

Student Feature - Advice on Citing Smart

Written by Paul Beaumont

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PAUL BEAUMONT, FEB 10 2017

Academic referencing can be tricky. How do you cite a blog with several authors of the same name, translated from French by a robot-dog known only as *Le Ros Bif*. How can you know whether to use APA 5th edition, 6th Edition, Chicago style, or that special referencing style your university inexplicably insists upon (even though it has yet to publish a guide). Moreover, universities—admittedly with good reason—inflame students' fears by threatening expulsion if they plagiarize. Every university has a professor who would rather critique the location of students' commas in their bibliography than the students' actual ideas. Once again, this leads students to a safety-first approach to referencing that emphasizes accuracy. This is not bad in itself, however, citing sources is not just about attention to detail. While accurate referencing is a pre-requisite for good referencing, accuracy is not sufficient to achieve good referencing. The mechanics of referencing can end up over-shadowing what you do with your references. Now, some of you might be thinking: "well, that's because it's easy; when you find a piece of information then you cite it, unless it is common knowledge". However, there is more to it, and understanding that may help you significantly improve your academic writing.

Number vs Type of Citation

While students often believe that "the more citations the better", the data does not support this view. Bojana Petric (2007), investigating the relationship between citations and grades in dissertations at Toronto university, found no correlation between the number of citations and the grade. While having a sufficient number of citations is undoubtedly necessary, it is not sufficient. Instead, the research indicated that it was diversity of citation *type* that was correlated with strong grades, rather than quantity. Indeed, both good and bad papers had roughly similar number of citations. So, this begs the question: what are the different types of citations, and how do they relate to grades?

Attribution

This type of citation is used to attribute information or activity to an author. This is the most simple and common type of citation found in research. The attributed information may take the form of a proposition, a term, or a stretch of text. This type includes all types of citation: summary/paraphrase or quotation. It is worth noting that when citing information for attribution you should only use a direct quotation if the wording is especially elegant, or if the exact words are important. An extreme example is that you would not paraphrase Martin Luther King, I have a plan for the future as "(King, 1963)." Meanwhile, you should not directly quote something as banal as "Yorkshire has around 5 million inhabitants". However, for legal documents, when interpreting the exact meaning of the words is important, you should use a direct quote.

Exemplification

Exemplification involves using other research to illustrate the author's statement; this type of citation is usually preceded by the "for instance, or for example". See the way Thierry Balzacq cites Alexander Wendt here for instance:

"In fact, many constructivists use scientific realism and positivism; sometimes interchangeably. Wendt (1994: 75), for

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instance, asserts that ‘constructivists are modernists who fully endorse the scientific project of falsifying theories against evidence.’” (Balzacq, 2010, p 7)

Statement of Use & Application

While Petric distinguishes between these two types of citation, for our purposes here, they can be merged into one category. Both types of citations explicitly explain the concept/idea/argument/theory an author is using, and how they will use it. Typically, these types of citation are found in introductions in and introductory sections. They may also be used in conclusions to reflect upon the theoretical relevance of the paper. It is worth noting that this type of citation foregrounds the author(s) decision to use the approach. For instance:

“We write from the perspective of a “feminist anti-militarism” which rejects both the military and political use of weapons of mass destruction in warfare or for deterrence” (Duncansen Eschele 2008, p. 546)

Evaluation

Evaluations can be either positive or negative, and usually involve evaluative adverbs or adjectives. It is worth noting that the verb choice here also matters to the coherence of the evaluation. When criticizing research, one might use the word “claim” or “suggests”, which implies a degree of scepticism to the work. Meanwhile, one would use more certain verbs like “argues”, “illustrates”, or “provides” when giving a positive evaluation. Second, it is also important to pay attention to the linking words that precede and follow criticism. For instance, one might use “however, but”, “yet”, “nonetheless”, to introduce a criticism that followed praise. Finally, it is important to recognize that negative evaluations must be substantiated with some sort of evidence or explanation and authors’ must avoid hyperbolic and loaded expressions that could indicate bias.

Here follows one positive and one negative evaluative citation.

“White’s position provides a distinct and useful starting point from which to examine recent writing about the Bosnian War” (Campbell, 1998, 263)

“While studies of global governance excel in charting the diffusion and disaggregation of authority from the state to non-state actors, they fail in exploring both the power at work in the actual practices through which governance takes place, as well as the more specific content or logic of the relations between state and non-state actors. The extent to which non-state actors are directly funded by and actively encouraged by states to be engaged in processes of global governance is thus inadequately addressed.” (Neumann & Sending, 2006, p. 655)

Establishing Links between Sources

When writing literature reviews or elaborating a theoretical framework, good research usually draws connections between the extant literature. The author may draw contrasts or similarities that serve to illuminate the direction the paper will take. This citation function also serves to generate authority for the author: done well, it illustrates the author’s critical reflection and deep understanding of the field. The above citation by Neumann and Sending, as well as being evaluative, is a good illustration of a citation that draws similarities between multiple works. In this case, the negative commonality that they “inadequately address” non-state actors’ state funding. Thus, this is also a good example of how one can combine citation types: each type is not mutually distinct. In fact, Petric found that theses which used more complex citations—those that combined citation types—performed better than those with less complex citations.

Comparison of one’s own findings or interpretation with other sources

Typically, when presenting one’s findings in the introduction and the conclusion, authors emphasize the value added of the research. Here, the goal is to highlight what is novel about the research presented. Indeed, in most master thesis originality is a pre-requisite for achieving a high grade. For instance, note how Scott Sagan uses “in contrast”

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to draw attention to how he differs from the realist (dominant) explanation:

“For, in contrast to the views of scholars who claim that a traditional realist theory focusing on security threats explains all cases of proliferation and nuclear restraint, I believe that the historical record suggests that each theory explains some past cases quite well and others quite poorly” (Sagan 1996, p. 56)

What does this mean in practice?

The first thing that should be stressed before going further is that thesis should still include mostly attributive citations. Attribution citations made up 70% of the citations in the A grade theses. However, it does suggest that you should offer some diversity. Think of attributive citations as your pizza base: you cannot make a pizza without one, but if you make a pizza with just dough, it would be very boring to eat, and would not really constitute a pizza. Similarly, a thesis with only attributive citations may be very boring to read, and may not even constitute “research”.

However, it is not the citation itself which guarantees the grade, the correlation between diverse citations and good grades is probably capturing the quality of the research. A thesis that has 90+ per cent of attributive citations may suggest that the work merely describes, or displays knowledge, rather than offering original input. The use of more diverse citations types is likely to indicate that the work offers original analysis of the topic. Petric (2007) characterizes this difference as *knowledge transformation* versus *knowledge reproduction*. The latter is explicitly valued more at graduate level.

Thus, you cannot merely use diverse citation types to guarantee a grade, you need to see it as tool to help show the reader that you are not merely reproducing knowledge, but transforming it. Perhaps your paper does transform knowledge but the references do not reflect this. In this case, adding more diverse citations into your paper may help make this clearer to your assessor. However, if you find that your work lacks a diversity in citation types, it could indicate that your idea and analysis lacks originality and may be too descriptive. You may therefore need to consider how you can alter your research to make it more original, and include more types of citations to indicate such.

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