

The Absolute Nos

Nine habits to break. Break them now and your drafts come back with far less red ink.

Well... every semester, the same nine errors do most of the damage. None of them is about intelligence — they're imports from other kinds of writing (essays, texting, high school English) that don't survive in APA country. Here they are, with the fix built in.

No 1 · No quotes. None.

In psychology we paraphrase, because a paraphrase *proves you understood*. A quote proves you can copy. If a sentence in a paper feels un-paraphrasable, that's the signal you don't understand it yet — reread, then say it your way, with the citation. (Bonus: paraphrasing from your first note onward is also your best plagiarism protection.)

No 2 · No first names, article titles, or universities

In APA style, identity lives in one place: surname plus year. Not "*Christina Balderrama-Durbin, a researcher at Binghamton University, wrote an article called...*" — just *Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) found...* The reference list

handles the rest. Your prose stays about the science, not the biography.

No 3 • No contractions

Don't becomes *do not*. Isn't becomes *is not*. Yes, this page uses contractions — it's a web guide, not a manuscript. Your proposal is a manuscript.

No 4 • Naked "this" (and "these")

"*This means that...*" — this *what*? Every "this" needs a noun after it: *this hypothesis, this pattern, these findings*. The rule looks fussy until you notice how often a naked "this" hides the fact that the writer isn't sure what "this" refers to either.

No 5 • The year is the publication date

"*In 2002, Crowell and colleagues conducted a study*" misreads what that number means — it's when the paper was *published*, not when the data were collected. Write *Crowell et al. (2002) conducted...* and the year sits where APA wants it anyway.

No 6 • No casual language

No *you*. No *one* ("one would imagine"). No *thing* or *something*. No slang — "24/7," "hookup," "it's not black and white." If it

sounds like a text to a friend, it doesn't belong in the manuscript.

No 7 • No thesaurus, no fireworks

Scientific prose is plain on purpose. *Incredible, fantastic, amazing* are reviews of a restaurant, not descriptions of an effect. And never swap a plain word for an impressive one you found in a thesaurus — precision dies first, credibility second. Bem's (2004) rule: accuracy, then clarity. Style is a distant third.

No 8 • No biased or outdated language

Current APA style (American Psychological Association, 2020): *participants*, not subjects; *gay men and lesbians*, not homosexuals; *older adults*, not the elderly; *patients with bipolar disorder*, not bipolar people. People-first, specific, and current. This one isn't just style — it's respect, and it's graded.

No 9 • No filler words

Really, actually, basically, first of all, in order to — delete them and watch the sentence get stronger every time. Omit needless words: the oldest rule in the book, and still the most profitable per minute of editing.

The repair shop

Caught in the wild	Repaired
"Dr. John Gottman of the University of Washington says that contempt is 'the sulfuric acid of love.'"	Gottman (1994) argued that contempt is the strongest behavioral predictor of relationship dissolution.
"This basically shows that teens don't really care about likes."	This finding suggests that adolescents place less value on peer approval metrics than commonly assumed.
"In 2019, Smith did an amazing study on the elderly."	Smith (2019) examined memory consolidation in older adults.
"One would imagine subjects felt something negative 24/7."	Participants reported persistently elevated negative affect.

Spot the violations

How many Absolute Nos can you find in this sentence? Count, then check.

"In 2015, researcher Lisa Feldman Barrett of Northeastern University wrote an incredible paper called 'The theory of constructed emotion,' which basically says that emotions aren't hardwired — this means the classical view is wrong 24/7."

Answer

Seven: year used as event date (No 5), first name + affiliation (No 2), article title in text (No 2), "incredible" (No 7), "basically" (No 9), contraction "aren't" (No 3), naked "this means" (No 4) — and "24/7" makes eight (No 6). Repaired: *Barrett (2017) argued that emotions are constructed rather than hardwired, challenging the classical view.*

Adapted with gratitude from course materials by Dr. Traci Giuliano (Southwestern University). Now go collect the tools these habits make room for: [The Absolute Dos](#).

References

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