



Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

Documentation: Consistency or Correctness?

Errors in documentation are a consistent source of frustration for instructors. Mistakes can range from punctuation errors in reference lists to significant omissions of attribution and documentation that might constitute academic misconduct. Instructors are often perplexed by students' documentation errors, particularly since students have presumably been writing with sources their entire academic careers. This tip will address some of the potential causes of persistent citation error and offer some recommendations for improving students' performance with citation.

If the rules are all right there, how do students still make mistakes?

Instructors are occasionally baffled by students' documentation errors, in part because faculty recognize that citation is a very common writing practice and because citation resources are readily available to help. Often students' errors are seen as inattention to detail or carelessness. At least four additional factors can explain some sources for student errors.

Faculty have differing attitudes about the significance of citation: For some faculty, correct use of a conventional citation style is a crucial component of accuracy and professionalism. For example, students in psychology would not be surprised if psychology faculty were sticklers for the Style Manual of the American Psychological Association. In other disciplines, a variety of citation styles may be acceptable depending upon subdisciplines and research methodologies. In such cases, instructors often apply a standard of internal consistency rather than technical correctness. Finally, some faculty may require research, but are more interested in other aspects of writing and give citation little attention at all. In all of these cases, the significance of documentation as an element of grading can vary.

Students meet alternative citation formats across the curriculum: Most high school students learn MLA strategies of citation in their English classes as *the* standard citation style. This MLA trend may continue in their first year writing courses. Across disciplines (and even within them) citation practices vary dramatically. While instructors are disciplinary specialists, undergraduate students are forced to be generalists through much of their academic careers. This boundary crossing is a frequent source of transfer errors.

Students writing practices deemphasize citation: If students are required to include a specific number of sources or citations, some students will select evidence based on meeting that numerical standard, rather than using research to guide the organization and content of their document. Students familiar with reading documents in electronic forms may cut and paste as a time-saving strategy without considering the value of summary and paraphrase.

Students often treat citation as an issue of proofreading: Students often fail to include citation information as they are gathering research or writing. Not only does this increase the likelihood of failing to cite, it meant that if students don't manage their time effectively, this step may be overlooked or short changed.

Practices for Improving Citation

Make the citation expectations explicit: In the course syllabus and assignments, make it clear what degree of attention citation merits in the course. Instructors sometimes presume a statement prohibiting academic misconduct is enough, but an explanation of the citation expectations and justification for their inclusion can help focus students' attention.

Use course readings to demonstrate effective in-text citation and references: Most textbooks and many online resources limit explicit documentation to enhance readability. By supplementing these resources with research writing in your field, you can give students a better sense of standard practices of citation and reference. Not only can these resources demonstrate in-text citation and reference, but they can also be used to demonstrate the argumentative moves or writing practices of your field.

Link students to quick help resources: Student Writing support has [quick reference sheets](#) for common citation styles. In addition to pointing to these resources, it can be effective to bring them into the classroom and illustrate their use.

Introduce students to citation management tools: Researchers are familiar with automation tools for citation management, but these resources can be equally valuable for students. Not only do tools like Mendeley, Zotero, and Refworks simplify the process of modifying citation, the [University of Minnesota Libraries](#) also offers instructional sessions and support for each of these platforms.

Consider citation practices as a curricular issue: While instructors can vary the degree to which they consider citation in evaluation, it can be helpful for students to understand that citation practices aren't merely the whims of particular instructors, but rather a practical and professional expectation in many fields. Even if citation matters little, students can benefit from specific guidance rather than simply to choose their default preference.

Learn more

- Teaching with Writing Resources on [Writing with Sources](#)
- Yale Center for Teaching and Learning on [Using Sources](#)
- University of Louisville [Guide to Writing with Sources and Avoiding Plagiarism](#)

Further support: Visit us online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww>. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).

Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.