

A Refresher on the Basics

Proper Documentation

Whenever you quote, paraphrase, or summarize someone else's work or ideas, you must provide an in-text citation and a corresponding entry in your list of sources. Failure to do so (whether it be intentional or unintentional) is considered plagiarism. If you find yourself uncertain of whether something needs a citation, err on the side of caution and provide one.

There are certain situations where you do not need to provide a citation. If something is considered common knowledge, you do not need to provide a citation. Examples of this include things that can be clearly observed or are widely agreed upon, such as "Many college students drink coffee" or "George Washington was the first president of the United States." What is considered common knowledge will of course depend on your field of study and intended audience. As previously stated, if you find yourself in doubt, provide a citation.

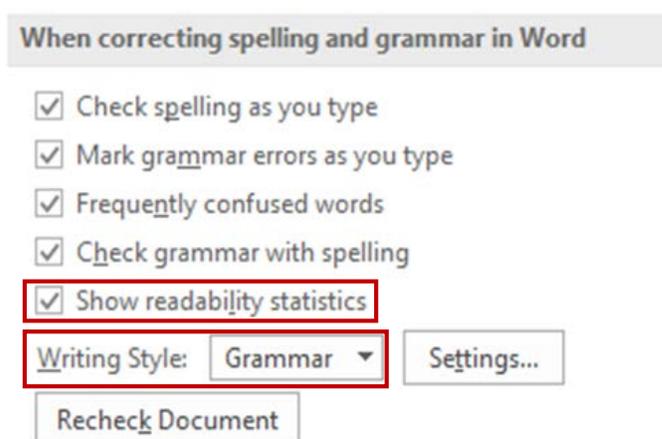
Lastly, make sure you are adhering to the standards of whatever style is most appropriate for your article. Examples include MLA, APA, and Chicago. Each style is slightly different, so make sure you're paying careful attention to detail and meticulously documenting your sources. You may be tempted to use an online citation generator. If you are doing this, make sure you verify all the information entered is correct. Citation generators can and do make errors, and it is your responsibility to catch them.

Formal Language

You are writing an academic article. As such, you should avoid any kind of casual language or slang. Typically, it is preferred that you avoid writing in first person and instead write in third person (ex: "researchers studied"

is preferable to "we studied"). While there are rare instances when using first person may be appropriate, it is typically distracting and will make you appear less professional.

Most disciplines prefer that academic papers be written in active voice. Microsoft Word has a feature that can help you detect and correct passive voice. Go to File → Options → Proofing. There, you can update the Writing Style from "Grammar" to "Grammar and Style." Word will then mark passive voice within your paper. It will also flag certain word choices and excessively lengthy sentences.



Please note that this option is currently not available in Office 2016, but it can be found in older versions. While it may not catch everything, it can serve as a helpful starting place if writing in active voice is something you struggle with.

Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	2,028
Characters	10,022
Paragraphs	39
Sentences	106
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	3.9
Words per Sentence	18.8
Characters per Word	4.7
Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	55.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	10.1

Additionally, you can check “Show Readability Statistics.” When this is enabled, Word will provide several readability statistics for you at the end of a spell check. One thing of note is that this box will provide you with the approximate grade level at which you are writing. This is determined using an algorithm that factors in the length of your words, sentences, and paragraphs. If you intend for your paper to be understandable by a general audience, you want to aim for a grade level around 8. For an academic audience, a score that is a few points higher is appropriate. Keep in mind that a higher score is not necessarily better. Rather, it indicates that a person would need more years of education to be able to read and understand your paper.

While you do want to come across as professional and intelligent, you need to be able to balance that with overall readability. By making sure your grade level is not too high, you can be more confident that your writing will be understandable for a variety of audiences.

If your grade level is higher than you would like it to be, start by examining your paper for an excess of lengthy sentences. A good mix of shorter and longer sentences can help your paper flow together and make concepts easier to understand. Additionally, check your paper for excessive use of “fancy language.” Sometimes simpler phrasing can be useful, especially if you are trying to convey a concept that is hard to grasp.

Thesis Statement

When you are writing a research-driven article, there should be a clear and strong thesis statement. A good thesis statement is one that makes a claim that has not already been well-established and that you can support through research. Your thesis should not be an open-ended question that you then attempt to answer.

If your claim has already been well-established, no one will argue with your thesis. Remember that this article is your way of placing yourself into a larger scholarly conversation. If a point has already been agreed upon, there is not a purpose in returning to it only to reiterate what has already been said. However, if you want to take a well-established claim and critically examine it from a new angle (perhaps in light of new findings or through a different perspective) that can be appropriate, since you are adding something new to the body of knowledge.

Additionally, you need to be able to support your thesis through scholarly research. This means issues of morality may not be appropriate. If your argument relies heavily on opinion and you struggle to find any supporting research, take a hard look at the claim you are trying to make. Can it be properly addressed in a scholarly article?

