

LBCC Writing Center: Citation Basics

Why do we cite?

- To avoid plagiarism.
- To allow readers to easily assess the quality of the research.
- To provide readers the information they need to read more about the topic from one of the sources.

What is plagiarism and why is it important?

Plagiarism is using information, in summary, paraphrase, or direct quotation, from a source without acknowledging that source. To avoid plagiarism, credit must be given when using:

- Direct quotes, both entire sentences and phrases.
- Paraphrases or summarized material.
- Words of terminology specific to or unique to the author's research, theories, or ideas.
- Facts, data (such as numbers and statistics), and images.
- Articles or studies referred to within a text.

Though these are helpful guidelines, students often have questions about common knowledge. These questions are understandable because **common knowledge** is more complex than is sometimes acknowledged. **Common knowledge** is information considered known by almost everyone; we do not need to cite common knowledge.

Some defining characteristics of common knowledge:

- Generally accepted facts. For example: George Washington was the first U.S. president.
- Folklore and common sayings. For example: An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
- Common sense observations. For example: Europe is east of North America.
- Knowledge you can reasonably expect others to know. For example: Walt Disney created Mickey Mouse.
- Facts or information so readily available (in encyclopedias, textbooks) it cannot be said to have one author or researcher. For example: Gravity is what makes a ball thrown into the air fall to the ground.

Refining our understanding of common knowledge:

It is useful to distinguish between general common knowledge and field-specific common knowledge:

- General common knowledge – factual information like the birth and death dates of well-known people, historical events, and military dates; however, specific numbers, such as number of deaths in a battle, need to be cited. Ask this question as a way to test for common knowledge: Can this same undocumented information be easily found in 5 or more credible sources?
- Field-specific common knowledge – “common” as defined within a particular field or specialty. Ask this question as a way to test for field-specific common knowledge: Is this so widely known in the field that the readers will understand it?

One guideline everyone agrees with:

If uncertain about whether specific information is common knowledge, cite the source or check with the instructor. Instructors will be particularly helpful in determining field-specific common knowledge.

Citation Formats

Instructors will usually indicate which format they want students to use. The two most common citation formats are APA and MLA. If allowed to choose, it is best to use the format your major requires, so as to get more practice.

- MLA – (Modern Language Association) is most frequently used in the humanities.
- APA – (American Psychological Association) is most often used in social sciences and the medical field.
- CMS – (Chicago Manual of Style) is frequently used in anthropology and history.
- CSE – (Council of Science Editors, formerly called CBE) is often used in the natural sciences.

Citation includes two important steps:

Sources must be cited in the body of the paper **and** in a separate list at the end of the paper.

Step 1:

In-Text Citation is a kind of shorthand to acknowledge the information source, to indicate the idea is not yours, and to give just enough information to lead the reader to the correct, full citation at the end of the paper.

Basic examples:

- **In MLA format** use the author's last name and a page number, though the author's last name does not have to appear if it is identified in the sentence:
 - Posters should include less information than "in a formal publication" (Pechenik 238).
 - According to Pechenik, posters should include less information than "in a formal publication" (238).
- **In APA format** use the author's last name, the publication date, and the page number of the sources, though the author's last name does not have to appear if it is identified in the sentence:
 - Posters should include less information than "in a formal publication" (Pechenik, 2004, p. 238).
 - According to Pechenik (2004), posters should include less information than "in a formal publication" (p. 238).

Step 2:

A list of complete citations is included at the end of the paper. In the MLA citation system, this list is called "Works Cited" and in the APA system it's called "References." These two include only sources cited in the paper; a "Bibliography" lists all sources consulted when preparing the paper, whether or not the sources are cited within the paper. Since there are many possible references to cite, including electronic sources, students must check style manuals or online citation resources to follow proper format precisely.

Note: Citation styles update occasionally. When styles update, there is sometimes lag time with print style guides. Online formatting sites sometimes have errors. Because of this, we recommend students verify the citation style or website date.

Works Cited

Pechenik, Jan A. *A Short Guide to Writing about Biology*. 5th ed. Pearson Longman, 2004.