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Everything I Know About APA References I Learned by Example

Nicholas de Leeuw

Vassar College

Writing a paper in APA style requires adherence to a number of rules and customs which seem arcane, at least when you are getting started. No doubt the most torturous and challenging of these practices, from a student's perspective, is the APA style for citations and references. This is spelled out in excruciating (yet readable) detail in the fifth edition of *The APA Manual* (American Psychological Association, 2001). Yet many students resist buying that manual, which presents the need for a shortened guideline to references and citations, such as this paper.

The first thing a student needs to understand are some basic principles and vocabulary. A *citation* is contained within the text of a paper. It lists only the authors' last names, and the year of publication. This is an example (Anderson, 1990). A *reference* is found at the end of a paper, in the reference section. It lists all of the additional information a reader might find useful about the source of information, such as the author's initials, the title of the article or book being cited, the name of the periodical or book that it appears in, the publisher, and so on. Every work that is cited in the text must have a corresponding reference, and the reference section should contain only works that are cited in the text.

Citations are a very compact way of giving the reader the information they need about the author's sources, without overly intruding on the flow of the writing. For example, if I were using information I read about in Siegler, DeLoache and Eisenberg (2003), you would have to turn to the reference section to find their initials and the title of the book.

A couple of little details about that citation are worth pointing out. Notice that when the authors' names are given as a part of the text, the only information that needs to appear in parentheses is the year of publication. Notice also that when one refers to multiple authors within the text of an article, the word "and" is used, but when those authors' names appear within parentheses, an ampersand ("&") is used instead, as in this example (Brown & Burton, 1978). Another point to keep in mind about citations is that when there are three to five authors, all of their names should be listed in the first citation. In subsequent citations, that same article would be cited more compactly, e.g. (Siegler, et al., 2003). Articles with six or more authors use that more compact form, even in the first citation.

The APA style for citations is consistent no matter what type of publication the material is drawn from. Mastering the APA style for references, however, requires learning slightly different approaches for different types of publications. The basic idea in a reference is to give the reader all the information they would need to track down the source on their own, such as the title of the book or journal that contains the article. Differences between different types of references are most easily learned by example.

One very common type of reference is an article in a periodical, more commonly called a journal article. Chi, et al. (1989) is an example. References to journal articles follow the format:

Author (year). Article title. *Journal Name*, volume (issue), page numbers.

Another very common sort of reference is to a chapter in an edited volume, such as this example (Brewer, 1987). These follow the format:

Author (year). Article title. Editors (Eds.). *Book Title* (pp. page numbers). City: Publisher.

Note that in both references, the article title is given with only the first letter of the first word capitalized. But the title of the journal uses capital letters for all the "important" words, and is in italics. This reflects a basic principle: The thing that you can hold in your hand (book or journal) gets italics and capitals, titles within that source (chapters or articles) do not. You should look at the reference section of this paper to see the differences.

Occasionally you may need to cite an article you read about in another source. The original article is the primary source, and what you read is the secondary source. You use this type of reference when you want to refer to something very specific to the primary source, such as a specific result or a particular method. For example, "The United States had an infant mortality rate of 7.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1996 (Guyer, et al., 1999, cited in Siegler, DeLoache, & Eisenberg 2003)." If you were just referring to the general conclusions given in the secondary source, you would just cite that source. For example, "The infant mortality rate in the United States is higher than in other industrialized nations (Siegler, et al., 2003)." In the reference section, you give the reference for what you read, the secondary source. If you were writing a term paper or thesis, you would usually not use a secondary reference. You would, instead, go to the primary source, which is always the preferred route.

A Slightly tricky, but common, type of reference in a student paper is an article that has been reprinted in an edited volume, such as a collection of classic articles like Guavain and Cole (2001). The trick is that the reprint, such as Piaget (1962/2001) gets both the original year and reprint year in the citation, and full information for the original and reprint in the reference.

An increasingly common sort of reference is to an article found on the world wide web. If the article is an electronic reprint of an article from a journal or book (such as an article retrieved from JSTOR), the reference is just as if you had the actual paper volume in your hand, except that you add "[Electronic version]" following the article title. The reference to Varga (2000) is an example. Often, however, the source is a web page or an article posted on a web site. Use caution in employing web-based sources. There is a tremendous amount of misinformation on the web, much of it presented as fact. Still, many useful sources, such as news articles, government documents and "background" sources such as university-affiliated medical information sites, can be readily found on the Web. The references to web-based articles should include the URL (web address). If there is any reason to think the article has been revised or may be revised (which is always true of on-line news sources), you should also include the date the article was retrieved.

There is even an excellent on-line resource for writing in APA style: The Online Writing Lab (OWL) from Purdue (Purdue University Online Writing Lab, 2002). Note that like many on-line sources, this has a corporate author (as opposed to an individual or set of individuals) and is cited as such.

This may seem like a lot of information and detail for such a minor issue as references and citations. But remember, the basic principles are pretty simple: Authors and year in the citation, and all the information the reader needs to track down the source in the reference. If you write with these principles in mind, and use a reference such as this guide to figure out specifics of the reference section, you will soon find yourself referring to others' work like a true academic. And in the world of academics, references to other author's works are not a minor issue, they are the foundation for building new knowledge.

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