Style Selection Decision Tree

START HERE: Has Your Instructor Specified a Style?

YES → Use the style your instructor requires
(Even if this guide suggests something else)

NO → Continue to Question 1

Question 1: What's Your Academic Discipline?

Path A: SCIENCES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Your field: Psychology, Education, Sociology, Nursing, Business, Political Science, Anthropology, Social Work, Economics

→ Go to Question 2

Path B: HUMANITIES

Your field: Literature, English, Languages, Philosophy, Arts, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, Theater, Music (non-technical)

→ Use MLA Format

Why MLA? - Standard for literary analysis - Emphasizes authorship and page numbers - Designed for close textual reading - Citation format: (Author Page)

Path C: HISTORY & RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Your field: History, Theology, Religious Studies, Archaeology (historical focus)

→ Use Chicago Style (Notes-Bibliography)

Why Chicago NB? - Standard for historical research - Allows detailed footnotes - Accommodates primary sources - Citation format: Footnotes with bibliography

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Path D: ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY

Your field: Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, Engineering, Information Technology

→ Use IEEE Format

Why IEEE? - Standard for technical papers - Numbered citation system - Clear for technical documentation - Citation format: [1], [2], [3]

Path E: UNSURE OR INTERDISCIPLINARY

Your field: Combination of disciplines, unclear category, new field

Question 2: You're in Sciences/Social Sciences

What type of paper are you writing?

Research paper, lab report, literature review, empirical study?

→ **Use APA Format**

Why APA? - Standard for social sciences - Emphasizes publication dates (recency matters) - Clear structure for scientific papers - Citation format: (Author, Year)

Is this specifically for Sociology?

→ **Consider ASA Format**

Why ASA? - Sociology-specific variant of APA - Required by sociology journals - Similar to APA with minor differences - Citation format: (Author Year)

Note: If instructor doesn't specify, APA also works for sociology

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Question 3: You're Unsure or Interdisciplinary

Ask yourself these questions:

Does your paper emphasize:

→ **Analysis of literature/texts?**
Use MLA

→ **Scientific research with current data?**
Use APA

→ **Historical context and primary sources?**
Use Chicago

→ **Technical specifications or engineering?**
Use IEEE

Still unsure? Use this hierarchy:

1. **Check your department's default**
   (Most departments have a preferred style)

2. **Look at similar published papers in your field**
   (What citation style do they use?)

3. **When in doubt, default to APA**
   (Most widely accepted across disciplines)

Special Cases

Case 1: Writing for Publication?

Journal article submission:

→ Check journal's author guidelines (REQUIRED)

Conference paper:
→ Check conference submission requirements

Never assume - journals specify exact format requirements

Case 2: Graduate Thesis or Dissertation?

Check your institution's requirements: - Most require specific style guide - May require Turabian (thesis-specific) - Graduate schools often mandate format

→ **Consult your graduate handbook FIRST**

Case 3: Multiple Sources Across Disciplines?

If citing sources from various fields:

Pick ONE style and stick with it - Don't mix citation styles in one paper - Choose the style for your paper's primary discipline - Format ALL sources in that chosen style

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Quick Field Reference

Use APA for:

- Psychology
- Education
- Sociology (or ASA)
- Nursing
- Business
- Political Science
- Social Work
- Communications
- Anthropology
- Criminal Justice

Use MLA for:

- English Literature
- Foreign Languages
- Literary Criticism
- Comparative Literature
- Cultural Studies
- Film Studies (analysis)
- Theater
- Art History
- Philosophy (often)

Use Chicago for:

- History
- Theology
- Religious Studies
- Art History (often)
- Music History
- Classical Studies
- Medieval Studies

Use IEEE for:

- Electrical Engineering
- Computer Engineering
- Computer Science (often)
- Information Technology
- Telecommunications

Other Specialized Styles:

- **ASA:** Sociology
- **AMA:** Medicine
- **Bluebook:** Legal writing
- **ACS:** Chemistry
- **AIP:** Physics
- **AMS:** Mathematics

Question 4: Still Confused? Use This Final Check

Answer these yes/no questions:

