

Nurse Author & Editor

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A 'Heads Up' on Headings

A 'Heads Up' on Headings (and Sub-Headings)

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A potential author for *Journal of Advanced Nursing* once complained to me about our insistence on the particular structures—headings and sub-headings—for specific types of articles on which we insist. His point was that this was very 'constraining' for authors. I agreed and told him that this was entirely the point; constraint. I also strongly encourage the use of headings and sub-headings by any students whose writing I am supervising, despite the views of some UK nursing colleagues regarding the use of headings and sub-headings in academic writing which I have previously covered in [my blog](#). I believe that the correct use of headings and sub-headings is an academic skill that students should acquire early.

This article addresses the use of heading and sub-headings in manuscripts for submission to academic journals.

PURPOSE OF HEADINGS

So, which headings and sub-headings should be used, how do they get there and what purpose do they serve? The purpose of headings and sub-headings can be examined in at least three ways:

- Aesthetics
- Signposting
- Positioning and retrieval of information

Aesthetics

This means, simply, that headings and sub-headings make your writing and your published article look better, even if only superficially. It should be said that scientific writing is not always the most 'page-turning' writing to read; a scientific report in the form of a published article is not a novel and successive pages of text without a break can be intimidating to look at and tedious to read. Headings and sub-headings provide some relief from an endless flow of words.

Signposting

Headings and sub-headings help to guide the reader through the article logically. When one section has been read then the reader has the information necessary for reading and understanding the subsequent section. A reader can also refer to previous sections for clarification.

Positioning and Retrieval of Information

In scientific articles, the use of headings and sub-headings serves an obvious purpose: where to put specific types of information in a manuscript. In most cases, headings are self-explanatory and are specified by the journal to which an author is submitting. Following the title of the manuscript—which is neither a heading nor a sub-heading—typical examples of headings are: **Introduction**; **Methods**; **Results**; and **Discussion**. While the respective material which should be placed under these headings should be obvious, some less experienced authors do make mistakes. One of the most common is to pre-empt subsequent material. For example, starting to discuss the design of the study in the **Introduction**; mentioning results under **Methods**; and, most commonly, starting to discuss the results in the **Results** section rather than simply stating the findings. Each of the sections of the manuscript, as labelled by its heading, should be highly specific. This helps readers to locate the information they need and leads to a more parsimonious and less repetitive style of writing.

SUB-HEADINGS

Sub-headings are less obvious than headings in terms of their positioning, purpose and number of levels to be used. Journals do not always provide guidance on sub-headings; however, the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2010)—used as a reference point by many journals and authors—provides for five levels of heading: i.e. one level of heading and four levels of sub-heading and prescribes precisely how these should be denoted. Table 3.1 in the APA manual (p. 62), reproduced here, shows how explicitly they describe the styling for headings. Even with this guidance, in my experience (and that of editor colleagues), authors very rarely have headings used and styled correctly. Don't be that person!

Table. Format For Five Levels of Headings (APA Style)	
Level of Heading	Format
1	Centered, Boldface, Uppercase and Lowercase¹
2	Flush Left, Boldface, Uppercase and Lowercase
3	Indented, boldface, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period.²
4	<i>Indented, boldface, italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period.</i>
5	<i>Indented, italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period.</i>

¹This type of capitalization is also referred to as *title case*.

²In a lowercase paragraph heading, the first letter of the first word is uppercase and the remaining words are lowercase.

Some journals specify a whole number for the headings, for example '1. Introduction' and then a system of numbering which uses periods and numbers to denote subsequent levels such as: '1.1'; '1.2'; '1.2.1'. etc. Usually, it is unnecessary to use more than three levels of heading—i.e. a heading and two sub-headings—and for most purposes, two levels are sufficient.

How to Use Sub-Headings

The judicious use of sub-headings is harder than the use of headings as it is not always obvious what material should be contained under them and labels are not usually specified by journals. Generally, the author can decide how best to use them. However, the principles remain the same as for headings: sub-headings should be ordered logically within the major sections of a manuscript and should be discrete with specific information under each one. I can only exemplify here but, for example, an **Introduction** could contain three sub-sections headed by sub-headings such as: *Background*; *Literature Review*; and *The Present Study*. The *Background* explains why they study is being conducted and what the issue or problem is that is worthy of study; the *Literature Review* provides the most relevant articles that support the study; and *The Present Study* outlines what will be addressed and can contain the research question. Under the **Methods** section, sub-sections could be: *Design and Analysis*. If both qualitative and quantitative methods are being used then these could be described separately using a second

level of sub-heading under the sub-heading *Analysis*. The results do not usually require sub-headings, although in mixed methods studies the quantitative and qualitative results could be presented under separate sub-headings. Finally, sub-headings may be used to present and discuss different aspects of the results or these may be presented as an integrated block of text. However, useful sub-headings within the **Discussion** could be: *Limitations*; *Implications*; *Future Research*, and—if not specified as a separate heading—*Conclusions*.

JOURNAL STYLE

Some journals use specific headings across all articles; typically this is the case in journals that primarily report research. If the journal uses specific headings, this will be stated in the Information for Authors. You should also look at several articles in the journal to make sure you understand what content belongs in each section and that headings are consistent.

Other journals, particularly those that are more clinically focused, may allow you, the author, to create your own headings to be reflective of the content. In this case, it is particularly important that you use headings that will be meaningful to the reader. You also want to be careful that you properly identify—in your own mind and in your manuscript—which are the main headings and which are the sub-headings.

FORMATTING

While the table referenced earlier provides guidance on the formatting of headings, it is surprising (and somewhat dismaying) how many authors don't do this correctly. Remember that headings help to organize the text; they can also help you to organize your thinking. Correct formatting—so that your eye is drawn to the heading and knows immediately if it is a Level 1, 2, or 3 heading from the style—helps you to make sure your paper is properly presented.

Remember that the title of the manuscript is just that: the title. It is not a heading or sub-heading. Similarly, in a classic five or six chapter dissertation, many authors are tripped up by the chapter designation at the top of the page. For this, I suggest that students consider **CHAPTER ONE** as the title; the first level head would then be **Introduction**, which should be Centered and Boldface, if using APA style. Other Level 1 (or main) headings typically found in the first chapter of a dissertation are **Purpose**, **Significance**, **Study Aims**, and **Research Question(s)**, and if requested by the dissertation committee, **Chapter Summary**.

Resist the urge to use features of your word processor to format your headings. In my experience, they tend to focus more on making a manuscript look 'fancy' or 'pretty' and are not going to be styled according to APA or journal guidelines. You are best to make an outline of the headings, identify each one according to its proper level, then format it accordingly, using bold, italic, the tab key (to indent), and alignment to center text.

CONCLUSION

Headings and sub-headings are one of those nitty-gritty features that permeate scholarly writing. Learn how to style them correctly and present your manuscript professionally—I can assure you that the editor will notice!

REFERENCE

1. American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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