Referencing in academic writing

Why we reference in academic writing

One of the most characteristic features of academic writing is the explicit mention of other writers, using formal referencing systems. In our daily conversations and writing, we refer to other people to provide support for our thoughts and to provide evidence of how we know something. We regularly use phrases like, ‘Jane told me…’ or ‘I heard on the BBC…’ These phrases both give credit (‘That was Jane’s brilliant idea.’) and create distance if the information was wrong (‘It wasn’t my idea; I heard it from Jane.’). If there is information that we couldn’t know on our own, giving a source makes our statements more believable (‘The BBC said the England manager is going to resign.’)

Students sometimes feel that academic texts are just patchworks of other people’s ideas and words. You might feel that there is no space in your own writing for your ideas. That is not right. Lecturers want to know what you think, what your ideas are. But they don’t want just your opinions; they want your informed opinions, the thoughts and ideas that you developed after considering what other people have said about the topic. They don’t want the answer they could get from the person sitting next to them on a bus. They want an answer that reflects a search for evidence as well as clear thinking. Your ideas are crucial, but they need to be based on good information.

Academic writing demonstrates the basis for ideas and opinions through systems of explicit referencing by which the origin of ideas is acknowledged and evidence for information that was not developed by the person writing is provided. Other reasons writers provide sources include:

- To acknowledge the work of previous writers;
- To strengthen arguments by indicating the source of ideas;
- To demonstrate knowledge of the field in which you are writing;
- To establish your own voice in your academic writing;
- To meet marking criteria;
- To avoid accusations of plagiarism.

As mentioned earlier, academic writing uses formal systems to refer to sources of information. Two systems are widely used: author-date systems and numeric systems. In the text, author-date systems put the source’s family name(s) and the year of publication in brackets close to the information. Numeric systems use numbers lifted above the line close to the information. Both systems then give more information about the source at the end of the text.
Within these large systems, there are many variations, particularly in the formatting and ordering of elements (such as where the date of publication appears and whether authors’ names are capitalised or put in **bold**). Because these variations are both significant (if the ordering and formatting are not right, they’re wrong) and conventional (they depend on an agreement to do it one way and not another), Coventry University has developed the Coventry University Harvard Reference Style, which almost all parts of the University follow. (Law-related programmes use a system specifically developed for referring to laws and court decisions.) The CU Harvard Reference Style provides a referencing style that is accepted across the University. It is a version of the author-date system, and by standardising on this system, students and lecturers will know how to format references in their academic texts. An example of referencing using the CU Harvard Reference Style is given in the box below:
You can find a full description of the CU Harvard Reference Style, with examples of many other types of sources such as books and webpages, at:  
http://wwwm.coventry.ac.uk/caw/Pages/CUHarvardreferencestyle.aspx

**Plagiarism**

Academics are concerned about where ideas came from and what sort of evidence supports claims. For these and other reasons related to the list of reasons for referencing given above, proper referencing is crucial in academic writing. If you fail to give appropriate credit to the source of your ideas with the intention of gaining a higher mark, you may be accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism is considered an extremely important issue at university, and it is also self-defeating. If you have found sources of information, you will receive credit for your research by citing them correctly. If you have not found sources, you are limiting your learning and may be reproducing other peoples’ errors. Coventry University takes plagiarism very seriously. The University defines plagiarism as: ‘the act of using other people’s words, images etc. as if they were your own’ (Coventry University 2010: 5). If you plagiarise, you may receive a mark of zero for your coursework, but you may also be excluded from the University.

You will need to develop your understanding of what to cite by reading academic sources in your discipline and noticing what is cited. There are variations in the extent of referencing (what is obvious and what needs to be cited) in different disciplines. This feel for what needs citing can only be developed through reading in your area and noticing what other writers do. For example, while you do not have to provide references for ‘common knowledge’, common or expected knowledge varies depending on the area of study and the claims that are based on that knowledge. In other words, most of the time you would not have to cite the fact that the Second World War ended in 1945, but in a detailed analysis of the concluding days of the War for a history paper, you might cite your sources for the day and time. In relation to plagiarism, it is important to remember that you receive credit for your reading, so if you are not sure whether to cite, it is wise to do so.
Referring to sources

When you refer to authors in your text, you can either make their names part of the sentence or only refer to the source in brackets. When the writer of the source’s name is included as part of your sentence, the reference is called **integral** or while when the name is not part of the sentence, the reference is called **non-integral** (Swales 1990).

Integral:

Gullifer and Tyson (2010) found that many students in their study did not fully understand what plagiarism was.

Non-integral:

Many students are afraid of inadvertently committing plagiarism (Gullifer and Tyson 2010).

