

Description

A report on a scientific study using human participants will include a description of the participant characteristics. This is included as a subsection of the “Methods” section, usually called “Participants” or “Participant Characteristics.” The purpose is to give readers information on the number and type of study participants, as a way of clarifying to whom the study findings apply and shedding light on the generalizability of the findings as well as any possible limitations. Accurate reporting is needed for replication studies that might be carried out in the future.

The “Participants” subsection should be fairly short and should tell readers about the population pool, how many participants were included in the study sample, and what kind of sample they represent, such as random, snowball, etc. There is no need to give a lengthy description of the method used to select or recruit the participants, as these topics belong in a separate “Procedures” subsection that is also under “Methods.” The subsection on “Participant Characteristics” only needs to provide facts on the participants themselves.

Report the participants’ genders (how many male and female participants) and ages (the age range and, if appropriate, the standard deviation). In particular, if you are writing for an international audience, specify the country and region or cities where the participants lived. If the study invited only participants with certain characteristics, report this, too. For example, tell readers if the participants all had autism, were left-handed, or had participated in sports within the past year.

> Related: Finished preparing the methods sections for your research paper? **Find out why the “Methods” section is so important now!**

Next, use your judgment to identify other pieces of information that are relevant to the study. For a detailed tutorial on reporting “Participant Characteristics,” see Alice Frye’s “Method Section: Describing participants.” Frye reminds authors to mention if only people with certain characteristics or backgrounds were included in the study. Did all the participants work at the same company? Were the students at the same school? Did they represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds? Did they come from both urban and rural backgrounds? Were they physically and emotionally healthy? Similarly, mention if the study sample excluded people with certain characteristics.

If you are going to examine any participant characteristics as factors in the analysis, include a

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description of these. For instance, if you plan to examine the influence of teachers' years of experience on their attitude toward new technology, then you should report the range of the teachers' years of experience. If you plan to study how children's socioeconomic level relates to their test scores, you should briefly mention that the children in the sample came from low, middle, and high-income backgrounds. Finally, mention whether the participants participated voluntarily. Include information on whether they gave informed consent (if the participants were children, mention that their parents consented to their participation). Also, mention if the participants received any sort of compensation or benefit for their participation, such as money or course credit.

Case Studies and Qualitative Reports

Case studies and qualitative reports may have only a few participants or even a single participant. If there is space to do so, you can write a brief background of each participant in the "Participants" section and include relevant information on the participant's birthplace, current place of residence, language, and any life experience that is relevant to the study theme. If you have permission to use the participant's name, do so. Otherwise, use a different name and add a note to readers that the name is a pseudonym. Alternatively, you might label the participants with numbers (e.g., Student 1, Student 2) or letters (e.g., Doctor A, Doctor B, etc.), or use initials to identify them (e.g., KY, JM).

Use Past Tense

Remember to use past tense when writing the "Participants" section. This is because you are describing what the participants' characteristics were *at the time of data collection*. By the time your article is published, the participants' characteristics may have changed. For example, they may be a year older and have more work experience. Their socioeconomic level may have changed since the study. In some cases, participants may even have passed away. While characteristics like gender and race are either unlikely or impossible to change, the whole section is written in the past tense to maintain a consistent style and to avoid making unsupported claims about what the participants' current status is.

Category

1. Manuscripts & Grants
2. Reporting Research

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