
The Importance of Citation

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A citation is both a signpost and an acknowledgement. As a signpost, it signals the location of your source. As an acknowledgement, it reveals that you are indebted to that source.

A citation can appear in different formats: within the text (in-text citation) at the bottom of the page (footnotes), or at the end of the paper (endnotes). Different disciplines use different formats. The mechanics of citing are complicated, and vary in each format. To answer specific questions on the mechanics of citation, please consult sources describing each type.

You may find it most useful to think about how citations function as a way for you as a writer to communicate with your reader. By using citations, you keep the reader always apprised of whose idea or words you are using at any given time in each sentence and in each paragraph.

Three Reasons Why Citation is Important

Citation is important because it is the basis of academics, that is, the pursuit of knowledge. In the academic endeavor, individuals look at evidence and reason about that evidence in their own individual ways. That is, taking what is already known, established, or thought, they use their reasoning power to create new knowledge. In creating this knowledge, they must cite their sources accurately for three main reasons:

Reason One: Because ideas are the currency of academia

First, citing sources is important because the currency of academia is ideas. As a result, academics want to accumulate that currency; they want to get credit for their contributions. When a writer cites ideas, that writer honors those who initiated the ideas.

Reason Two: Because failing to cite violates the rights of the person who originated the idea

Second, keeping track of sources is important because, if you use someone else's idea without giving credit, you violate that person's ownership of the idea. To understand this violation, envision the following scenario: You and your friend are discussing some ideas from class during lunch one day, and you make what you consider to be a particularly insightful observation. During class discussion that afternoon, your friend brings up your observation but neglects to point out that it is yours, not his. The professor beams and compliments your friend on his clear and insightful thinking.

In this scenario, you likely feel that there's something unfair about your friend's implicit claim that your idea was his or her own. After all, you had been thinking about the idea, perhaps had devoted time to developing it, and you are not getting credit for it. Worse, someone else is. That sense of violation you feel, the sense that something valuable has been stolen from you, suggests why failure to cite sources hurts another person.

Reason Three: Because academics need to be able to trace the geneology of ideas

Third, keeping track of sources is important because academics value being able to trace the way ideas develop. Consider the scientist who looks at an experiment described in a new publication, and then decides to perform an experiment to extend the results. At the same time, other scientists are planning experiments to test the findings, to contest the findings, to relate the findings to their own research: all of these "second generation" experiments owe their inspiration to the original idea. If another person reads one of the "second generation" ideas, proper citation will allow that person to explore the original publication to trace the way the idea has developed. In general, scholars must be able to trace how ideas develop in order to consider, think about, and test them accurately. So giving credit to the original source of ideas is the right thing to do, as well as the basis on which academia is built.

For more discussion on the ethical responsibilities of scientists in citing sources, sharing credit, and other matters, please see *On Being a Scientist: Responsible Conduct in Research, Second Edition* (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine 1995).

These three reasons suggest why it is important both to cite sources and to use them well. And neither is easy. You will learn about how to cite, when to cite, and why to cite throughout your college career. Your work in the tutorial is intended only to help you begin to consider these complicated questions.

Students' Frequently Asked Questions

How big a problem is academic dishonesty at Grinnell?

According to the College Registrar, the numbers of cases brought and students found guilty of academic dishonesty have been as follows:

Year	Number of Cases	Number found Guilty
1998-99	5	8
1999-00	6	5
2000-01	29	12
2001-02	28	19
2002-03	13	6

How can we talk about owning ideas? Aren't ideas part of the culture, part of all of us?

Good question. Indeed, some cultures view ideas differently than others. For example, in some cultures, in order to honor the words and thoughts of ancestors, students memorize long portions of the ancestor's exact words. In such a culture, being able to reproduce such words may represent a way of honoring the ancestor. And citation may be unnecessary because the culture at large understands where the words come from.

But remember that the culture in which you exist is twenty-first century academic culture. Academics do not regard it as an honor to be quoted without attribution;

indeed, they regard it as a violation. Traditionally, academic culture regards words and ideas as able to be owned, and academic reputation depends in part on owning a lot.

Doesn't the whole idea of ownership of ideas reek of capitalism?

Well, yes. The language of "stealing" "crediting" being in debt, and "owning" ideas relies heavily on capitalism for its imagery. Before the printing press made writing capturable, words, stories, and legends were passed down in an oral tradition, where memorizing and reproducing were needed skills, and attribution was generally unnecessary.

But we live in different times, and ever changing ones. Ownership of ideas became important when the invention of the printing press replaced the oral tradition. In our present era, the Internet offers us new challenges to figuring out who owns ideas. In the popular culture, borrowing of words and ideas is a frequent topic of disagreement and discussion—whether of the propriety of popular historians' plagiarizing other sources, the ethics of sampling music and lyrics, or of the ethics of ghost-written "autobiographies" and speeches.

