic, I think writing can be a very idiosyncratic thing so I tend to see people doing the same thing over and over again. When you tend to get into a style you tend to use that style in all of your written work and sometimes when you start making mistakes, you make the same mistake over and over again because I think writing is a habitual kind of a process if it's not interrupted.

Stan Orchowsky: Launching the next topic is fine for when you're in a novel or even a nonfiction book but it's not fine for a research report. The last sentence of the paragraph does not introduce the next thought. The first sentence of the paragraph introduces the next thought. Then subsequent sentences clarify, expand upon and explain the topic. I think that if you just think about that in terms of one paragraph per big thought, that will help you go a long way.

Stan Orchowsky: There's also this idea of there are just tricks that you can use to maintain the continuity of ideas by using these linking words at the beginning of sentences. These time links, cause-effect links, addition links, contrast links, all of these things add a flow to the writing so that the writing doesn't seem choppy so that you really are flowing from one thought to the next and the reader can follow the flow of that. Again, I would refer you to any, really, any style guide. The APA I like but any one of the
traditional ones I think will work fine toward teaching you some of the stuff if you haven't been taught it before.

Stan Orchowsky: One thought per sentence and those thoughts can be clarified or qualified using these kinds of words that you see here by adding in commas or semicolons but we all know about run-on sentences which a particular bugaboo in scientific writing so you need to be careful about that. I don't know how you develop the skill of recognizing that you just put two distinct thoughts into the same sentence and they shouldn't be there. I can certainly pick them out pretty easily when I'm reading but I'm not sure exactly how that skill is developed.

Stan Orchowsky: I think you just need to ask yourself, am I qualifying something that I just said or am I introducing a whole new idea. If I'm introducing a whole new idea, I need to stop, put a period and start a new sentence. I'm also, and I'm not sure where, honestly, where we are with this third bullet these days but because I'm sort of old school to me, sentences contain a subject and a verb and can stand by themselves. Even if you've just written a sentence and then your next sentence refers back to a thought or an idea or a subject that was in that previous sentence, if that second sentence won't stand by itself without the first sentence, then you need to do something to change it. You need to add a subject back in or a clarifier or a pronoun or something so that the sentence can stand by itself.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, so here's an example. I'll let you take a moment and read that. Hopefully, the people that I've quoted don't recognize that this is their work. This idea about a model report, somebody asked me about that. I mean that really is a hard thing to do. The APA style guide gives you a sample paper but it's not really focused on the stylistic so much. It's focused on illustrating, which I like the idea of illustrating of all of their guidelines, but their guidelines include things like how do you do references, how do you do footnotes, and so a lot of it is oriented around that.

Stan Orchowsky: I'm not sure exactly how to point you. I would say that it's a matter of maybe practice. I do think that reading is the best way. The best way to be a good writer I think is to be a good reader so I think that and which puzzles me because by the time we've all gotten through ... Most of us probably have master's degrees and many of us have doctorates and so we've done a lot of reading. I'm not sure why more of that doesn't stick. I would say if you go to any journal, especially the good ones, the big ones,
in your field wherever they are, let's say criminology, for example, and read, I think you will see at least, I hope, writing that is grammatically correct and correct in terms of usage.

Stan Orchowsky: Now, it might not be good writing in the sense of it's not the kind of writing you or I would do and submit to our governor's office because it's just way too technical and boring frankly. But in terms of the technical aspects I think you will find it there. The answer is no, I don't really. I mean I'm not able to provide a model.

Stan Orchowsky: I will tell you however, and I will repeat that I am hardly an expert at this and I'd noticed in my own writing that I make the same mistakes over and over again. For a long time here at JRSA we had the luxury of an editor and that was awesome because we had somebody who could come in after me and clean up the stylistic stuff that I would mess up and somebody who actually knew what pluperfects were and what subjunctives were and when to use what and why which I don't know.

Stan Orchowsky: That's why I titled the next section and this is going to go on. I think we're probably 15 to 30 minutes away so those of you who need to cut off, this as I said will be on the website afterwards. This is just … I've labeled this a layperson's perspective because that's what I am. These are just things that I see in the writing of the people whose writing that I read so these are just sort of common mistakes. I think some of this just comes from going too fast or not proofreading. The single versus floral possessive, the use of past tense and again, some of these is just guidelines. If you have a style in your profession or whatever guide you use, if they have different rules, that's fine. In the APA style, past tense is used to refer to actions or conditions that occur to specific times in the past.

