



Off the Charts

Reference Readiness

By Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Health Services Administration

September 17, 2017 <http://drexel.edu/cnhp/news/current/archive/2017/September/2017-09-17-reference-readiness/>

You've made it to grad school. Congratulations! Ok, so during the summer you did not invest time learning about proper citation and reference style...Spent your days surfing Mavericks, climbing the Rockies, or basking in the Florida sun? That's understandable, but without a doubt knowing proper citation and reference style will save you much time and anguish as you write away these next few years. Frankly, the faculty expect you to not only know how to write well, but to cite and reference your work. They will not be teaching you, and they will be unforgiving, if this is not done right. (Yes, you lose points in this area.) Don't panic. Here's a starter kit to get you going.

There are actually good reasons why members of professions and disciplines use standard documentation in their writing. It was not invented to torture students. The accuracy and consistency facilitates ease of communication among a community of scholars, in the writing and reading of work and helps with validation and continued research in an area of study. Being disciplined about standard documentation is worth it, as it will help you in your future coursework and with your own research journey. It is part of your orientation and training in any field and is expected of any professional. Learning standard documentation increases your value to publishers when writing for publication.

What standard documentation style should I use? This may seem to be an elementary question but check and double check with one who speaks officially for the department. Don't rely on "conventional commentary" of your peers. Departments or programs should have an agreed upon citation and reference style (e.g. APA, MLA, Chicago/Turabian, AMA, New England Journal).

Should I buy the book? Of course! There are several good resources on the web for sure, and each sponsoring organization has an online resource, but there is still no substitute for the actual manual. Experts put a lot of thought and time in the scope and sequence of this content. In the end, "the book" has the final say on what is correct. There is plenty of room for error with some online sources, even a journal's "guide to authors" website. Buying the book is a useful investment. Do it early on.

Do I read the book cover to cover? No. These manuals are not like the cheap dime novels. The material is weighty. Open the book each time you want to know how to do something in standard documentation. You will find yourself opening the book again and again. That's ok. Don't try to memorize rules. Think concepts!

The basics... Regardless of source and style, keep in mind that any reference needs the following components identified and accurate.

- Author
- Year
- Title of Artifact (book, article, painting, etc.)
- Source/Place (e.g. publisher)
- Other.... Page #, doi, etc. (sometimes)

You can get lost in all the rules of punctuation. Think conceptually, first. Ask, what information do I need and for what purpose does it help the reader?

In-text Citations and References: The bulk of your time will be spent learning the rules of these two components of your writing. Students are surprised to find that a documentation style manual has so much information, e.g. writing style, headings, figures, formatting, even voice, but get familiar with in-text citation and references first.

The Nuance of the Nuances. Even the most seasoned academic writers look up “how to do” proper documentation style when writing articles for books and journals. There are so many nuances. Truth be told, there are few “experts” on the subject. This is what copy editors do for a living. The best writers have their work copy edited in this area. But as a student, you must give it the ol' college try.

How to deal with “Who's right?” As mentioned above, there are few experts among us. The faculty, and your peers, have varying degrees of knowledge on proper documentation style. Faculty may have varying expectations to how perfect your documentation needs to be. In fairness to them, you cannot be too persnickety in this area. At some level every mark or missing piece of information is important. The whole point of standard documentation is getting it right! Accuracy is important throughout the knowledge generation and dissemination process. However, at some point you may have to acquiesce to please the instructor, and the one who ultimately will be grading your work. In the publishing world, the writer/editor relationship should be a conversation. This will be more of an art in the teaching/learning process.

Take a Developmental Approach. As time goes by you will naturally pick up the rules. It is easy to despair and not advance in this area but resist the temptation. Many will succumb to this pitfall. Standard documentation is a matter of discipline and perseverance. Both are good traits for a successful graduate student.