

Teaching Citation and Documentation Norms

Overview

There are at least two approaches you might take when teaching students the citation norms in your discipline. You might focus primarily on avoiding plagiarism and producing appropriately formatted in-text citations and reference lists; alternatively, you might use a discussion of citation norms as an opportunity to help students become more aware of how those norms function rhetorically within your scholarly community. The former might be preferable if you have limited time available, while the latter can allow for deeper understanding of how to interpret and produce key scholarly moves.

General Considerations

Even first-year students generally know that they should cite others' work in order to avoid plagiarizing. However, undergraduates at all levels don't necessarily understand:

- a. How to integrate in-text citations properly.
- b. How to format reference lists and understand the logic behind the formatting rules.
- c. How to determine what kind of sources they are working with (ex: should they consider a compact disc a "cd-rom" or a "sound recording"?) and where to locate key identifying information to cite (ex: how can they tell which is the volume number and which is the issue number in a scholarly article?)
- d. That "patchwork plagiarism," or the cobbling together of snippets gathered from many sources, is plagiarism.
- e. What counts as common knowledge in your discipline and what needs to be cited.

Furthermore, students often see citation norms as arbitrary rules that they must follow only to avoid getting in trouble for plagiarizing. Yet, honoring disciplinary citation norms also helps scholars perform several other crucial tasks that students might not immediately recognize:

- f. Providing research aid to those studying similar questions.
- g. Establishing credibility—showing that one has read and understood key works.
- h. Drawing attention to the contributions of others.
- i. Signaling original contributions—citing work by others in order to highlight what is new in one's own.

A lesson plan that explores the rhetorical roles proper citation plays in scholarship should probably address the issues of avoiding plagiarism and producing proper formatting first, in order to relieve student anxieties about these questions, and then move on to helping students see how they can use citation norms to position themselves within a larger scholarly discourse.

Exercises

Classroom activities can be designed to discourage plagiarism and to help students identify the rhetorical value of citations. The exercises below correspond to the problems listed above. The first exercise (a) may be the most helpful if your goal is to teach students how to format in-text citations and reference lists properly.

- a. Walk students through a published journal article in your field. Ask them to describe the in-text citations they see. When—if ever—are authors' names introduced within sentences ("According to Brown and White...")? And when are they tucked into parentheses "(Brown and White, 1999)"? Help them interpret the significance of these differences.
- b. Ask students to describe and interpret the patterns they see in a reference list or bibliography. What characteristics appear first? What appears second? Why might these things appear in the order they do?
- c. Give students a selection of sources to cite, along with a citation guide. Ask them to produce, individually or in groups, a properly formatted reference list. Make sure some of sources are unusual—compact discs, comic strips, data from a government web site—and that others lack explicit labels for key identifiers such as volume or issue number. Help students figure out how to cite these works as questions arise.
- d. Have students read a paragraph built from patchwork plagiarism and then another version of that paragraph that has been properly paraphrased and cited. Ask the students, individually or in groups, to rewrite and properly cite another paragraph of patchwork.
- e. Provide a set of facts, concepts, or arguments, including some that should be documented and others that count as common knowledge. Ask the students, individually or in groups, to decide which is which and explain why.
- f. Give students a specific research question to address. Provide a single, relevant article that includes at least two relevant references as a starting point and ask them to generate a list of 10-15 other possible resources by working their way through a "tree" of reference lists that branches off from the original two.
- g. Ask students to choose a field in which they consider themselves experts. (This doesn't have to be academic. Excellent soccer skills or a thorough knowledge of Beatles trivia could serve the purpose.) What lack of knowledge would prevent them from taking others seriously in this realm, and why? Share with them some key texts or ideas that play a crucial role in establishing your own respect for other scholars. What omissions would prevent you from taking others seriously, and why?
- h. Talk to students about your own academic genealogy—the scholars to whom you are indebted. How do you fit into a larger picture of scholarly exchange? How do you acknowledge your academic debts in your own writing?
- i. Walk your students through a paragraph or two of a published text from your field. Note the signaling moves that convey transitions between acknowledging research contributions of the past ("As Brown and White noted in 1992...") to original contributions the writers make in the present study ("To that end, I/we propose...").