

Documentation Styles

Most academic writing draws on previous research, writings, and materials. While some assignments require you to focus on your own experiences, impressions, and responses, more advanced writing projects will require you to gather, evaluate, and use the work of others. And when you do draw upon the work of others, you must give proper credit. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism.

We know what you're thinking--"Ugh! Footnotes!" You'll be happy to discover that the most frequently used documentation styles no longer require the use of footnotes. In fact, if you learn a few basic rules, you'll be able to quickly format your researched papers in accordance with the style that is required for your course.

If you're not sure what a documentation style is or which one you should use, ask your instructor.

The major documentation styles:

- [American Political Science Association \(APSA\)](#)
- [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#)
- [Chicago/Turabian](#)
- [Council of Biology Editors \(CBE\)](#)
- [Modern Language Association \(MLA\)](#)
- [Numbered References](#)

If you are interested in citing electronic sources, check out the following pages:

- [MLA/Citing Electronic Sources](#)
- [APA/Citing Electronic Sources](#)
- [Chicago Style/Citing Electronic Sources](#)

General information about documentation

What are documentation styles?

Documentation styles have been established to provide you with a way to give credit for work that you have used in writing your paper. It is important to cite sources not only to give credit where it's due, but also to allow the reader of your work to locate the sources you have consulted. In short, the reader of your paper must be able to use the information you provide, both in the text and in appended list(s), to duplicate the research you have done.

A documentation style is a standard approach to the citation of sources that the author of a paper has consulted, abstracted, or quoted from. It prescribes methods for citing references within the text, providing a list of works cited at the end of the paper, and even formatting headings and margins. Different academic disciplines use different documentation styles; your instructor may require you to use a particular style, or may allow you use one of your choosing. It is important to fully understand the documentation style to be used in your paper, and to apply it consistently.

What to document

In general, you must document information that originates in someone else's work. All of the following should be accompanied by a reference to the original:

- Direct quotations
- Paraphrases and summaries
- Information and ideas that are not common knowledge or are not available in a standard reference work

- Any borrowed material that might appear to be your own if there were no citation

By now you're likely wondering, "Yes, but how do I know where the ideas of others end and my own begin?" If you're writing papers that require research, you've probably been in academia long enough to know that the only good answer to such a question is, "Good question." Giving credit where it's due is a founding principle of academic inquiry, one that fosters the free exchange of ideas. Ultimately, you'll need to decide for yourself which ideas you can claim as your own and which should be attributed to others. Perhaps we should consider how we'd like **our** work to be credited, and use that as our guide.

Gathering information for documenting sources

You can make the process of applying any documentation style easier if you keep good notes while you perform research. Write down the most complete bibliographic information available for each source that you consult; you may want to take a look at the sample references list for the style you will be using to get an idea of the amount of detail that's required. If you write out quotations or data from a source, be sure to note the number of the page(s) on which the information appears in the original. Double check the quotation for accuracy before you return the source to the library.

It's a good idea to put citations into your paper as you draft it. When you quote, put the source and page number directly after, perhaps marked with asterisks. When you refer, do the same. And when you place a citation in your text, add the source to your working bibliography. When it comes time to put the finishing touches on your paper, the information you need will be available right in your text, and may be easily put into the proper format.

Which style should I use?

The choice as to which style is appropriate for a given paper may be determined by three factors: the requirements of the particular course, the standard for the discipline in which you are studying, or your individual preference.

Your instructor may assign a documentation style for papers to be written for that course. This will often be indicated on the course syllabus or in the paper assignment, but may simply be mentioned during class. If no documentation style is prescribed, you should ask whether the instructor has a preference. If no preference is indicated, then you are free to choose a style.

In doing so, consider which style will be most appropriate for your area of specialization. If you are pursuing a major in the humanities, consider learning the [MLA style](#). If behavioral or social sciences are likely to be your interest, then the [APA style](#) may be most appropriate. For information about the major documentation styles, look at one of the items in the list at the top of this page.

If you don't know what you want to major in, or aren't particularly interested in adopting a documentation style that will last your whole life long, then what you should do is read on, because we're just about to launch into a little comparison of the distinguishing features of the most commonly used documentation styles. Take a look around, choose a style that fits your style, and then go to its pages to learn how to use it.

The Writing Center Review of Documentation Styles

- [Quoting vs. referring](#)
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Quoting vs. referring

Documentation styles provide methods for you to cite (refer to the original source of) the information you quote from or refer to in your paper. The difference between quoting and referring may seem small, but it is significant; therefore, some documentation styles emphasize the former, while others focus on the latter.

You should provide a quotation from a source when the wording of the original is important. If the author makes a point in a particularly insightful, original, or concise way, then you should allow that author's words to speak for themselves. This is most often done in humanities disciplines, such as the study of history and literature, because often the words used are as important as the meaning they convey. Thus, the primary documentation style used in the humanities, that of the Modern Language Association (MLA), allows for page numbers alone to appear after quotations; the author and work are usually clear from the context in which the quotation appears.