Stan Orchowsky: When you're talking about your literature review, those are in the past tense. When you're talking about the results of your study, that's given in the past tense but when you switch to the discussion section, you actually switch to the present tense. That's just something to get used to. I will say, I'm just going to, for those of you who may cut out, this is really important point and I want to make this point even though it's coming in a later slide that the key to all of this is consistency. It almost doesn't matter what set of rules you use as long as you apply them consistently. That's why it's really nice to have and to know a set of rules like the APA style guide because then you don't have to worry about being inconsistent.
Stan Orchowsky: What I mean by inconsistent is you've hyphenated a word at one point but then later on when you use the word, you forgot to hyphenate it because you don't know the rule and so you do it one way one time and then the next way you think you got it wrong and you do it in a different way another time, so there's that.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, use of pronouns. I'm going to give you a second to read that first example. I think this is a good example where we probably know what they mean. Train the service provider community to leverage service provider skills to meet crime victims' needs, wide range of needs because you can figure it out by context but you don't want the reader to have to stop and do that. It's just there's no reason for those pronouns to be that unclear.

Stan Orchowsky: The other thing that I see misused a lot is which versus that. That provides essential information, which provides further information. When which is used it's used after a comma. The study used an experimental design, which involved random assignments or conditions. Versus the example beneath, so again, these are all things that you can find in any sort of basic style guide but these are the things that I see all the time in the reports that I read.

Stan Orchowsky: This is hard a one, anthropomorphism, attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects so the program was pressured by judges. Well, the program can't be pressured. The people in the program can be pressured. This is a technicality, really. It's just one of those things like there's much in writing that we've all come to realize is acceptable even though we know it's technically not right. I'm guilty of this all the time. In the last sentence you'll find this. Much of what we write at JRSA we talk about SACs, state analysis centers, reported a variety of technical assistance needs. Well, the SACs can't report. The SACs are offices. The people who filled out our survey can report those so the SAC directors, the SAC stuff, so technically, that's what we're talking about here.

Stan Orchowsky: Subject-verb agreement, singular and plural must agree, and this is something that I just learned recently, even when there's an intervening phrase so here's the example. The number of offenses increases with age so the agreement there, offenses is plural so ... I mean I'm sorry. The number is singular so increases is singular but when you have that intervening clause in there, as well as the seriousness of offenses, that doesn't affect anything. It's still single even though that seems like it should be the number of offenses as well as the seriousness both
increase with age, that's actually technically not correct. The way it's written there is actually correct.

Stan Orchowsky: Then similar to the pronoun example, misplaced modifiers, so staff interviewed victims using their new listening skills, is it the victim's new listening skills or is it the staff's new ... or did the staff interview victims using the staff's new listening skills or did the staff interview victims who were using the victim's new listening skills, so just trying to clear that up.

Stan Orchowsky: If you don't know the difference between i.e. versus e.g. you need to learn it, especially if you're going to use those things. i.e. is that is. It's used to elaborate, explain, clarify and it's abbreviated when it's used inside parentheses. Just like that, that first example. e.g. is for example which provides an example and I wrote in there one of many because that's how I think of it. The state-mandated age of consent is an important consideration in a number of legal instances, for example, charging in sexual assault cases. There could be other examples as well. Those are very different things and I've seen people use them incorrectly often.

Stan Orchowsky: Me versus I, this is, again, if you don't know this, this is something you should learn. Our former director Joan Weiss taught this to me as well as many other things. What's correct for one is correct for more than one. If you look at that first clause, if you just take out the part in red and look at just the part that's in black, clearly, it's I would like to thank and not me would like to thank. The addition of my fellow authors doesn't change that in any way, shape or form.

Stan Orchowsky: You look at the second one, it's the same thing. If you take out the clause in red and you just say the editors invited, you wouldn't say the editors invited I to attend a signing party, you would say me. The addition of my fellow authors doesn't change that. The editors invited my fellow authors and me to attend the signing party.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, this is just a usage thing around quotation marks and again, this is just APA format. There may be other formats out there. I see this problem all the time. Where do you put the punctuation with regard to quotation marks? There are some rules. Periods and commas are placed inside quote marks whether it's a comment in the middle of a sentence like in the first example, whether it's a period at the end of the sentence as in the second example. Other punctuation is put outside of the quote marks as in the third example unless the quote is, I mean the punctuation
is actually part of the quote as in the fourth example where the punctuation then of course comes inside the quote marks because it's actually part of the quote.

