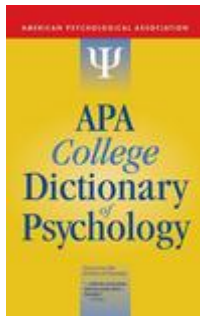


Defining the Discipline for the Student Audience: A Concise and Direct College Dictionary

A review of



APA College Dictionary of Psychology

by the American Psychological Association

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009. 480 pp. ISBN

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Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.

—Samuel Johnson

One of the chief complaints of psychology's critics is that it is a jargon-laden discipline. When in doubt, such critics attest, psychologists just make up a word, term, or phrase to describe, categorize, or otherwise give life to an idea. Whether such criticism is justified is debatable and likely to depend upon the topic under scrutiny. What is really not debatable is

the fact that, like it or not, psychology has spawned a rather large lexicon. With the continued growth of the discipline, the burgeoning of the neurosciences, and the popularity of psychology courses in secondary and postsecondary settings, there is little doubt that more words to characterize theories, results, effects, and findings will continue to creep into psychology's vernacular.

What are readers, very often students, to do when confronted with unfamiliar psychological terms, whether or not such terms might well be classified as professional slang? I suggest following the observation of Dr. Johnson (1709–1784), the 18th-century author and lexicographer: When you don't know something, know where to look for the correct information. One of the best places to look when navigating the perils of unfamiliar language is, of course, a dictionary. Although many abridged and unabridged general dictionaries do contain frequently encountered psychological terminology (e.g., *id*, *ego*, *superego*), more recently coined words will not be found there. The curiosity to know in concrete language what something means, whether it's *phosphene* or *problem-focused coping*, requires use of a specialized dictionary of psychological terms.

Curiosity is one of the most permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect.

—Samuel Johnson

Fortunately, the American Psychological Association (APA) has just published a rather concise and direct guide for the perplexed, the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology*. Although this dictionary of psychological terms is aimed primarily at the student audience (i.e., high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement [AP] psychology courses and undergraduate psychology majors), the increasing number of specialized subdisciplines within psychology means that anyone—researchers, teachers, practitioners, laypeople—can use it to satisfy their curiosity regarding foreign ideas found in the ever-expanding psychological literature.

Still, the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology* focuses primarily on terms and constructs that are likely to be encountered in the course of study in an undergraduate psychology curriculum. As a result, most entries hail from the traditional subfields in the discipline, namely abnormal, social, developmental, and cognitive–experimental psychology. An added plus for today's students is that many terms from neuroscience, statistics, and research methods are also included. Thus, a desire for some depth is satisfied, but what about breadth? The book's back cover touts the fact that the dictionary provides “basic coverage across 90 subdisciplines of psychology.” That is arguably a substantial amount of coverage for a specialized dictionary, particularly one designed for a student audience.

But there is more good news for users of this dictionary: The entries are brief, crisply written, and often cross-referenced with or to related entries. Abbreviations (e.g., *Cs* for *conscious*, *CS* for *conditioned stimulus*) are also well represented in its pages. A helpful one-

page *Quick Guide to Format* of the entries, which appears on page xi, explains how to read an individual entry and its (possible) component parts (e.g., part of speech label, plural forms, cross-references, alternative names, etymology, abbreviations, derived words). An appendix contains a fairly extensive list of significant historical figures in psychology (most late, a few living) and a sentence or two summarizing their major contributions.

Words are but the signs of ideas.

—Samuel Johnson

How did APA go about creating this compendium of ideas? The answer is found in the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology*'s lineage: The original *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2007) contained 25,000 entries. A briefer work, the *APA Concise Dictionary of Psychology* (APA, 2009), appeared shortly thereafter; its number of entries is around 10,000. College students are unlikely to consult either tome very often (although copies of one or both are likely to be found in the reference section of their college or university libraries). As a further refinement of its predecessors, with only 5,000 entries (200 of which are said to be new), the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology* is a much more manageable and portable source for interpreting and understanding the field than are its more professionally oriented counterparts (still, I intend to keep my copies close at hand for both reading and writing).

Do not accustom yourself to use big words for little matters.

—Samuel Johnson

I think students can certainly benefit from learning to use this dictionary, not only for understanding but for learning to focus on the meaning of words, especially how they help to advance psychological knowledge. Savvy students, for example, would be wise to keep a copy of this reasonably priced resource handy when reading primary source empirical or theoretical journal articles, monographs, or chapters in edited volumes, if not traditional textbooks. Students who are learning to write APA-style manuscripts or literature review papers, too, could benefit from dipping into this dictionary, as it makes a more reliable and simplified source than either traditional college dictionaries or today's default reference source, Wikipedia.

Virtually all undergraduate psychology majors who write any discipline-related papers in their courses will benefit from examining this dictionary's entries and learning to craft concrete (and brief!) definitions or descriptions of theories, constructs, and terms by its example. With some guidance from instructors, the entries in the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology* could help students learn to think and write more clearly, to paraphrase legitimately, and to avoid plagiarism or reliance on dull or lengthy verbatim quotations in their work.

Yet, how likely are students going to be to purchase this dictionary (or any dictionary), given the ease of access to definitions on the Internet and its innumerable

outlets, including quite a few online dictionaries? Undergraduate educators have a possible role here. Teachers of psychology will want to examine the *APA College Dictionary of Psychology* in order to decide whether it would be an appropriate supplemental text for research methods courses or for some advanced or honors courses. Certainly, departments of psychology that maintain a student library, as well as college and university reference desks, will want to have copies of this dictionary.

Books, like friends, should be few and well chosen.

—Samuel Johnson

Dr. Johnson is right again. This dictionary may well be one of the few resources that psychology students will keep and consult throughout their academic careers. As a relatively modest investment, it is to be recommended highly.

References

American Psychological Association. (2009). *APA concise dictionary of psychology*. Washington, DC: Author.

VandenBos, G. (Ed.). (2007). *APA dictionary of psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.