Citation and Referencing Strategies for Secondary and Post-Secondary Students

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to present some guidelines and strategies for citation and referencing in research papers, term papers and theses. The assumed audience is secondary school, college and university students, but the strategies outlined are useful and pertinent in all instances where research is involved, and are therefore applicable in all contexts ranging from the purely avocational to the professional.

It should be noted that this essay is *not* a style manual focused narrowly on the formatting and mechanics of citations and references. Many excellent style manuals are already available for this purpose, including the perennially popular *Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago 2003; see also Turabian 1996), the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (Gibaldi 1998) and the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (Gibaldi 2003). Every serious student should have at least one of these useful volumes within reach while conducting research and writing papers. Usefully, the University of Chicago (www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq) and the Modern Language Association (www.mla.org/style_faq) maintain lists of frequently asked questions about style guidelines on their Web sites.

Students should consult with their teachers or professors for the citation styles supported by their institution and/or discipline, but it is generally the case that Modern Language Association (MLA) style is favored in the humanities (especially literature and language studies), while Chicago style predominates in the social sciences and natural sciences. Both styles are alike in permitting parenthetical citations of sources in the main body of a text, keying these citations to an alphabetized list of references at the end of the work (i.e., "references cited," "bibliography" or "works cited"). One important difference is that MLA style advocates the citation of only the author's name and the page number within parenthetical citations, whereas Chicago style incorporates the author's name, date of publication and page number. The MLA system therefore underspecifies the precise work under discussion, while the date of publication is a useful, minimally specific feature that enhances the readers' recognition of well known sources (e.g., Stuart 1987) without unduly interrupting reading or necessitating tedious cross-checking of authors' names against the list of references cited. (It might be mentioned that the MLA system allows for the citation of shortened versions of the title when multiple works by the same author are involved, but this arguably interrupts the text even more than the regular and repeated insertion of a publication date.) In any event, since *Mesoweb* specializes in the anthropological and historical exploration of Mesoamerican cultures, we favor a somewhat modified Chicago style widely used in anthropology, archaeology and history (see e.g., Society for American

Archaeology 2005, American Anthropological Association 2005).

Plagiarism and Academic Responsibility

In contrast to the style manuals discussed above, this essay focuses less on the mechanics of citation (though some of this is unavoidable) than on guidelines and strategies for the responsible conduct of research, and on the proper reflection of such research in citation and referencing. Central to this aim is the understanding that "[b]y definition, a research paper involves the assimilation of prior scholarship and entails the responsibility to give proper acknowledgement whenever one is indebted to another for either words or ideas" (Turabian 1996:74). Scholars must acknowledge their intellectual debts to predecessors, teachers and colleagues by meticuously documenting the origins of each and every discrete idea in their writing (though see below for the very few exceptions to this practice). As Joseph Gibaldi (1998:151) has usefully noted, "[w]henever you draw on another's work, you must specify what you borrowed—whether facts, opinions, or quotations—and where you borrowed it from." Failure to give due credit to all "facts, opinions, or quotations" borrowed from others constitutes *plagiarism*, a serious violation of professional ethics.

Two common complaints among students are that plagiarism is somehow "vaguely defined," and that the origins of their ideas are not always clear to them. Related to the latter, because of the uncertainty about what constitutes "common knowledge," is the curious notion that only facts and figures need to be cited and referenced. Yet all three of these propositions are entirely without merit.

First, *plagiarism* is easily defined as "the appropriation of someone else's ideas or writings" (Webster's Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary 1990:1294).* To put this even more simply: if you did not come up with an idea on your own (or even if you believe that you did, but have since realized that others came up with it before you did), then you are morally and professionally enjoined to provide your readers with the source from which you drew the idea (or the source that beat you to it). Some have defined plagiarism technically as a string of three or more words borrowed from another source without acknowledgement, while others would argue that the unacknowledged borrowing of as little as two words or even a single distinctive term constitutes plagiarism (Dresner 2003; see also Jack Smith, quoted in Dresner 2003). But such quantitative measures of intellectual indebtedness should not obscure the key issue, which is simply that "[t]he reader must be able to tell the difference between your work and those of your sources. Anything less than full disclosure; anything less than absolute clarity in distinction between your work and borrowed material, is plagiarism" (Dresner 2003). You should never allow anyone to gather the false impression that an idea, apt expression, or string of words originates with you when it does not. If in doubt, cite generously. It never hurts to give someone else appropriate credit.

