**When to Cite Sources**

You’ll discover that different academic disciplines have different rules and protocols concerning when and how to cite sources, a practice known as “citation.” For example, some disciplines use footnotes, whereas others use parenthetical in-text citations; some require complete bibliographic information on all works consulted, whereas others require only a list of “Works Cited.” As you decide on a concentration and begin advanced work in your department, you’ll need to learn the particular protocols for your discipline. Near the end of this booklet, you’ll find a brief sampling of commonly used citation styles.

The five basic principles described below apply to all disciplines and should guide your own citation practice. Even more fundamental, however, is this general rule: when in doubt, cite. You’ll certainly never find yourself in trouble if you acknowledge a source when it’s not absolutely necessary; it’s always preferable to err on the side of caution and completeness. Better still, if you’re unsure about whether or not to cite a source, ask your professor or preceptor for guidance before submitting the paper or report.

**1. Quotation.** Any verbatim use of a source, no matter how large or small the quotation, must be placed in quotation marks or, if longer than three lines, clearly indented beyond the regular margin. The quotation must be accompanied, either within the text or in a footnote, by a precise indication of the source, identifying the author, title, place and date of publication (where relevant), and page numbers. Even if you use only a short phrase, or even one key word, you must use quotation marks in order to set off the borrowed language from your own, and you must cite the source.

**2. Paraphrase.** Paraphrase is a restatement of another person’s thoughts or ideas in your own words, using your own sentence structure. A paraphrase is normally about the same length as the original. Although you don’t need to use quotation marks when you paraphrase, you absolutely do need to cite the source, either in parentheses or in a footnote. If another author’s idea is particularly well put, quote it verbatim and use quotation marks to distinguish his or her words from your own. Paraphrase your source if you can restate the idea more clearly or simply, or if you want to place the idea in the flow of your own thoughts—though be sure to announce your source in your own text (“Albert Einstein believed that…”) and always include a citation. Paraphrasing does not relieve you of the responsibility to cite your source.

**3. Summary.** Summary is a concise statement of another person’s thoughts or ideas in your own words. A summary is normally shorter than the original — a distillation of the source’s ideas. When summarizing other people’s ideas, arguments, or conclusions, you must cite your sources — for example, with a footnote at the end of each summary. Taking good notes while doing your research will help you keep straight which ideas belong to which author. Good note-taking habits are especially important when you’re reviewing a series of interpretations or ideas on your subject.

**4. Facts, Information, and Data.** Often you’ll want to use facts or information to support your own argument. If the information is found exclusively in a particular source, you must clearly acknowledge that source. For example, if you use data from a scientific experiment conducted and reported by a researcher, you must cite your source, probably a scientific journal or a website. Or if you use a piece of information discovered by another scholar in the course of his or her own research, you must cite your source. But if the fact or information is generally known and accepted — for example, that Woodrow Wilson served as president of both Princeton University and the United States, or that Avogadro’s number is 6.02 x 1023 — you do not need to cite a source. Note that facts are different from ideas: facts may not need to be cited, whereas ideas must always be cited. Deciding which facts or pieces of information require citation and which are common knowledge, and thus do not require citation, isn’t always easy. Refer to a later section in this booklet, “[Not-So-Common Knowledge](http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/08/notcommon/),” for more discussion of this issue. But remember: when in doubt, ask questions.

Common Knowledge

There is no clear boundary on what is considered common knowledge. Even experts on plagiarism disagree on what counts as common knowledge. For instance, many sources only consider facts — current and historical events, famous people, geographic areas, etc. — to be potentially common knowledge. Others also include nonfactual material such as folklore and common sayings. Some sources limit common knowledge to only information known by others in your class, other sources look at what is common knowledge for the broader subject area.

The two criteria that are most commonly used in deciding whether or not something is common knowledge relate to quantity: the fact can be found in numerous places and ubiquity: it is likely to be known by a lot of people. Ideally both conditions are true. A third criteria that is sometimes used is whether the information can be easily found in a general reference source.

How do you tell if you have met the **quantity** criteria? Some experts say that a fact is common knowledge if it can be found in three independent sources. Purdue’s Online Writing Lab recommends finding five independent sources before considering a fact common knowledge. The point is that common knowledge can be found in a variety of sources. As you do more research on a topic, you are likely to discover which facts count as common knowledge because you will encounter these facts in many places.

How do you tell if a fact is **ubiquitous**? Some facts may be well known within one discipline and papers written within that group may assume the information is commonly known. That same piece of information used in other situations or by ‘non-experts’ may require attribution. A good rule of thumb is to acknowledge ideas which are not common knowledge among your peers such as the other students in the course for which you are writing the paper.

How do you know if it is a **general reference source**? Reference sources collect together facts for easy look-up. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, and gazetteers are typical examples. Reference sources that focus on a specific area are not considered ‘general.’ The definition of Marfan syndrome mentioned [previously](http://library.csusm.edu/plagiarism/WhatIs/what_is_common.htm) came from a medical dictionary, a specialized reference source, that may not be readily available to most people. Therefore, you would probably want to cite this source if you were writing for people not familiar with medical information.

If you are not sure, assume that an idea is *not* common knowledge and cite the source. It is much easier to remove a citation than it is to hunt down a citation and try to add it later. Finally, when in doubt, check with your professor.

Sources:

[www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/08/**cite**](http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/08/cite)

Purdue University Online Writing Lab. 18 September 2007. *Is It Plagiarism Yet?*. 5 February 2008 [http://http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/02/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/02/).