

GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

6.5 Manuscript Citations

A prominent feature of a scientific manuscript is the care with which citations have been added to the text. Any assertion or point of information made in the text is linked to a source of supporting evidence. That evidence may or may not be solid, but it is accessible for the reader to judge. Citations can also a rich source of information to the reader wanting to go deeper into the subject. For these reasons any manuscript intended for publication must have thorough and accurate citation referencing. Here we discuss how to ensure this is achieved.

What is a citation?

This is a reference to a previously published work that is widely accessible. In the pre-internet age of distant memory an ‘accessible’ work meant a document physically available at an institutional library or, failing that, photocopies of publications arriving by snail mail. Nowadays all medical journal publications are accessible online, and certainly their abstracts are available even if paywalls may block full text access for some. Most citations are straightforward references to journal articles. Less commonly they may refer to book chapters and conference proceedings that may not be available online, which can be frustrating. Increasingly important and useful citations are links to online resources and databases. Since the detail of a reference is usually quite lengthy that detail is placed at the end of the manuscript in the “References” section.

Work that is referenced may be a primary publication, i.e., a full original research article, an essay, a review or, on occasion, a published abstract. Peer-reviewed articles from a respected source are always preferred, but a citation may from necessity refer to a grey literature item, such as non-peer reviewed internal reports and policy papers.

Where are citations needed?

Any assertion of fact in a manuscript needs to cite a source that supports the assertion, with occasional exceptions made for points that are universally

accepted. Citations need to be inserted either next to the assertion in the text or at the end of the sentence. Where a good reference cannot be found to back a claim, that claim should either be removed or should be accompanied by a remark about its lack of substantiation.

Where a very general claim is being made, or the claim involves a lot of detailed papers, then citing a literature reviews provides a good shortcut and (an important consideration) it helps keep down the length of the manuscript References section list. However, citations of literature reviews should not be over-used to support very specific points.

What form does a citation take?

Usually there is an abbreviated reference, often a citation number, which can be looked up in the References section at the end of the manuscript. Within the text the reference number can be a superscript or in brackets; alternatively, it may be in the form of first author name followed by “*et al.*” (if there is more than one author) plus a publication year all placed in brackets. However, this form is becoming less common. Note “*et al.*” is universally employed to mean ‘and others’; as it is a Latin abbreviation (for *et alii/ et aliae*) it is commonly italicised with a full stop added.

The in-text format and the Reference section list format used for the manuscript depends on the preferences of the intended journal, which can vary

widely, so the journal “Instructions to Authors” needs to be consulted.

Checking references

It is important not to use an inappropriate citation, so cited papers need to be checked with care, i.e., the referenced paper (or at least its abstract) should be read. It can be dangerous to rely on a paper title alone to indicate its content, although for very obscure or old papers there may be little alternative. The details of the citation itself must also be accurate, which is not difficult to ensure with digital resources.

How to find sources to cite

It is useful for citations to be inserted into the text as the text is composed, because if an assertion of fact is made which later becomes central to the manuscript narrative then it will cause embarrassment later if the source cannot be found. Virtually all journal publications can be found at the NCBI PubMed resource¹ (which accesses the Medline bibliographic database), and careful and wide-ranging searches should be undertaken. Note that the unique Pubmed ID number (PMID) for a publication is a compact and foolproof way to locate the reference later on, unless the publication comes from outside the biomedical field.

Note that aside from PubMed there are also commercial databases like Web of Science, Scopus and Proquest that cover a wider range of subjects (i.e., more than just biomedical) and these which have their own accession conventions.

Deciding which publications to cite

There are no certain rules on deciding appropriateness of a citation, but there are some expectations and rules of thumb. A general statement is often best supported by published reviews, while a specific statement is best supported by a citation (or two) of research papers that directly provide support. Ideally, and that support should be evident in their abstract as that is most accessible. An obscure or doubtful publication should not be chosen over a more reputable one, and here it is useful to consult published reviews to identify which are the seminal papers in the field. Withdrawn publications should not be cited. Where

no citation can be identified this may indicate a knowledge gap that could be commented on.

Inserting citations into text

Putting references into text can be a fiddle since the software that does it tends to be clunky and needs time to master. Until recently the most common types of reference manager software were proprietary programs such as Reference Manager (discontinued 2015; Thompson Reuters), SciRef (now version 1.5; Scientific Programs) and EndNote (now version X9; Clarivate Analytics) that search for and download PubMed data then link it directly to text in MS Word documents. There are now alternative managers available, and some are free, such as Zotero (New Media). LaTeX publishers (usually free or freemium model) such as Overleaf.com enable insertion and formatting of in-text and end-text references using a coding approach. These are increasingly useful as they can take in and format records that can be obtained with minimal hassle from PubMed.

Formatting of reference lists

Reference formatting has always been a nuisance since there are so many ways that journals can cite articles. For any manuscripts the instructions to authors should be consulted and followed carefully. Templates for particular journals are often available in reference manager software, however it is not unusual for these to be wrong or out of date so should be verified that their output resembles what appears in the journal. A common type of reference list is the so-called Harvard System but, annoyingly, no definitive standard for this system exists. For journals a typical format is Author list (in comma separated surname - first name – initials order), year, article title, journal title, volume, issue, page number and DOI.

Citation conventions can be quickly grasped and become such second nature when writing documents that it becomes hard to write a document without at least one reference.

¹ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed

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