The second complaint, that one cannot always remember the source of one's ideas, is nothing less than a dereliction of one's duties as a scholar. Can you imagine a fishmonger who doesn't know one type of fish from another? As a student, you work in a world of

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* For what it's worth, the English word *plagiarize* derives from Latin *plagiarius* "kidnapper," itself from *plagium* "kidnapping," ultimately from Latin *plaga* "net" (Webster's Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary 1990:1294; and see also Gibaldi 1998:151). The etymology should make the criminal implications of the act clear. Plagiarism is nothing less than intellectual kidnapping, coupled with subsequent nurturing of the ill-gotten offspring as one's own.

ideas, and it is your responsibility to know where each and every one of those ideas come from. If in doubt about the origin of an idea, spend some time researching it at the library or on the Internet. (This is the least you can do.) If still in doubt, ask a research librarian for assistance. (They are always delighted to help.) If you've exhausted these sources (but only once you've exhausted them) then you can always ask your teacher or professor for help in resolving your conundrum. Yes, it's hard work tracking down pertinent references for your assignments, but at least you can console yourself with the consideration that others are (or will be) working just as hard to cite your own intellectual contributions properly.

A common misapprehension, stemming perhaps from the compact and easily verifiable nature of numerical information, is that only facts and figures need to be cited and referenced. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As outlined above, any idea, concept or combination of words borrowed from someone else (even if paraphrased so completely that no two words from the original source appear alongside one another in your paper) must be credited to the source from which they come. Again, as an inhabitant of the world of ideas, you must know the sources of those ideas and give full and complete documentation of them for the benefit of your readers.

As with almost all rules, there are at least a few exceptions. As Gibaldi (1998:151) notes, "you rarely need to give sources for familiar proverbs ('You can't judge a book by its cover'), well known quotations ('We shall overcome'), or common knowledge ('Shakespeare was born during the Elizabethan age')." Nevertheless, even exceptions have exceptions, and the sources and origins of familiar proverbs and well known quotations may need to be documented if they are a major focus of your paper or of importance to a line of argumentation. Similarly, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of "common knowledge," and opinion can vary widely as to how "common" a particular observation or demonstration is. A good rule of thumb is to honestly ask yourself how you came upon the proverb, quote or fact in question. If you first came across it during your research, then be honest enough to admit it, no matter how commonplace the item may seem in retrospect. (An important consideration here is that your teacher or professor will not think less of you for honestly acknowledging your sources. But the reverse is not true, and you will be hard pressed to find a teacher or professor who tolerates academic dishonesty.)

Equally important is that you do not confuse a proverb, quote or fact with its connection to your topic—e.g., "it's often said that you can't judge a book by its cover, but Richard P. Feynman found that this was precisely how the California State Board of Education has been selecting its secondary school textbooks" (Feynman 1985:288-302). If you are not the first to make the connection between your topic and the proverb, quote or fact in question—or in fact between any ideas or thoughts which you include in your paper— then you must credit the source or sources. Note also that it does not matter how evident or straightforward the linkage may seem in retrospect; all that matters is that you honestly acknowledge where you first read, heard or otherwise became aware of the link or links being made. Scrupulous academic honesty is not always easy or flattering, since it can make one appear a bumbling idiot unable to make the most elementary of deductions without assistance. Yet such honesty brings its own rewards, including the respect and trust of teachers, colleagues and friends.