Most writers use a mix of integral and non-integral references. However, when you do not include the source’s name(s) in your text—a non-integral reference—there is more emphasis on the ideas and less emphasis on the authors who are the source of the ideas. The way you cite your sources affects the meaning of your text.

Referring to sources can also be divided according to whether you **quote** exactly what the source said, express the same idea in your own words (**paraphrase**), or **summarise** the overall idea of the passage. **Direct quotes** are used when the source’s wording is particularly important, such as for definitions, or when the wording seems particularly appropriate. However, you should avoid too many direct quotes or quotes that are too long. If you use many direct quotes, your paper will seem like a patchwork quilt, and your readers will have a hard time figuring out what you believe, rather than what your sources think.

Restating an idea in your own words or **paraphrasing** demonstrates your clear understanding of the ideas that you have found. Paraphrases are usually about the same length as the original passage.

**Summaries** give the gist of an idea and are a particularly efficient way of telling what a source meant. Almost all writing has to be of a certain length, for example so many words or pages long. Academic assignments (and journal articles) usually have limits. When you summarise, you show the origin of ideas you are using, but you also give yourself space to express your own thoughts.

Look at the three examples given below.

**Direct quote:**

Pecorari (2008: 38) writes that, ‘Plagiarism in this respect is like art or pornography: we don’t know what it is, but we know it when we see it.’

Note that the direct quote should be **exactly** the words that the author wrote, and that it should be enclosed in speech or quotation marks ['Plagiarism... it.']. Direct quotes should have the number of the page on which the quote may be found as part of the in-text citation; in the example above, that is page 38.

**Paraphrase:**
Novice academic writers therefore need to learn to perform a rather complex set of skills in a way that is not only broadly acceptable to the academic community but which also meets the specific demands of their disciplines. How do they do it? Explicit instruction is, of course, one route, although there are limitations on how much it can accomplish (Pecorari 2008: 49).

Paraphrase:

Pecorari (2008: 49) notes the many difficulties that confront students learning how to avoid being accused of plagiarism. They must understand not only the expectations of the academic community but also of their particular area of study. Students may receive instruction on plagiarism, but direct instruction cannot provide answers for all questions.

Note that paraphrased passages must accurately represent what was written and they should include page numbers in the in-text citation (e.g. page 49 in the example). Because the wording has been changed, it does not have ‘speech’ marks.

Summary:

Based on their exploratory study, Gullifer and Tyson (2010) suggest that current methods of deterring plagiarism are ineffective. While punishment for egregious misconduct will remain necessary, they argue for shifting the focus from punishing plagiarism to encouraging academic integrity, which should be instilled through a process of cognitive apprenticeship.

Note that the in-text citation for this passage does not include a page number because the passage represents the ideas contained throughout the entire article by Gullifer and Tyson (2010), not just the ideas contained on certain pages of their work.

**Turnitin**

Many parts of Coventry University use a software tool, Turnitin, to identify plagiarism. You may be required to put your assignment through Turnitin before submitting it for marking.

Turnitin compares your assignment with sources on the Internet, including books and journal articles in digital form, and with their very large bank of student assignments. It looks for passages that are similar and notes the degree to which your assignment resembles the sources that it checks. It produces a version of your assignment with passages that match other passages from its database highlighted and gives a number representing the extent of similarity. This number will be affected by the number of quotations in your text, if these are found in the Turnitin database.

The results of the Turnitin analysis provide a guide for tutors on the degree of similarity between your assignment and the sources in the database. The use of Turnitin helps tutors identify cases of plagiarism and can help you improve your use of sources in your writing.
How writing tutors can and cannot help you with appropriate citation

Tutors at the Centre for Academic Writing can provide guidance on using the Coventry University Harvard Reference style and can help with paraphrasing and summarising, though they will need to see the original text (your source) in order to compare your rewordings with the source. If you have questions about appropriate referencing or how to improve your handling of sources, be sure to ask your tutor for help.

Tutors cannot recognise plagiarism or improper use of sources on their own. Sources are highly specific to disciplines, and writing tutors cannot know the sources that you may have used in your assignments and dissertation. However, your lecturers and markers are likely to be familiar with these sources and may recognise improper use of sources. In addition, you may be required to process your paper through Turnitin before submitting it for marking, and that process may find sources that your marker did not know.

Tutors also cannot say whether your assignment may be accused of plagiarism or not. This again depends on knowledge of the discipline and knowledge of the type of information that must be cited in the discipline. For the same reasons, CAW’s Academic Writing Tutors cannot give advice or support in cases of accusation of plagiarism.

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List of References:


