2.6: Correct citation builds trust and authority

When my son started figuring out how to do things (open the child locks on the cabinet, for example, or make his own toast), I would tease him by asking “Who taught you how to do that? Or did you just wake up and know it?” Now, he teases me whenever I ask him where he learned some fact about animals or when he comes home showing off a Fortnite dance, telling me “I just woke up and I knew it.”

In college, no one expects you to just wake up and know things. You are expected to read texts and know things, and you are expected to know from which text you learned things. I didn't realize it at the time, but what I was trying to teach my son was the importance of citation.

What is Citation?

For college-level work, this generally means two things: in-text or parenthetical citation and a “Works Cited” or “References” page. What these two things look like will be a little different for different types of classes (for example, it’s likely your writing class will use MLA—Modern Language Association—format, while a psychology class is more likely to use APA—American Psychological Association—format). The specific details required and the order in which they appear changes a little between different formats, but practicing one of them will give you a general idea of what most of them are looking for. All of the information we are looking at here is specific to MLA, which is the format you will use for your writing classes.

In-Text and Parenthetical Citations

Once you have brought source material into your writing (via quotation, summary, or paraphrase), you must cite it. This is essential because giving credit to the creator of the source material helps you avoid plagiarism. Properly used
citations also help your reader understand which written content is from a source and which represents your ideas. Sometimes you can accomplish this simply by mentioning the author or title of a source in the body of your writing, but other times you’ll handle in-text citation differently, with a parenthetical citation (Parenthetical means that the citation appears in parentheses in the text of your essay).

A starting point for parenthetical citations is that they include the author’s last name and the page number where the borrowed information came from. For example, let’s say I’m using material from an article written by Lisa Smith. It’s in a physical magazine and spans pages 38-42. If, on page 41, she says something like, “While most studies have shown that Expo dry erase markers have superior lasting power, erasability, and color saturation than other brands on the market, their higher cost is a concern for some consumers,” I might incorporate that into a paper like this:

According to Lisa Smith, Expo markers are clearly the favored option by most measurable standards (41).

The first time that you mention a source in your writing, you should introduce the speaker and, if possible, the title of the source as well. Use the speaker’s full name (e.g. “According to Jonas Fogbottom . . .”) the first time you introduce them; if you mention them again in the paper, use their last name only (e.g. “Fogbottom goes on to discuss . . .”).

Or you could incorporate it like this:

By most measurable standards, Expo markers are clearly the favored option (Smith 41).

If there are two authors, list both (with a page number, if available). If there are three or more authors, list the first author only and add "et al." (with a page number, if available):

(Smith and Jones 24)

(Smith et al. 62)

If you are using an electronic source or another kind of source with no page numbers, just leave the page number out:

(Fogbottom)

If a source doesn't have an author (because many useful documents, like government publications, organizational reports, and surveys, don't list their authors) simply use the title of the source (article, chapter, graph, film, etc.) in the place where you would have used the author's name. If the title is long, you should abbreviate by listing the first one or two words of it (with a page number, if available). Let’s imagine you’re working with a newspaper article entitled, “What’s New in Technology,” enclosed in quotation marks to indicate that this is an article title, and with no known author. Here’s what that would look in a parenthetical citation:

(“What’s New” B6)

On rare occasions you will need to use both the author and the title. For example, if you have two different sources by the same author, you would distinguish between them by using the name and the title:

(Smith "Archetypes" 56)

(Smith "Star Wars")
The parenthetical citation should be added at the end of the sentence that contains the source material.

“Poodle grooming is a labor of love. It takes years of practice to be good at it, but once learned, it’s a fun and worthwhile career” (Fogbottom).

Or

Although it takes a long time to become a skilled poodle groomer, it’s well worth the effort and leads to a good career (Fogbottom).

If using parenthetical citations is easy, why would we bother with using introduction or linking language to identify sources?