Lastly, your thesis should be specific enough that it can be answered in your article. If your topic is too broad, you will struggle to prove anything. Narrow down your focus for the sake of being able to make a solid claim. That being said, your thesis should require some kind of follow-up in order to make sense. In other words, your claim should require extra writing for support. This goes back to having an arguable thesis. If no one would

disagree with your thesis statement, there is no point in writing the rest of your paper. Make sure your thesis narrows down your topic into something manageable, but also make sure that you are arguing for something that has not been well-established.

Remember that your thesis statement is the backbone of your essay. It is important to have this part of your essay down before you work on anything else. Having a thesis statement will keep your writing focused and help you avoid wandering down tangents unrelated to the point you are trying to establish.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should not simply be a reiteration of what has already been said throughout your article. While a brief summary can certainly be an aspect of your conclusion, there should be more substance. Your conclusion is an appropriate time to reflect on how your findings fit into larger academic conversation. What have you managed to establish? What questions still exist, or perhaps what questions have risen up from your findings? Most importantly, why should someone care about the research you have done? One way to think about this is to imagine someone reading your article and saying, “Okay...so what?” How would you explain the importance of your work to them? In many senses, the conclusion is the most important part of your article. It allows you to put your research into context and explains to readers why what you have done is important.

Writing Clearly

Audience Awareness

Who are you writing to? One of the biggest challenges every author faces is trying to determine their audience. You cannot possibly know every person who will read your paper, so you will need to think critically about the characteristics your intended audience will most likely possess. What beliefs and values do they hold? What knowledge do they already possess?

For example, an article will look completely different depending on whether you intend it for a general audience or a technical audience. When writing for a general audience, you may find that you need to provide more background information and use simpler, less technical information. On the other hand, a technical audience will be well-versed in your subject. You may still need to provide some background information, but not nearly as much. Note that you still need to make sure you’re writing clearly, regardless of your audience. What’s changing is the amount of information you provide, as well as what kind of information and how you explain it.

If you intend for your article to be persuasive, you need to think about who you’re trying to convince and what it is that they already believe. The better you can understand your audience, the more effectively you can address their beliefs and values. It’s common to acknowledge an opposing side and refute their points. It can be tempting to want to tear down your opposition. However, keep in mind that you have to respectfully refute them. Your readers might be on their side initially. The last thing you want to do is imply to your reader that you think they are stupid or that their currently held beliefs are nonsense.

Graphs and Visuals

Graphs and other visuals are a great way to add clarity in displaying your research. Often, a graph can display a lot of information in a much smaller space than a written description. When providing a graph or visual, you should also use your text to note interesting highlights or the “big picture” takeaway.

A good graph will not misinterpret your data or portray it in a way that is misleading. It will present data in the clearest way possible. It should also have a caption that briefly but sufficiently explains what it is showing. Even if you are providing a textual summary of the image, you still should provide a caption so someone skimming through your article would be able to briefly look at the image and understand what it shows.

You should not be using graphs and visual aids just to make your paper seem longer or more researched. If something can be summarized easily within the text, a graph is likely unnecessary and distracting. For example, if you asked a yes or no question, it’s easy to summarize your results. However, if you asked a question that had a multitude of different responses that people could select, it would likely be appropriate to incorporate a visual.

Always make sure you are labeling your graphs clearly and making sure they are large enough that your reader can view their contents easily. Consult specific style guides for more details on how graphs and visuals should be formatted. If you are submitting to a journal, they may have their own standards in place as well. Make sure to carefully review them before submitting your manuscript for publication.

Word Choice and Sentence Structure

Beginning writers often worry about their writing sounding not formal enough, and as a result, they end up making awkward word choices. The best way to learn to write in a proper academic voice is to read scholarly articles in your discipline. Over time, you will catch on to sophisticated word choices and eloquent phrasings.

Avoid using casual language in your writing, but don’t use a thesaurus to try and sound more intelligent. Take advantage of writing services on campus and recognize that becoming a good writer is a lifelong pursuit. Working closely with faculty on their research and manuscript preparation can also be very helpful.

Additionally, keep in mind that an abundance of long sentences is also not the best way to write. A mix of shorter and longer sentences helps your paper flow. Avoid long sentences that are joined to each other by a bunch of commas, as they will tire your reader out and make them forget what point you were trying to make in the first place, kind of like how this sentence is going on and on for the sake of making a point. Especially when you’re trying to convey a sophisticated concept or complex research finding, try to mix short and long sentences, possibly a long sentence introducing a concept, then a shorter sentence providing follow-up and clarity.

Borrowing from Other Writers

Finding Credible Sources

Your credibility is in part dependent on the credibility of the sources that you are using. Scholarly articles are preferable to general websites (additionally, they tend to be much easier to cite). You have access to many different databases through the McIntyre Library, as well as books and physical journals. If you are having

difficulty finding relevant and credible sources, stop by the Reference Desk on the first floor of the library and they will be more than happy to help you out.

The Literature Review

Depending on your discipline and topic, it may be appropriate to include a review of the existing literature. This can be done to establish your scholarly credibility, situate your audience with the work that has already been done, and establish a purpose for your study.

