

## CITING SOURCES IS A BASIC SKILL LEARNED EARLY ON

Susanmarie Harrington

Citing sources can seem simple: Follow the rules to show readers what you read. Many English classes usually teach a particular system for citing sources designed by, and named after, the Modern Language Association (MLA). College students soon discover that professors working in other disciplines have similar (yet different!) systems for citing sources (one designed by and named after the American Psychological Association, APA, is particularly common). The belief that citing sources is simple can be traced back to formative experiences: Many writers connect their later success to a thorough assignment in middle or high school that required them to use the library, create an extensive bibliography, and write a long paper that used quotations to support their points. People who become expert in a field may not recognize the implicit skills they have developed since that first experience. It can seem almost second nature to follow rules for inserting footnotes, indenting long quotations, and constructing lists of works cited: Citation is merely a matter of following directions.

It turns out it's more complicated than that: All the directions about citing sources assume deep prior knowledge. Citing sources is a specialized, almost ritualized, skill that provides readers with information in specific, routinized ways. Style guides provide rules about everything from how many spaces to put between sentences to how to organize and format the bibliography. Style guides direct academic writers to use footnotes or parenthetical notations, in combination with bibliographies at the end of a piece, to tell readers where information comes from—who wrote it, when, and where it was published. For skilled writers, following complicated rules comes easily—for beginning students, not so much.

Why are these systems so complicated? One reason often emphasized in school is accountability. Citing sources in very particular and detailed ways allows readers to find any source material the writer used, and allows readers to evaluate the quality of the source material the writer used. But complex citation systems have other purposes as well: They let writers demonstrate strong command of highly specialized work. In other words, the rules let writers show expertise.

This expertise unfolds in nuanced ways. Writers choose texts to quote in order to connect themselves to particular traditions of thinking or researching; to put their arguments in the context of other, more prominent authors, whose views are already accepted by readers; or to put forth arguments or examples a writer wants to contest, examine, or elaborate. So, selecting and discussing sources is a matter of savvy diplomacy, persuasion, and argumentation. Sure, it involves learning how to follow detailed directions about how and where to place punctuation in order to indicate where quotations start and end; more importantly, it involves learning how and why writers associate themselves with sources, whether they seek to agree with what they've read, argue with what they've read, or apply what they've read to a new context. It involves understanding that there are reasons for using evidence other than to support a claim; writers might use sources to identify trends in order to argue with them.

## **Capturing Complexity**

Different systems for citing sources may require different formats on the page, but the variation in how research is presented is intellectually even more significant. Humanists generally value work that dwells closely and slowly on particular passages or moments in text, and quotations are to be presented and analyzed. Scientists generally value work that presents trends in phenomena, with previous work grouped and summarized, with far fewer, if any, quotations. There is no simple formula for citing or using sources, or for organization that can teach writers everything there is to know about what they are expected to do.

Will today's seventh graders be prepared to pick up these lessons in college without additional instruction? Probably not, even though the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) *do* put a premium on learning to cite evidence for claims and conclusions. The Reading Standards mention that students should be able to

cite material accurately, and the expectation that students support claims with evidence appears in grades 6 through 12. But the CCSS don't distinguish the ways in which different disciplines might have different ways of approaching the use of sources, and they don't go into detail about the particular conventions writers should follow to cite sources. The CCSS emphasize the kind of close reading that is likely more common in the humanities. So students coming from high school English classes will be prepared to move into college English literature expectations for handling sources—but they may not be prepared to do exactly what a sociology or political science course expects, let alone biology or math.

Students arrive in college prepared not only by high school curriculum standards but also by their experience of reading and writing in the world. In school, the details of citation systems carry authority. Out of school, other strategies help readers evaluate information. Material on the web provides live links rather than formal citations. Journalists don't use parenthetical citation systems to indicate where their information comes from—they simply identify it in the text by putting the source's name and qualification. Graphs and charts, seen in posters, pamphlets, textbooks or journalistic sources, may have a legend identifying the organization that supplied data. Nonfiction books have varied styles for citation—from copious footnotes, extended lists of sources at the back, to a list of works consulted without any attempt to map where they influenced the book. Sometimes experts supply information without citing sources: Reputable food bloggers dispense authoritative information about, say, how to safely can produce without necessarily linking to or identifying the scientific sources for those recommendations. Outside of school, there are many ways to convey credibility and indicate relationships to the sources used for a piece.

Writing with authority is complicated and needs to be learned anew in each situation: successful writing isn't just about following rules, but about establishing connections among readers and writers. Writing with sources is about participation in ongoing conversations, situated in the complex, messy politics of social networks.

## Further Reading

Lionel Anderson and Katherine Schulten's blog, "The Learning Network," published in the *New York Times*, discusses the complications of citing sources and plagiarism in high-profile cases in

journalism, politics, music, and comedy. For a look at how context matters in how citations work, see Chris Anson and Shawn Neely's discussion of citation in writing for the U.S. Army and at West Point: "The Army and the Academy as Textual Communities: Exploring Mismatches in the Concepts of Attribution, Appropriation, and Shared Goals," published in *Kairos*. Linda Adler-Kassner, Chris Anson, and Rebecca Moore Howard discuss the ways we should look beyond traditional school expectations to learn how writers in many contexts—such as government work and agricultural extension sites—attribute information. See their essay "Framing Plagiarism" in the collection *Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism: Teaching Writing in the Digital Age* (University of Michigan Press).

To learn more about the many reasons writers cite sources, see Amy Robillard's essay, "Young Scholars Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Citation Practices," published in *College English*. For a historical take on this point, see Robert J. Connors's "The Rhetoric of Citation Systems, Part II: Competing Epistemic Values in Citation" (Rhetoric Review). Connors's historical study illustrates the ways citation styles have shifted over time, influenced by arguments in professional associations. Citation styles have never been simple and obvious; they change over time.

For a look at how one university helpfully introduces students to writing effectively with sources, see Gordon Harvey's material for the Harvard Expository Writing Program: *Writing with Sources, A Guide for Harvard Students*.

## Keywords

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## Author Bio

Susanmarie Harrington is professor of English and director of Writing in the Disciplines at the University of Vermont. She has taught researched writing for over twenty years, teaching at all levels from first-year students to graduate students. She has collaborated with faculty across the disciplines in workshops and teaching, and she has taught in both urban and rural institutions. Most recently, she has worked with librarians, faculty in the disciplines, and the writing center to promote attention to department-based learning outcomes for students. She has co-edited and co-authored many different types of publications, working with quantitative

and qualitative methods. Her variety of writing experiences and working relationships with faculty in many departments inspired her interest in citation and research development.