Good question! There would be nothing wrong with only using parenthetical citations all the way through your writing—it would absolutely do the job of citing the material. But, it wouldn’t read smoothly and would feel somewhat rough because every time a parenthetical citation popped up, the reader would be “stopped” in place for a moment. Using a combination of introduction, linking language, and parenthetical citation, as needed, makes the writing smoother and easier to read. It also integrates the source material with the writer’s ideas. We call this synthesis, and it’s part of the craft of writing.

**Attributive Language and Signal Phrases**

This simply means using words that show the reader you are still talking about a source that you just mentioned. For example, you might use linking language that looks something like this:

Fogbottom also explains . . .

Fogbottom continues . . .

By using this kind of language, you make it clear to the reader that you’re still talking about a source. And while you’ll use this type of language throughout any researched essay whether you’re also using parenthetical citations or not, as we mentioned above, sometimes this linking language will be all you need for in-text citation.

In the article, “Grooming Poodles for Fun and Profit,” Jonas Fogbottom says that although it takes a long time to become a skilled poodle groomer, it’s well worth the effort and leads to a good career. Fogbottom goes on to explain how one is trained in the art of dog and poodle grooming, and he provides a set of resources for people who want to know more about a dog grooming career.

Using the linking language makes it absolutely clear to your reader that you are still talking about a source.

**Works Cited Entries**

Whatever comes first in the Works Cited citation is what will go into the parentheses in a parenthetical citation. Most
often that item is an author’s last name, but sometimes it’s a title or abbreviated title of an article or other type of text. This is another good reason for starting by creating a Works Cited entry the moment you begin working with a source.

At the end of texts that have drawn from existing sources, you will often find a Works Cited page. This page gives more information than the parenthetical citations do about what kinds of sources were referenced in this work and where they can be found if the reader would like to know more about them. These entries all follow a specific and consistent format so that it is easy for readers to find the information they are looking for and so the shape and type of that information is consistent no matter who is writing the entries.

Until recently, the MLA required a slightly different format for every type of source—an entry for a Youtube video required certain information that was different from an entry for a book that was different from an entry for an online article. The most recent version of MLA, though—MLA 8—has simplified this so there is just one format rather than many. Include as much of the information as is relevant for your particular source.

Author. "Title of Source." Container, contributors, volume and issue numbers, publisher, publication date, location.

For more information on Citation and Works Cited, please visit a page like the University of North Carolina Library's Citation Guide

Here are a few basic rules for formatting titles:

• Article and chapter titles are placed in quotation marks. So are song titles, television episode titles, poems, and short stories.

• Containers are always italicized. Anything that holds other sources is a container: a website, a book of poems or essays, an music album, a television series. But movies and video games are also italicized because they are not held in a container, so they are considered containers.

• Whenever possible, follow the capitalization of the source in its original form. In general (but not always), every word in a title is capitalized except for conjunctions (small joining words like and, but, or if), articles (a, an, and the), and prepositions (words that show position, like above, on, and between). Also, don’t capitalize “to” when it’s part of a verb (to Learn, to Practice, etc.).

• If a colon is used within the title, the word after the colon is always capitalized, e.g., Raising Golden Retrievers: An Exercise in Power Vacuuming.

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Citation Generators

A citation generator is a piece of software that creates a Works Cited list for the writer. The writer types in the details about the source, and the citation generator creates the citations and the Works Cited list. Some of them also create in-text (parenthetical) citations.

Sounds too good to be true, yes? That’s because it is.

Citation generators are always improving, but I have yet to find a citation generator that works correctly all of the time for every source. Most make at least a couple of errors—often more—which means you end up having to go back and manually correct the source. And this means that if you would have just created your own source citation in the
beginning, you would have saved time!

I always suggest that students stay away from citation generators for the above reason. I also feel that it’s important to learn to do this skill on your own before turning to a piece of software: it’s much like learning your multiplication tables before using a calculator to do it for you. Plus, the newest version of MLA (version 8) is so simple that creating citations is quick and easy.

That said, if you are lucky enough to find a citation generator that works, it may save you some time. But be wary. Remember what I said above: “I have yet to find a citation generator that works correctly all of the time for every source.”