The Importance of Taking Notes

It should be evident at this point that proper citation and referencing is not just a crucial concern in the writing of term papers, research papers and theses. Rather, careful and meticulous acknowledgement of your sources should characterize all of your academic work, and should begin in the earliest stages of research. (Sometimes, as will be evident in a moment, such documentation may take months, years or even decades before its full usefulness is revealed). Whenever you are exposed to a new idea, to a novel series of connections between old ideas, or even to a particularly clear demonstration of a well known fact or theory, you should make a detailed note of it. It cannot be stressed enough that, as a scholar (whose world is composed of ideas and their interrelationships) you are responsible for understanding the origins and developments of these ideas, connections and demonstrations. Further, since your mind is your chief asset in academic pursuits, it will greatly repay your vigilance to pay some attention to what it absorbs from the world around you. Just as a star athlete cautiously monitors her dietary intake and exercise regimen, so too do you have a duty to monitor and make note of the sources and reliability of the ideas, connections and demonstrations you take up from your reading and research.

In this way, it can be argued that diligent note taking and organized file keeping, coupled with scrupulous academic honesty, are your best defense against wasteful reduplication of previous effort, accidental misappropriation of another's intellectual property, and tedious hunting for a fact remembered in a source unrecalled. Simply put, it is never too early to begin making careful and detailed notes. You can never tell when a paper you've read for first-year history will become pertinent to a senior undergraduate thesis in sociology, to a dissertation in anthropology some ten years later, or to a published paper in economics thirty years down the line. As a student in the twenty-first century, you have been given the extraordinarily rare privilege of spending many years of your life in academic and personal discovery. But with this privilege comes the awesome responsibility of documenting your learning process as conscientiously and meticulously as possible.

What to Cite and How to Cite It

Now we come to the core of this essay. This section aims to provide you with a rationale for citation and referencing, and some strategies for citing different types of information appropriately.

Parenthetical Citations and Reference Lists

Because term papers are frequently assigned with minimum page counts and a suggested number of references, students inevitably assume that the length of the paper and the number of sources cited (i.e., the quantity of text and the number of sources employed) are more important than the ideas weighed and discussed, and the success with which an independent conclusion is reached (i.e., the quality of the research and writing). But the numbers of pages and sources suggested by your teacher or professor are, all else being equal, only a very rough approximation of the size and scope of your investigation. No one can honestly say how much space or how many sources will be needed for a particular topic until your research has actually been carried out, at which point you will

probably have looked at many more sources than you will actually be able to cite (though you must, of course, properly cite everything you actually end up using, and you should keep notes on everything anyway, since you can never tell when the information you gather will prove useful).

To begin with, while a list of references is a necessary part of citing your sources, it is not in itself a sufficient acknowledgement of the scope and nature of your borrowing of ideas from others. That is, "[y]ou must indicate to your readers not only what works you drew from but also exactly what you derived from each source and exactly where in the work you found the material" (Gibaldi 1998:230). This is why the "bibliography" (or list of books) has largely become a thing of the past in academic writing, replaced by a list of "references cited" or "works cited" (the latter being a somewhat more inclusive category, and drawing on unpublished or non-print sources of information). The key word is *cited*, and directly reflects the consideration that every book, article or other source listed in the references is in fact *cited* in the body of your paper (and vice versa). This is accomplished by inserting a parenthetical citation directly into the body of your paper wherever you have used someone else's words or ideas. The format of the citation, its level of specificity, and the extent of its integration with your own text is largely up to you, but the citation must include at least the last name of the author, the date of publication and the page number. Compare the following three ways of citing essentially the same idea from the same source:

> Given that most grammatical suffixes seem to be indicated by phonetic signs, "we must realize that there may be no such thing as a 'verbal suffix' sign in the Maya script" (Stuart 1987:45).

> As David Stuart (1987:45) has pointed out, given that most grammatical suffixes seem to be indicated by phonetic signs, "we must realize that there may be no such thing as a 'verbal suffix' sign in the Maya script."

> Most verbal suffixes seem to be indicated by phonetic signs, and so we ought to consider that Maya signs may never have been equated with grammatical suffixes *per se* (Stuart 1987:45).