In the scientific disciplines, by contrast, quotation is less often used than reference. The purpose of referring to the previous research of others is to establish findings and evaluate results; the word choice of individual scientists is less important. Therefore, the documentation style established by the [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) provides for author and date to be provided after a reference; the page number is omitted unless a quotation is included (it often isn't).

An example may be helpful here. The author of the first passage wishes to capture the flavor of the original by quoting; the author of the second simply wishes to refer to the original to help make a point.

Quotation

In the state of nature, Hobbes considered "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (207).

Reference

Theories of the primitive state of nature abounded at this time (Hobbes, 1651).

The question of when to refer and when to quote is one that can only be answered within the context of the purpose of your paper. If you are writing a literary analysis, direct quotation of the text will allow you to perform a more specific, concrete analysis. If you are writing a research project, however, it is much more important that you refer to previous research and provide summaries of findings.

Citing sources

The mechanics of citing sources will vary from style to style, but there are two primary methods of giving citations: [parenthetical \(in-text\) references](#) and [notes](#). Although most documentation styles provide guidelines for both in-text references and notes, each is generally identified with one or the other.

Parenthetical references

Systems of parenthetical reference have become popular in the past twenty years or so. Their greatest strength from the standpoint of the reader is that they don't obligate the reader to search for citations at the bottom of the page or at the end of the document; all necessary information is located in the text, immediately following the quotation or reference. From the standpoint of the writer, parenthetical reference styles are much easier than notes to format and keep track of (although most word processors will handle this automatically).

Parenthetical references work in conjunction with the [list of sources](#) that appears at the end of your document. That is, the information that appears in parentheses after a quotation or reference allows the reader to turn to the list of sources and identify which one is being cited. Thus, if a particular author has more than one entry in the list of sources, your parenthetical reference must give enough information to allow the reader to identify which work is being cited. This may involve including the year of publication, or a shortened version of the title, or both.

The information provided in the parenthetical reference varies from style to style. Because the chronology of previous research is important in evaluating its usefulness, the [APA style](#) requires the date to be included with the author's name. Other styles, such as the MLA style, require only the page number for quotations (as long as there will be no confusion as to which work is being cited).

Notes

The citation of materials in footnotes (appearing at the bottom of the page) and endnotes (appearing at the end of the document, usually beginning on a separate sheet) is a more traditional method for identifying original sources. One advantage of giving citations in notes is that the reader will not be interrupted by sometimes lengthy references in the text. And now that word processors are able to manage the formatting of notes automatically, the writer no longer needs to set aside time to adjust the spacing of every page to accommodate them.

Unlike the parenthetical-reference styles, note-based styles do not require the appending of a list of sources. Instead, complete bibliographic information is provided in the first note that cites a work; subsequent notes referring to that work will use a shortened version of the citation. Therefore, the author need not worry about omitting any works from a list of sources, or accidentally including any that aren't actually referred to or quoted from.

The style established by the University of Chicago (commonly referred to as the Chicago style) is the most commonly used for notes, although the citation-sequence style adopted by the Council of Biology Editors (CBE) and the Numbered References style both call for citations to appear in notes.

Lists of sources

As mentioned in the section on [parenthetical references](#) above, references in the text of a paper must work in conjunction with an appended list of sources. Documentation styles have different names for these lists; the MLA calls it "Works Cited," while the APA designates it simply "References."

Each documentation style establishes strict rules for the construction and formatting of the list of sources. In fact, a large proportion of the manual for each style is devoted to these rules and examples of them. The Writing Center Web pages provide the basic rules for each style, with examples you can follow.

Formatting your paper

Almost all of the documentation styles offer guidelines for the appearance of your final draft. However, all of the style guides defer to the requirements of the individual assignment. Therefore, you should follow your course instructor's instructions for preparing the final draft.

Page formatting

Most documentation styles call for a minimum of one inch of space on all sides, and for all elements of your text to be double-spaced. The appearance of certain elements, such as page numbers, indented quotations, and title pages varies; check with the documentation style you're using for specifics.

Headings

You may find that dividing a longer paper into sections with headings helps you organize it more effectively. If this is the case, you should find out if the documentation style you're using establishes standards for their appearance. The [APA style's headings structure](#), for example, is quite detailed, while the MLA style establishes no standard for headings.

Indexes and tables of contents

If your document is long enough to require an index or a table of contents, you should check the style manual for the documentation style you're using. If that style offers no specific guidance, you may consult the *Chicago Manual of Style*, whose advice in these areas can be relied upon in the absence of other instructions.

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The information included in these handouts is, of necessity, generic. Keep in mind that the specific assignment from your course instructor should be your guide, and that you should seek clarification from your instructor if you have any questions.