



Referencing – what, how and why? Sounding out citation styles

All academic texts use citations to refer to other texts. In doing so, it always needs to be clear which thoughts and phrases come from which author. Also, all sources must be given in a comprehensible, unambiguous and uniform manner. However, how this is done in each individual case, in different types of text and in different disciplines can be quite different. By analysing a scientific text, you can find out about conventions in your discipline and determine which rules apply.

Select a scientific text from the part of your discipline in which you need to write a paper. Please use a publication in a scientific journal rather than material from a textbook, Wikipedia or a lexicon entry as different citation conventions may apply. Ideally, you should use an article that you have already read in your course or found as part of your research for your paper. Alternatively, you can ask your lecturer for an article that uses the same citation style as the one that is expected of you. For most of the questions below, it doesn't matter which language the text is written in. Write down the answers you can find.

1. What does the bibliography look like?

Check if there is a list of references at the end of the text. Find out:

- Is the reference list divided into sections (e.g. primary and secondary literature) or is there one complete list?
- Are the titles ordered alphabetically by author or according to a different system?
- How many titles does the list contain compared to the length of the article?
- Look at the titles: Which kinds of literature are referenced?
 - Monographs (= books by one author)
 - Edited volumes (= books with editor(s) that include contributions from different authors)
 - Articles from academic journals
 - Others (e.g. legal texts, statistical data, conference papers, online sources)
- When were the sources published?
- What is the structure of the references, and which details are given in what order for the different types of literature (author(s), title, year, place, issue number, ...)?
- What does the layout of the reference list look like? What do you notice? Do you recognize a rule behind it (e.g. titles in italics)?

2. How much is referenced, and in what form?

Scan the entire article:

- How many references does it contain? (overall, per page; spread evenly throughout the text or only in specific sections?)
- Does the text use footnotes, brief in-text citations (author-date) or endnotes (numbers)?
- Does it contain direct (verbatim) citations? How are they marked?
- Are page numbers given and if so, always or only in some cases? Do you recognize a rule?



- Does the text use “cf.”? When and why is “cf.” used? (in German: “vgl.”)
- Does it use multiple references (several sources for one thought / result) and if so, in which section of the text?

3. What are citations used for, and how are they integrated into the text?

Mark five citations that are as different as possible in your text to look at more closely. Make sure that you use citations from different parts of your text.

- Why did the author(s) use this citation at this point in the text, which function does it have? (e.g. naming the author of a theory / a concept / a term, giving evidence for a claim, supporting the author’s argument, …)?
- How does it become evident that the statement refers to other people’s thoughts? Where does the citation begin and end, and how can you recognize this?
- What is the author’s position towards the references he/she gives? Agree, disagree, critical? How can you determine this?
- Do you notice anything you do not understand but feel is important?

To continue:

1. Derive rules:

Go over your notes and think about what this means for your paper. What, how and why do you need to reference? Write down what you need to keep in mind.

2. Discuss:

Talk to other students about the citations in their articles. Where did you find out the same things, what is different? Can you explain why these differences occurred? What does that mean for your paper? Try to clarify the questions you have.

3. Agree on rules:

After the discussion, complement or adjust your notes where necessary. Compare the rules you found with the instructions you were given by your lecturers. Some things may need to be handled differently in a student paper than in an academic publication – so you need to make sure that the approach you plan to take is OK. You can find additional information on our worksheet [“Clarifying your writing task”](#).

Published as an exercise with didactic writing instructions in:
Meyer, Heike (2019): Was, wie und wozu zitieren? – Zitierkonventionen erkunden. In: Christian Wymann: Praxishandbuch Schreibdidaktik. Übungen zur Vermittlung wissenschaftlicher Schreibkompetenzen. Opladen, Toronto: Barbara Budrich, 142–146.