Note the direct relationship between what you integrate with your text and what you place in parentheses. Thus, when an author's name appears in the text, it can be omitted from the parentheses. Note also how the parenthetical citation typically moves with the name of the author. This is not a hard and fast rule, but with experience you will find that the frequent appearance of authors' names alongside dates and page numbers is habituating, and that its absence can make a passage seem uncomfortable and odd:

> As David Stuart has pointed out, given that most grammatical suffixes seem to be indicated by phonetic signs, "we must realize that there may be no such thing as a 'verbal suffix' sign in the Maya script" (1987:45).

Here, despite their proximity to the actual quoted text, the parenthetical date and page number seem almost orphaned from the reference to the author. But whatever your choice of citation strategy (and there are many more ways to integrate your text with citations than we can possibly cover here), your readers are now free to dredge "Stuart" and "1987"

out of their memories and recognize the reference; it turns out to be a seminal monograph, with which most scholars in the field are intensely familiar. At minimum, however, a reader will at least be able to turn to your alphabetically organized "references cited," look up "Stuart" and "1987," and find full information on the title, place of publication and publisher:

> Stuart, David
> 1987 *Ten Phonetic Syllables.* Research Reports on Ancient Maya
> Writing 14. Washington, D.C.: Center for Maya Research.

It is the close integration of the in-text citations and the end-of-text references that distinguishes this type of citation and referencing strategy. These are not hoary traditions carried over from the scrivenings of the Latin-besotted monks of Mediaeval Europe. (Indeed, a most vexatious aspect of the study of mediaeval manuscripts is precisely a lack of adequate intertextual referencing.) Rather, these two systems have been carefully designed in modern times by the University of Chicago and the Modern Language Association to balance ease and economy of reading with full and appropriate acknowledgement of sources.

The golden rules of in-text citations are two in number: (1) these must directly reference items in your "references cited" list, and (2) these should be as brief and unobtrusive as possible, though they must at least include the page number of any words or ideas borrowed from the source. (Note that more information might be necessary or desirable, like the volume number of a multi-volume work, but generally speaking the year and page number will suffice.) Too much information in the body of the text and the reader's eye becomes lost in a welter of parentheses, italicized titles and numeration. Too little, and the reader must page back to the references section with each and every citation, even for well known works.

In the hands of a practiced writer, this system of citations and references can be a thing of beauty, seamlessly interweaving novel prose and argumentation with the barest essentials of academic citation. Feel free to experiment with the almost limitless possibilities of integrating citations with your text. In time, you will come to feel quite at home in this system of citations. As a writer, you will learn to place parenthetical citations at natural junctures of the text, where a pause for breath might naturally occur, or where a subordinate clause articulates with the main sentence, and you will learn to focus text on particularly important citations. As a reader, you will quickly come to know the "greatest hits" of your own field with but the barest of hints (a last name and date of publication), and you will become surprised at your capacity to recall the key points made in a source by page number alone.

It is this close integration of citation and reference that compels further honesty in the compilations of a list of "references cited." That is, unless your teacher or professor has specifically asked to see a list of "works consulted," do not be tempted to "pad" your references by including every conceivable item related to your topic. Doing so leaves you open to a charge of sloppy editing at best, or to one of plagiarism at worst, since sources will appear in your "references cited" that are not actually credited in the text. Similarly, do not resort to the age-old tricks of citation, such as citing a large list of irrelevant sources in a single, lengthy citation:

> Many authors use the word "and" in their publications (e.g., Gibaldi 1998, 2003; Harnack and Kleppinger 2003; Stuart 1987).

Not only are such constructions distracting to the reader, but your teachers and professors are well aware of these and other methods of "padding" your references (no matter how much more deftly you think you can handle it). Further, it is unfair to the authors to cobble their works together in a big pile with other sources, and it is simply not worth the effort. An honest reading of almost any text is practically guaranteed to give you something worth citing, and a real citation—reflecting some careful consideration of the author's arguments and how they relate to your own topic—will carry far more weight with your teacher or professor than any dozen occurrences of "padding."

