

Screwtape Letters Final Paper Instructions

Throughout this course you have learned about many of the obstacles that psychology researchers face in trying to conduct experiments that accurately capture reality. You've learned about all sorts of dead ends and traps that research can fall in to—the temptations and sins of research, so to speak.

For this final paper you will be creating a series of six (or more) letters modeled on C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. You will want to read at least a bit of this book to get a sense of the style you want to imitate (an audio version narrated by John Cleese is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLA8BAC9375345E6C7>) but the gist is the letters are from a senior demon (Screwtape) to his nephew, a junior demon (Wormwood), giving him advice about how to tempt his 'patient' into sin, with the ultimate goal of making sure the patient ends up in hell. The letters cover various parts of the patient's life—his conversion to Christianity, his various moral lapses and triumphs, and his ultimate death during WWII (unfortunately for Wormwood, the patient is safe in belief when this happens).

You will be writing this style of letter, only instead of tempting a Christian patient to sin, you will be giving instructions to a 'science demon'^a for tempting a psychologist to conduct bad research. To do this you will draw upon the textbook and the additional readings throughout the course, as well as our in class discussion. You will document the connection between your tempter's advice in the letters and the readings by means of footnotes which explain what problem of research you are referring to and giving the reference for the problem. For example, a letter might look like this:

My dear Whirligig-Popper,

I was pleased to learn from your letter that your patient is overwhelmed by the prospect of recruiting so many subjects for her research. Exploit this. Subtly suggest to her that there's nothing wrong with recruiting the people who are easiest to find—her friends!¹ [rest of letter omitted]

Keep up the good work, someone who is this easily discouraged so early in the process should be easy to keep from good research. If only all psychologists were this lazy!

Your affectionate 5th cousin,

Kuhn-Hufflegump

¹ This is an example of convenience sampling (a biased sampling technique), and will be a real problem if the patient's friend group differs significantly from the population of interest. If the friends are very different from the average person or the population of interest, then this will create external validity problems (Morling, 2015, p. 186)

^a I made this up. But stranger things exist.

So there you have it. A mini example letter with example footnote. Obviously the real one will be much longer and have multiple footnotes.

Letter Structure

1. A Baby Researcher — Becoming a Researcher

In this letter the patient arrives at grad school, all bright eyed and bushy tailed and excited to conduct research on their own favorite research area. Write about some of the pressures in the way that psychology as a discipline is structured that might lead a psychologist to do bad research. Write about the types of personality traits (or virtues and vices) which might lead a young psychologist to do bad research. What types of habits and ways of thinking should your tempter encourage? What types of things do they want to discourage? (think virtue ethics!) The student's graduate advisor might feature in this section and throughout the letters, either—from the tempter's perspective—as a potential threat (if they are a good researcher) or as an ally (if they are bad researcher), given what advice and instructions they give the patient, their student.

2. A Great Idea for A Study! — Literature Review and Initial Choices

In this letter the patient is learning about research and preparing to design their own study. They are learning about what kind of research has been done in the past. They are thinking about how to interpret the literature review of the area they are interested in that they are currently conducting. They are thinking about what type of research they want to do—qualitative or quantitative, behavioral or questionnaire, etc., etc. What advice does the tempter have in this case? What types of sloppy thinking or skipping over steps or copying others does the tempter want to encourage? What types of mismatch between research topic and method? What kind of ethical questions does the tempter want the patient to ignore?

3. A Grand Design — The Design of the Experiment

In this letter the patient is getting into the details of designing their experiment. They are deciding things like how to operationalize the conceptual variables they are interested in, what measures and manipulations to use, and what kind of subjects to recruit. They are deciding on how long and how complicated the study will be, and how they will analyze the results. Think through the potential temptations that arise in the tasks that come before actually conducting research. What types of design confounds does the tempter want the patient to miss? Any ethical or cultural blind spots? There are all sorts of problems at this stage a tempter can exploit!

4. Oops! — A Problem Mid-Research

In this letter the patient gets into trouble in the middle of conducting their research and has to figure out what to do. What the problem is and how the patient responds is up to you—just make sure to include how the tempter wants the patient to respond, and what types of behavior they want them to avoid. In this letter you will also discuss any things that the patient might do in the process of conducting their research to mess things up.

5. “Interesting...” — Interpreting the Results

In this letter the patient is trying to make sense of the results they got. The senior tempter has a lot of ideas about how to help the patient jump to conclusions or make bigger claims than are warranted, given the limitations of the study (perhaps an unwarranted causal claim?). Perhaps there are alternative interpretations that the patient should be encouraged to ignore or statistical mistakes they can make. Perhaps the patient can be tempted to make grand claims about who this finding can be generalized to. If they didn't get significant results, the senior tempter has some ideas for that, too!

6. Now what? — Planning the Next Step

In this letter the patient is trying to figure out where they go next in their research. Do they do the same study again? Do they become more narrow or more broad in their focus? Pick a new approach? Move on to a completely different topic? If they ran into trouble or didn't get significant results, what are they going to do differently next time? Should they publish if they didn't get significant results? What does the tempter want to prevent them from learning from their experience of conducting their research?

Note 1: These suggestions for what to include in each letter are not exhaustive, but simply examples to get you thinking. You can go beyond that, and, if necessary, you can switch around what letter a particular topic gets discussed in if you need to. In other words there is some flexibility here.

Note 2: To follow the Screwtape convention, you will write only the side of the letters giving advice, not reporting on the progress on from the junior tempter, but respond as though letters from the junior tempter have been received.

Note 3: Get as specific as you like. You can decide what topic the patient is researching, what design they are using for their study, what type of person they are. The more real you can make this the better!

Details

Citations: Please use APA style to list the papers and the textbook you reference in a references list. Citing additional sources (for example relevant papers from other classes) is encouraged but not required.

Please specify page numbers in your citations of the textbook even though they are not direct quotes--I want to be able to see where you pulled the concept from.

Times New Roman, 12pt. font, double spaced.

No page max. or min.—use your own judgement for what is needed.

Reminder: This paper is worth 20% of your grade and is what we have instead of a final exam. You should put as much work into the paper as you would in studying the material for an exam. Your goal in the paper is to convince me that you understand the pitfalls and challenges of doing good research. While being creative! And hopefully having fun. 😊

Instructions about References

You will want to cite all the readings that are relevant. For example, your patient finds significant results but only uses questionnaire research, you would want to cite Baumeister et al. on the importance of behavioral measures. If you want to critique the patient for only using college students as subjects, you would cite Sears, for it being unethical, cite Stark or McCoy or the textbook, etc.

For your reference, here a list of the non-textbook articles and what their subject was.

Yong, 2012 & Yong, 2015—the Replication Crisis

Rodkey & Pillai Riddell, 2013—dangerous blind spots from cultural assumptions, theory and methods

McCoy, 2007/Stark, 2010—ethical problems in psychology

Schwarz, 1999—how questions shape the answers in questionnaire research

Baumeister, et al., 2007—the importance of behavioral measures rather than questionnaire research

Bohan, 1990/Sherif, 1987—the built-in bias of much of experimental psychology's assumptions

Sears, 1986—the problem of only having sophomore college students as subjects

Cosgrove & Flynn, 2005—an example of qualitative and participatory action research/we should expand psychology's methods

Rozin, 2009 (optional reading)—psychology should prioritize real-world and descriptive research