While popular culture may dispute the notion of ownership, academia has firmly embedded that notion. Further, as a matter of common politeness, you should try to give credit to the originators of ideas, difficult though that task may be.

How do I know what citation format to use?

Look at your syllabus. Ask your professor. If for some reason neither of these is an option, remember that at Grinnell, the following formats are common:

Sociology: American Sociological Association format
Psychology: American Psychological Association format
History: Chicago Manual of Style
English: Modern Language Association
Anthropology: Guidelines for Student Papers
Biology: Investigations Booklet

What is common knowledge? What has it got to do with issues of citation?

Common knowledge is information that is so well known and uncontroversial that there is no need to cite a source for it. For example, if you are writing about the arrival of Columbus at the North American continent, you could assume that the basic facts of this events are common knowledge. However, when you discuss the controversies involving that information, for example, whether Columbus was engaging in an exciting voyage of discovery or a cruel colonizing effort or some amalgam of the two, you need to cite your sources.

How do I know what is considered common knowledge?

By working hard, listening carefully, and reasoning clearly. As you study the material in your courses, particularly in introductory courses, think about whether a particular paradigm or view is expressed by several, whether it is described as a common part of the literature, or whether it seems to be attributed to one person. Paying attention to sources should be part of your reading process.

Generally, introductory courses explain the assumptions of such disciplines; that is, they reveal to you both the discipline's arguments and its fault lines. As you learn more about the discipline and the questions it explores, you should begin to understand better what that discipline commonly understands and accepts.

Do I have to cite something that happened in class?

Generally, it's a good idea to keep track of where you learned things, so the default answer to this question is yes. Since you should take notes in class, you should note the person, the date, and the context in which a particular view was given. This guideline applies as well to blackboard or listserv discussions. Check with your professor for a definitive answer for each of your courses.

Do I have to cite myself?

If you published an idea previously (and in this context turning in a paper for a class may be thought of as publishing), then you should cite yourself when you use the same idea in a later paper.

Do I have to cite a newspaper article? A conversation with another person?

Again, on the general presumption that it's best to cite all your sources, the answer is yes.

If I'm getting a whole paragraph or couple of paragraphs from one source, how often do I have to cite the source? Is once at the end enough?

You should cite it as often as you need to in order to make clear to your reader where it comes from and whose idea it is. Think about being the reader of such a paragraph or set of paragraphs. How often would you have to see a source to know what the source of each statement is? Where would you as a reader like to have guideposts as to whose idea you are reading? The answer is probably more than just at the end of a paragraph or a set of paragraphs. Think about a reader asking constantly "Whose idea is this?" and arrange your citations so as to answer that question.

When I have a long quotation or paraphrase that comes from one source, how do I cite if I put a new idea in the middle?

Keep in mind that, if you put your own idea in the middle of those of the other author, the reader must be able to figure out whose ideas are whose. It's a good idea to think about bracketing the sentences that represent the ideas of one source: that is, acknowledge the source both at the beginning and the end of the section taken from that source.

If I download a paragraph or two directly from the Internet, can I just put it in quotation marks, cite the source, and use it in my paper?

Doing so may indicate that you have been honest in a technical kind of way, but it will also show that, as a writer, you have been lazy or careless.

What's the difference between citing and quoting?

Citing means acknowledging the source of the idea and indicating its location so your reader can consult that work. Quoting refers to using the exact words of another source in your writing. When you quote, you must use quotation marks or indentation to indicate that the words are not yours, and you must also cite the source.

Why do some professors criticize my papers for using lots of quotations when others seem to like such use?

Some disciplines focus on language: others value ideas more than language. For example, if you are writing a paper for an English course, chances are that you are analyzing a particular use of language. Therefore you will have to quote at least that piece of language under analysis.

On the other hand, if you are surveying the previous research for a biology research project, chances are that you will spend your time paraphrasing the findings, and you will use few or no direct quotations, although you will of course cite your sources.

Why do different disciplines use different formats for citation?

The answer to this question has to do with the histories of these citation systems and what different disciplines value. You can see in the differences between systems of citation that different disciplines emphasize different characteristics of the sources. For example, note that in the APA format, the date is listed in a much more prominent place than in MLA: APA puts the date immediately after the author's name while MLA puts it after the name, title, and publication information. This difference may indicate that the disciplines differ in their emphasis on when something was published: APA regards that information as more important than does the MLA.

For more information on citation and paraphrase, consult the web page from which this handout was excerpted: <http://www.grinnell.edu/academic/writinglab/ethicaluse/>