Is publication date important to your argument? - YES → Use APA (emphasizes dates) - NO → Consider MLA or Chicago
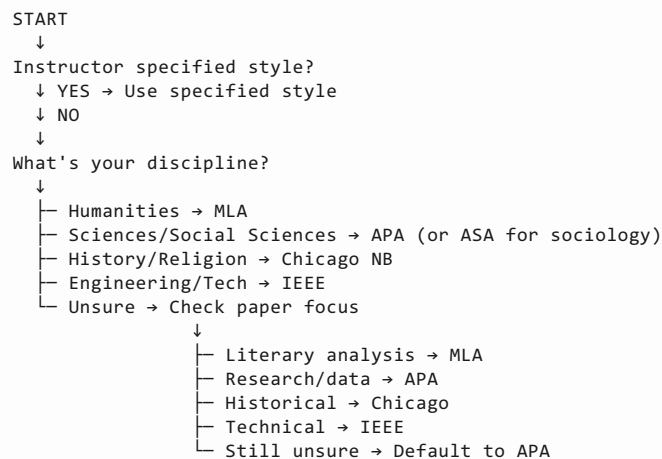
Are you analyzing literary texts? - YES → Use MLA - NO → Continue

Do you need detailed footnotes for sources? - YES → Use Chicago Notes-Bibliography - NO → Continue

Are you writing technical documentation? - YES → Use IEEE - NO → Continue

If none of the above apply clearly: - **Default to APA** (most versatile)

Decision Flowchart Summary

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START
 ↓
Instructor specified style?
 ↓ YES → Use specified style
 ↓ NO
 ↓
What's your discipline?
 ↓
 ├─ Humanities → MLA
 ├─ Sciences/Social Sciences → APA (or ASA for sociology)
 ├─ History/Religion → Chicago NB
 ├─ Engineering/Tech → IEEE
 └─ Unsure → Check paper focus
                ↓
                ├─ Literary analysis → MLA
                ├─ Research/data → APA
                ├─ Historical → Chicago
                ├─ Technical → IEEE
                └─ Still unsure → Default to APA
```

Red Flags: When to Double-Check

⚠️ **Check with your instructor if:** You're in an interdisciplinary program - Your course combines multiple fields - The syllabus doesn't specify format - You're writing for a new or emerging field - You've never used citations in this class before

⬜⬜ **Check with your institution if:** Writing a thesis or dissertation - Submitting to institutional repository - Graduate-level capstone project - Honors thesis

⬜⬜ **Check with the publication if:** Submitting to a journal - Conference paper submission - Contributing to an anthology - Publishing in any formal venue

Common Scenarios

Scenario 1: Psychology Class Essay

Field: Psychology (social science)
Type: Research paper
→ **Use APA**

Scenario 2: English Literature Analysis

Field: English (humanities)
Type: Literary analysis
→ **Use MLA**

Scenario 3: History Research Paper

Field: History
Type: Historical research with primary sources
→ **Use Chicago Notes-Bibliography**

Scenario 4: Computer Science Project Report

Field: Computer Science (engineering/tech)
Type: Technical report
→ **Use IEEE**

Scenario 5: Sociology of Education Paper

Field: Interdisciplinary (sociology + education)
Type: Research paper
→ **Use APA or ASA** (both social science styles)

Scenario 6: Philosophy of Literature Paper

Field: Interdisciplinary (philosophy + literature)
Type: Analysis
→ **Use MLA** (humanities focus)

Quick Decision Table

If your paper is about…	Use this style
Analyzing poems, novels, plays	MLA
Psychological studies	APA
Historical events and documents	Chicago
Circuit design or coding	IEEE
Social behavior research	APA or ASA
Teaching methods	APA
Film or art analysis	MLA
Religious texts and history	Chicago
Language and grammar	MLA
Child development	APA

Remember

The Golden Rule:

Your instructor's requirements ALWAYS override any style guide recommendations

When in Doubt:

1. **Ask your instructor** (best option)
2. **Check your syllabus** (may specify)
3. **Look at course readings** (what style do they use?)
4. **Ask classmates** (what are they using?)
5. **Default to APA** (widely accepted)

Never:

- ☐ Mix citation styles in one paper
- ☐ Assume you know without checking
- ☐ Use the "easiest" style
- ☐ Copy a friend's format without verifying

Always:

- ☐ Verify requirements before starting
- ☐ Use ONE style consistently
- ☐ Follow that style's complete guidelines
- ☐ Include all required components (title page, headers, etc.)

Final Answer: If you've worked through this entire tree and still can't decide, use APA format. It's the most widely accepted style across multiple disciplines.