Stan Orchowsky: Then I snuck in there one more. Again, this is just APA format on footnotes which I also see all the time. All punctuation basically goes before the footnote. Oftentimes, you see people will put that footnote in there and then they'll have the punctuation after that but generally speaking, the only exception is when you're using dashes in APA format which is not really found very often. Again, one of the tricks to this is just simply to be consistent in what you do.

Stan Orchowsky: Okay, common spelling mistakes. You can just take a look at these quickly. These are things that I see all the time. When you're the principal investigator, you're the first one. When you're in D.C., you're the second one. When you're not moving, you're the first one as opposed to when you're using a bunch of paper. Then when you're talking about a verve, you're the first one and when you're talking about a noun, you're the second one.

Stan Orchowsky: There's always confusion about numbers. APA style is to spell out the numbers one through nine and to use numerals for everything else. There are some exceptions to that that you can look up in the manual but I think that that ... It's nice to have a standard for that because you see that all over the place and since we put so many numbers in our reports, it's nice to be consistent with that.

Stan Orchowsky: Then I thought this was actually really interesting. This is something that drives me crazy all the time, prefixes and suffixes but mostly, prefixes which is why I put just those down here. All of these things in APA style do not require hyphens with the exception of quasi-experimental and meta-analysis. I'm not sure exactly why those are exceptions but they are. All of these things you see all the time, particularly pre and posttest, which always drives me crazy, and so often, I will use it one way and then I'll forget how used it and then I'll come to a later part of the document and put the hyphen in and so forth. This makes life a lot easier and by the way, if you're using Word, this will catch ... Word doesn't like these words like socioeconomic and it flags a lot of those as being errors but if you just don't ... For the most part, you're not using hyphens at all and it makes life a lot easier.
Stan Orchowsky: Some final thoughts here on style, I already mentioned the first one which is being consistent. Even if you end up doing it wrong and technically, it's not correct, at least if you're consistently doing it that way, then the reader won't be puzzled or it won't be jarring to the reader.

Stan Orchowsky: The second point I think is a key one. I think because perhaps we're often operating under deadlines and so forth, we don't rewrite enough. I think it's really important to do that and again, back in the old days, being as I'm so old, it used to be a pain to do this. Literally, you wouldn't want to rewrite something. Now, it's simple. It couldn't be any easier. I particularly noticed for myself that if I'm having trouble with a word and the same thing happens to me whether I'm writing or whether I'm reading someone else's writing, I would say, more than 9 times out of 10, the problem is the sentence, not the word. It's a lot easier to just trash the sentence and start over again rather than trying to figure out why am I having trouble figuring out what word to put in here.

Stan Orchowsky: Proofreading is absolutely essential. I proofread everything. I proofread emails carefully. I hate making mistakes and they always happen. I'll always go back to something I've written like a grant proposal a few months later and I will always find mistakes in there that I didn't catch and I find that very frustrating. You need to proofread. You need to proofread more than once and you need to get someone else to proofread because, I don't know what the explanation for this human phenomenon is, but when you read something over and over again, what happens is you tend to just skip over it.

Stan Orchowsky: If it's wrong and you've written it that way wrong and you read it the first way wrong and then you keep reading it wrong. It's really important to try to get another set of eyes on this stuff, not just to catch typos and things like that but also, because what you consider to be clear, someone else may not have a clue what you're talking about so it's really, really important to do that. For those of you out there who are in SACs, we will do this for you. Please feel free to send drafts of reports or anything else that you've got and that's one of the things JRSA will do for you. SACs and members, I might add.

Stan Orchowsky: The fourth bullet is about outlines. I don't know about you, I can remember having to do outlines when I was like in high school and I just hated, hated doing outlines. To this day, I hate doing outlines. This is really, really helpful. Particularly, I like to advise people that somewhere
really, really early on in the process, like while you're doing data collection and you're maybe waiting around for people to respond to a survey or something, consider preparing an outline of the final report. I think this is so instructive and so valuable and so few of us take the time to do it.