Quotations and Paraphrasing

In general, quotations are not so widely used in the social sciences and natural sciences as they are in literature, language studies and the humanities. The reasons are obvious, since the latter more typically revolve around the quoted text itself as an object of study, therefore necessitating numerous, occasionally complicated conventions for the accurate and consistent transcriptions of prose, poetry, dramatic works and other, similar sources (see Gibaldi 1998:102-115). By contrast, the former focus on the cited text more as a medium for the expression of ideas which ultimately take their meaning from elsewhere, whether from the evidence underlying authorial assertions, or the data undergirding a logical proof.

More importantly, and regardless of the discipline, most teachers and professors do not like to see lengthy and repeated quotations. Not only do these inevitably detract attention from the original work of the student, but it is practically impossible to find relevant quotations that are directly compatible with a student's writing style (or with that of other authors whose works may be quoted nearby). Such considerations underscore the importance of *paraphrasing* to the student's arsenal of citation strategies.

Paraphrasing is defined as the "restatement of a text or passage in another form or other words, often to clarify meaning" (Webster's 1990:1233). Properly handled, a paraphrase can adapt the meaning of another author's text without the radical departure in prose style and word choice usually occasioned by lengthy quotation. Do note, however, that changing a few words or grammatical constructions, or simply altering the order of items discussed in a sentence, is not paraphrasing. (Remember that if two or more words from the source remain together, they must be enclosed in quotation marks.) Simply put, then, paraphrasing is nothing less than the translation into another idiom of someone else's ideas. Since even the best paraphrases still require a parenthetical citation, however, many students feel tempted to simply quote the original and leave it at that. But this misses the opportunity to truly incorporate the thoughts of other scholars into your work (with adequate citation, of course). Also, many students are surprised to find how much better they understand another author's work once they have "put it into their own words."

Personal communications

Many students are confused by what constitutes a personal communication, and have

not always been instructed how precisely to cite and reference one. In general, a personal communication is any idea, fact or quote which comes not from a published or broadcast source, but directly from the originator to you (e.g., as an email communication, letter, telephone conversation, classroom lecture, hallway conversation at a conference, etc.) Note that it is not so much the medium of the communication as it is the context, since an email you have printed out is still to be considered as an email rather than a text (at least for the purposes of citation) and is therefore cited differently from an unpublished manuscript that has been circulated to more than one individual.

With the occasional exception of theses, dissertations and special citational contexts like tables and charts, personal communications are rarely included in reference lists anymore, but must nevertheless be acknowledged in the body of the paper. Because there is no corresponding entry in the "references cited," an in-text personal communication tends to be more detailed and lengthy than a typical citation. Given that personal communications are often the first appearances of someone else's intellectual property in print, however, a generous and specific in-text citation is the least the recipient can do to acknowledge the originator. Such citation can be handled as follows:

> In an e-mail message to the author on August 1, 2004, David Stuart mentioned that...

Or the reference can be given parenthetically:

> As David Stuart (personal communication, August 1, 2004) mentioned to me in an email...

Or, after suitable discussion of the thought or idea in the main body of the text, the reference may be given in a footnote:

> 1. David Stuart, e-mail message to author, August 1, 2004.

As with all in-text citations, there is ample room for artful maneuvering with respect to their integration with the text. Note too that not all disciplines employ precisely the same degree of specificity in referencing the date of the personal communication. (In anthropology, for instance, the year alone is frequently cited). Given the highly variable conventions for citing personal communications, it is probably best if you check with your teacher and/or institution to see if they express a particular preference.

Electronic Sources

The citation of electronic sources occasionally seems even more dauntingly variable than for personal communications, and this despite the increasingly important role of Internet sites and electronic publishing in the academic world. Nevertheless, some broad outlines for the proper citation of electronic sources can be given here, provided we do not dip too deeply into the bewildering mechanics of the citation process.

Two common complaints that educators have about the Internet are: (1) the instability of some Web sites, and (2) the frequent unreliability and outdated nature of its sources. Because of these concerns, students should check with their teachers and professors as

to whether they even allow the citation of electronic sources. (Note that many professors maintain a list of stable, reliable Web sites which they will be more than happy to share with their students.) Pay particular attention to the dates when material was posted on a site, and try to get an impression of the frequency with which material is updated. The best sites update on a weekly or even daily basis, and regularly annotate and update previous postings to keep them timely.

