

Referencing – an Academic Obligation

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Referencing is the integral part of any academic writing with which each and every scientific researcher or writer must be familiar. The most important characteristic of scholarly writing is that it is to some extent based on previous research within the field or within related fields. References need to be made to all sources that have been used, according to accepted writing standards.¹

In scientific writing, scientists communicate the state of knowledge of a particular topic. In this type of writing, every statement of fact must be supported by a published source for this information.² In academic writing it is obligatory to attribute every piece of material used to its author.

During any research work many ideas or information are used from a number of sources, including books, articles from journals or newspapers and websites in support of the work. Referencing is a standardized method of formatting the information sources one has used in any assignment or written work. It is defined as citing authorities or support for an argument, especially in a book or paper. Evans defined referencing as “the labeling of material you have drawn from other writers with enough information for the reader to be able to locate the source”.³

The material is marked when it is used in text (a citation) and full identification is given at the end (a reference). It is very unfortunate that most of us are so unfamiliar to utter ‘reference’ and ‘bibliography’ that very often we use it at wrong places. References are all the works cited. It is the list of all the information sources cited in the text. Bibliography means all the works consulted that is a list of everything read to prepare the assignment and contains all the items cited ‘plus’ sources that found useful but not cited.

Referencing allows an author to acknowledge the contribution of other writers and researchers in that work and to respect the intellectual property rights of that researcher. As an author or academic we can draw on any of the millions of ideas, insights and arguments published by other writers, many of who have spent years researching and writing. All we need to do is acknowledge their contribution to our assignment / writing.

Referencing is a way to provide evidence to support the assertions and claims in one’s assignments. By citing experts in respective field, an author can show that he is aware of the field in which he is operating. It shows depth and quality of the researcher. Referencing increases and spreads knowledge. References should always be accurate, allowing the readers to trace the sources of information used. Citations also make any writing more authentic and persuasive. It validates arguments.³⁻⁵ Appropriate referencing avoids plagiarism by accurately acknowledging the originator of information or ideas of others.³

References must be

Complete: Full details including author, title, source or URL, place and year of publication, publisher and page numbers may all need to be given (depending on publication type) if available. **Correct:** Readers won’t be able to locate the source if the reference is inaccurate. **Appropriate:** Referencing legitimizes and supports the author’s claims. It also prevents accusations of plagiarism. **Consistent:** One writing task requires a single referencing style to be used throughout; one must not mix and match.³

Different referencing styles

To make the reference list and bibliography consistent there are predefined styles for citation.

Different subjects prefer to use different styles. Individual institute generally stipulates which style to use for any particular subject. A reference style is a set of guidelines for writers. The overall aim of reference styles is to increase readability and clarity of the text, thereby avoiding misunderstandings.¹

Although different reference styles give more or less the same information to the reader, this information is provided in different ways. For instance, in some styles source information is given in the running text, whereas other reference styles rely on a note system. Most reference styles have some kind of reference list containing all sources referred to. Depending on the way in which they record sources, reference styles can be divided into three main categories: documentary notes styles, parenthetical or author-date styles, and numbered styles.¹

Each referencing style includes the following basic information like author's name, title of work, and publication information but organizes it slightly differently. For example to refer a book - author, title of book, place of publication, date of publication. For journal article - author, title of article, title of journal, volume, issue no., page numbers and for website - author (if available), date, title of the source, retrieval information, etc.

Documentary note styles

In documentary note styles references are given in footnotes or endnotes. The notes are indicated by digits, which then recur with the full reference at the bottom of the page (footnote) or after the entire text (endnote). The digit is usually placed after the full stop ending the sentence to which the reference belongs. Oxford and Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) are documentary note reference styles.¹

Parenthetical styles or author-date styles

In parenthetical, or author-date styles, in-text references are given within parentheses before the full stop of the sentence containing the reference. American Psychological Association (APA), Harvard, and Modern Language Association (MLA) are parenthetical reference styles.¹

Numbered styles

In numbered styles, sources are referred to with Arabic numbers within square brackets or in superscript, and the references are listed in a numbered reference list after the text. References are numbered in the order in which they first appear in the text. Vancouver and Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) are numbered styles.¹

Some of the well-known referencing styles

APA: APA is an author/date based style - emphasis is placed on the author and the date of a piece of work to uniquely identify it. Primarily used in the USA.

MLA: MLA is most often applied by the arts and humanities, particularly in the USA.

Chicago and Turabian: These are widely used for history and economics.

Harvard: Harvard is very similar to APA. Mostly used in the UK and Australia, and is encouraged for use with the humanities.

Vancouver: The Vancouver system is mainly used in medical and scientific papers.

It is important to consider the relevance of the references that are being used. In the hope of showing everything that the writer has read, a common beginner's mistake is to insert too many and, thereby, irrelevant references. Another common kind of over-referencing occurs when references are given to facts that can be seen as common knowledge; if readers to whom the text is directed can be expected to know a general fact, no reference is needed. Consequently, writers need to be aware of the audience for which they are writing.¹

Some of the misconducts the authors must be aware of are; Plagiarism - use of any source, published or unpublished, without proper acknowledgement or referencing intentionally or unintentionally. Collusion - unacknowledged collaboration with others. Personation - someone else doing 'your' work. Fraud - fabricating, falsifying or omitting information. Cheating - any deliberate attempt to deceive in order to gain advantage in assessments.⁶

Individual institute must have a defined referencing structure that to be followed by the students and author(s) of articles. Formation of scientific committee, interdepartmental thesis or dissertation presentation, financial and logistic support to conduct institute based original and basic scientific work - all these could help and encourage quality research works and writings.

Delta Med Col J. Jul 2016;4(2):52 – 54

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