Stan Orchowsky: This is a practice what I preach kind of thing but if you have a sense from the very beginning of where you want this report to go, what is it that you want to say, what is it that you want to conclude, and I don't mean what are the conclusions but I mean what is the nature of what you want to conclude. If you know what the research questions are and you have some sense of that, that is just enormously helpful not only in writing the final report but in solidifying the methodology, determining the conceptualization, the operationalization that I talked about earlier. In so many ways, that can be so crucial.

Stan Orchowsky: In addition to, it really helps to write from an outline. It makes life a whole lot easier especially if you're not naturally organized. I've always had the good fortune to be able to write in a pretty organized fashion without having to do this but most people can't and I can't all the time. Writing off of an outline is really helpful.

Stan Orchowsky: Then, finally, and I think this is really important that the whole point of this, of telling your story, of your research study, is so that the reader can understand it with as little effort as possible. You want the effort to come on your end in the writing and not on their end in the reading. It's important that the writing not distract from the storytelling, if that makes sense. Any of you out there who have taught, who have done any teaching and have to read student papers, I think will know what I'm talking about. That if it takes too much effort for the reader to understand what you're saying, the reader reacts to that in some way. Maybe they get angry. Maybe they get frustrated. Maybe they think well, if this person can't even put together a sentence, how can I trust the findings of their study?

Stan Orchowsky: Whatever it is, you don't want that to happen. It's really important that the focus be on what's the best way for the reader to understand this and for the reader to get through this and understand the story that I'm trying to tell and not so much and if that requires a little more effort on my part, then that's fine.
Stan Orchowsky: I believe that's it. Let me see if there are any questions. While I'm doing that, I'm going to try to launch the survey. If you could please take a moment to answer the questions while we're looking at whether or not there are actually any questions for me.

Stan Orchowsky: Again, I understand we're looking for good examples of technical reports and I just don't know what to tell you on that. You're certainly, without trying to sound obnoxious, going to the JRSA website and looking at some of the stuff that's there. I think that stuff tends to be pretty well edited for the most part. We wrote a nice report that's up there on disproportionate minority contact for OJJDP that has what I think are pretty good examples of conclusions and recommendations from something that, believe me, it was not easy to do.

Stan Orchowsky: Obviously, the stuff that you'll find in journals has the advantage of course of being refereed and it's also got the advantage of being run, for the most cases, through an editor or in many cases, through an editor. The stuff you'll see there tends to be clean and perhaps cleaner than the stuff that you will find in nonpublished stuff at the more kind of technical reports and so forth that we tend to produce.

Stan Orchowsky: There also is a huge piece in the APA style guide on biased writing so making sure that you're reducing bias in your writing which includes disabilities, age, sexual orientation, race and ethnic identity and so forth. Yes, somebody has pointed out the question about using his or her versus their versus do you put he, do you put she, do you alternate, do you put (s)he, do you put his/her, do you do that every single time, which can be distracting and annoying. These are all things where it really does help to have just a style guide that you can follow and have guidance for where your local norms may dictate how you do it. Again, I think it's important that you do keep the audience in mind.

Stan Orchowsky: Again, it's finding that balance. On the one hand, you want those folks to be able to understand and there's a lot of other interesting things about this topic that we could get into. When you think about the people who are in your audience and what is their background and given their background, what kind of writing are they used to reading, what kind of style of writing are they used to reading, that can also give you a clue about how to phrase certain things or organize certain things. Other than just obviously when you're writing for, we all know that when you're writing for governors and legislators, they won't read more than a page or even a paragraph or two and so that's a challenge in and of itself.
Stan Orchowsky: Thinking about how many of those legislators are lawyers and what kind of writing and reading are they used to is another way to think about it. I think there's a fine line, not a fine line but a balance that needs to be struck between your need to write the research report in a way that demonstrates the integrity and the main components that we talked about today and the readers' needs in terms of understanding your story.

Stan Orchowsky: All right, that was almost an hour and a half so a little longer than I intended but I appreciate those of you who have hung in there. Thank you very much. I don't see any other questions so please complete the poll at the end. Again, thank you to the Bureau of Justice Statistics for sponsoring this. You will find this up on our website soon. For those who you think might benefit from this, we hope you enjoyed it. If you have any other feedback, please feel free to go to the website and email me. I'd love to hear it. Thank you again. Have a great afternoon and a great weekend.