Regardless of whether or not a site is frequently or infrequently updated, however, most citation styles insist on a clear record of the URL (or Web address) at which the source was consulted (with or without the http:// prefix). If the source is subject to periodic revision, then you should note the date on which you accessed it. Thus, a typical parenthetical citation and associated reference for a periodically updated online article might appear as follows:

> The putative discovery of early Olmec writing was reported by the New York Times, the United Press International and other print and electronic news agencies (Skidmore 2005).

> Skidmore, Joel
> 2005 Evidence for Olmec Writing? *Mesoweb Reports & News*: www.mesoweb.com/reports/writing.html. 20 Feb., 2005.

The parenthetical citation is typical of that for published sources, minus the notation of page numbers (which simply do not exist in electronic sources). If there is no readily apparent date on the cited Web page, then the default date is that of accessing the document, in which case it's recommended by some style guides that the Month and Day be provided in the parenthetical citation as well (as with the inherently unstable and undocumented personal communications.)

Some citation styles recommend that the URL be encased in angle brackets (e.g., <www.mesoweb.com/reports/writing.html>) or that the http:// prefix be included in the citation of the URL (e.g., Harnack and Kleppinger 2003). The former seems to have been predicated on the notion that readers would be unable to properly discern where an URL begins or ends without some orthographic guide, a concern belied by rapidly growing Internet literacy (and see Li and Crane 1996:3-8). As to the inclusion of the increasingly predictable http:// prefix, this still seems common, especially in the Chicago style and its derivatives (see e.g., Harnack and Kleppinger 2003), but this too seems unnecessary, and it is a reasonable prediction that this convention will recede as the http protocol continues to dominate file retrieval systems which once saw far more active use of FTP and Telnet (Li and Crane 1996:7).

For sources republished in electronic format (but not subject to revision), some indication of the original source and the actually consulted source is necessary:

> Stuart, David
> 2005(2004) New Year Records in Classic Maya Inscriptions. *The PARI Journal* 5(2):1-6. Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, San Francisco. Electronic version of original 2004 publication: www.mesoweb.com/pari/publications journal/0502/NewYear.pdf.

Note that in such cases the date of access is not necessary, since the citation is predicated on two distinct, stable sources with clear publication dates.

Finally, for sources published directly on the Web and not subject to revision, only the date of Web publication is needed:

> Stuart, David
> 2002 Glyphs for "Right" and "Left"? *Mesoweb*:
> www.mesoweb.com/stuart/notes/RightLeft.pdf.

"Stable" articles such as the two previously cited examples can usually be recognized by their formats. Thus, .pdf documents cannot be easily edited or altered, whereas .html or .doc files are more readily subject to revision. For most purposes, then, you can treat a .pdf document as a stable source, whereas most other sources should be regarded as unstable, and therefore requiring some mention of the date on which they were accessed. In such instances, as Li and Crane (1996:7) note, "[t]he access date validates the existence of a cited file at a given time. It also indicates, although indirectly, the possible version of a database when that becomes difficult to determine."

Further help in navigating the complicated questions of citing electronic sources can be found in Harnack and Kleppinger's (2003) useful *Online! A Reference Guide to Using Internet Sources*. This is available both in hard copy and in a searchable online format (www.bedfordstmartins.com/online) and contains useful guidelines for the citation of Web pages in Chicago, MLA and other popular styles. Similarly, Li and Crane (1996) provide a thoroughgoing discussion of Web citation from the perspective of MLA and American Psychological Association (APA) styles.

Final Considerations

It cannot be stressed enough that citation and referencing comprise but one small part of a larger tool kit designed to help students conduct their research honestly and responsibly, and to accurately reflect that level of research in their writing. Note taking and file keeping were highlighted as particularly important ways of maintaining adequate records on the authorship and origination of ideas, facts and quotations to which students are exposed on a daily basis. With diligence and perseverance, and close attention to the stylistic and substantive usage of predecessors, teachers, and colleagues, students should be able to build on the few suggestions made above, and to refine and amplify them with the particular conventions of their own disciplines.

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