A literature review is not an exhaustive summary of all the work that has been done on your topic. If all you are doing in a literature review is summarizing an article, it does not need to be there. Rather, you need to be critically evaluating past research, drawing connections between studies, emphasizing gaps in the existing body of knowledge, and placing your study into a larger context.

For example, perhaps you are closely replicating a study, but while the initial researchers were only able to sample elderly individuals, your sample will consist of college students. It would be appropriate to summarize relevant aspects of their work, but also explain the limitations of their study and how your study will seek to add clarification.

The flow of the literature review should be fluid, with clear connections being drawn between different articles. If the only clear connection is that all of these articles were on the same topic, you have not done your job. Ultimately, a literature review is your chance to explicitly highlight how your study fits into the larger realm of academia while giving readers the context they will need to understand your article.

Direct Quotes

Direct quotes should be used sparingly, especially when the material could easily be summarized by you. Exceptions to this could include times when you are specifically examining the language used in a quote (as is done in a literary analysis), the quote is providing an important definition, or you want to present readers with a particularly eloquent or well-stated passage that would be difficult to summarize.

If you do use a direct quote, you need to at least do three things: introduce the speaker of the quote, include the quote, and summarize the quote or explain its significance.

Introducing the speaker means giving at least their name. It is highly encouraged that the introduction also briefly establishes the speaker's credibility. This could mean providing the individual's credentials (John Smith, a doctor of chemistry, states...) or emphasizing where the article was published (In an article published in the highly regarded academic journal *Sample Name*, John Smith states...). If you include multiple quotes by the same individual, you need only introduce their credibility once.

The quote should be included in quotation marks unless it is lengthy, in which case a block quote would be used. If the quote is lengthy, consider if all of it is necessary. If there are bits not relevant to the argument you want to make, you can omit them and indicate that you've done so. Excessive use of block quotes creates the impression that you know the quote is somehow important, but you're not sure how, so you're including as much information as possible and hoping you've captured the relevant information.

Lastly, the most important thing is that you are summarizing the quote. It is never acceptable to end a quote and move on to something else. You need to pause and summarize this quote or its importance. Why was it

important for readers to be exposed to this content? Quoting without any kind of follow-up will make you look lazy.

To summarize, if a direct quote is important enough for you to use, you have to make sure you are slowing down in your own writing to give it proper treatment. Since you're ultimately going to have to summarize or explain the importance of the quote anyway, it's oftentimes easier to do a simple paraphrase in the first place.

Document Formatting and Citations

Within your discipline, there is most likely a writing style that is preferred (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). However, do keep in mind that if you are preparing your document for publication in a journal, you will need to review their standards and make sure your document conforms to them.

Purdue OWL has excellent resources for most of the common writing styles. The Center for Writing Excellence and Reference Desk in the library also have style guides available and can help answer any questions you encounter.

Resources

There are many resources available to you throughout the process of writing your article. When in doubt, ask for help. No one expects you to know everything, but you are expected to take initiative and find answers to your questions.

The **Research & Instruction Department** of the McIntyre Library is the place to go if you're wanting to choose or narrow down a topic, find credible sources, clarify citation questions, or really talk with someone about how you see your research fitting into the "big picture." You can reach their staff by phone, email, online chat, or by stopping at the Reference Desk on the first floor of the library. They also can help you schedule an appointment with a librarian, which can be anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour.

This department is incredibly friendly and accessible. Even if you feel like you've got a good handle on finding sources, they will likely be able to share some wisdom with you, and talking with another person can help you gain perspective. Maybe there's something quite large that you've overlooked, or they know how to find a source you otherwise wouldn't have even thought about. Additionally, they have information about different publication opportunities, so if you are interested in seeing your article published in more than the McNair Program's journal, they'll be able to provide you information on that as well. These people are well-versed in information literacy, and they're a great resource for you to take advantage of.

The **Center for Writing Excellence (CWE)** takes both appointments and walk-ins, and they are available to help you at any stage of the writing process, including brainstorming, conducting a literature review, preparing a rough draft, and polishing up a final draft. Additionally, you have the option of working with the same tutor on a regular basis in what's called a sustained appointment. Your paper will no doubt be lengthy by the time you're finishing up your draft. Rather than rushing through one appointment, sustained appointments allow you to give each part of your paper the time it deserves.

The CWE is by no means “just for bad writers.” No matter what level you’re writing at, they’ll be able to give you some really good feedback to make your paper even stronger. Additionally, if citations are really hanging you up, they’ll be happy to introduce you to some good resources. Expect to go in and be engaged throughout the session. The more you put into it, the more you’ll get out of it.

Lastly, the **McNair Program** is of course here to help you at any step of the process. If you don’t know where to begin, are feeling overwhelmed, want someone to look over what you have already written, or need anything else, please stop by our office and we will be glad to help you. We also have a study space with computers, iPads, and several different reference books for you to use.