

The Importance of Referencing

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It is imperative that authors of medical papers give fitting credit to the sources that they quote in their manuscripts. Frequently this is not the case, and a wrong, inappropriate or unsuitable citation often blights the quality of a paper. Many concerns can proceed from questions relating to improper citations. These matters may be directed at a personal level or may have a bearing on the general research community. They can range from doubt being levied at the individual's academic ability, to his/her academic honesty, or even the suggestion of potential plagiarism. Meticulous referencing of sources will eliminate all of these concerns.

The stamp of a good research worker is attention to detail at all levels of his/her research. Attention to detail cultivates good habits and the detail required in referencing and preparing a bibliography focuses attention on the whole research procedure. It aids scientific thought and analysis and makes for better research reporting.

Good referencing includes attention to detail such as correct page numbering, the spelling of author's names and the accuracy of relevant facts that will be stated in the paper. Attention to referencing not only makes you a better researcher but enhances your reputation amongst editors, reviewers and readers.

An editor or reader may interpret poor referencing as a sign of intellectual laziness, unclear thinking, and inaccurate writing. When you cite sources correctly, you leave no question in your readers' minds regarding your point. By citing precisely and accurately, the phrase "It is said" need ever be used in your academic manuscript. An excellent bibliography shows off your scientific knowledge. An extensive bibliography is the hallmark of a widely read and well-informed clinician or scientist.

Errors of omission frequently are the cause of a reviewer not accepting a manuscript for publication. By not citing a critical or well-known paper extant in the

scientific literature, authors can be accused of not having undertaken an extensive literature review or having inadequate knowledge of their subject. It may even lead a reviewer to consider that the work is, in part, plagiarised.

Reviewers look at the bibliography for several reasons. Attention to detail, with regard to spelling and punctuation, as stated above, is a primary concern. Moreover, the citation method, be it Harvard or Vancouver or other, must strictly follow the instructions to authors as prescribed by the journal in question. If the most recent reference is more than five years or so, this may indicate that a full up to date review of the literature has not been undertaken. A preponderance of references by one author(s) may suggest self-promotion, self-plagiarism, or the selective citation of papers whose conclusion are in accord with those of the author.

Plagiarism is a prominent problem encountered in the academic process and is one of the most common causes of compromising the academic integrity of the author. Sources must be cited in an appropriate form. Copying, using, or the misuse of other people's ideas, words or concepts, without proper referencing is prohibited. It is not enough to change a few words in a phrase from the source material into "own words". Changing the word-order of a sentence is unacceptable, as is the use of synonyms. Referencing and references, signify the quality of the work, detail the primary sources and are indicative of the extent of information on the subject. Proper referencing removes any question of plagiarism.

Every submitted academic manuscript is scrutinised several times before it is accepted for publication. The process starts with editors, progresses via reviewers and continues even after acceptance when editorial assistants will locate sources in the bibliography and ensure that the citations are accurate.

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Your manuscript is much more likely to survive the rigours of the review process with minimal criticism and positive feedback if all references are contemporaneous, refer to a primary source and have been accurately and correctly cited.

■ **ADDITIONAL READING**

- Bryson, D. Using research papers: citations, referencing and plagiarism. *J Vis Commun Med.* 2012; 35:82–84.
- Masic I. How to Search, Write, Prepare and Publish Scientific Papers in the Biomedical Journals. *Acta Inform Med.* 2011;9:68–79.