

How & WHEN to CITE

When does your sentence need a citation?

- If it includes a quotation from a source
- If it includes information that is not common knowledge

? Why do you need to cite your sources?

Citations establish your reliability as a source. Consider your own level of expertise in relation to your audience: if you know a lot about the subject already (for instance, a lot of serious baseball fans have a high level of knowledge about specific batting statistics), but your target audience doesn't share that knowledge, you would need to establish your expertise with your audience. You can do so by informing your reader about your background (how/why you already know this information) or by adding citations. You should always check with your professor, however; some professors may always want to see citations in your work.

? What is common knowledge?

Common knowledge is **information that a well-educated person in your society would know.** For instance, most people know that there are 365 days in a year, or that the freezing point of water is 32 degrees Fahrenheit. You would not need to cite this information, even though you're presenting specific numbers. What counts as common knowledge can depend on who the writer is and the target audience. For instance, many GW students know that GW opened in the 19th century. A GW student writing for a GW audience would not need to cite that information. However, a student at another university probably wouldn't know when GW opened, and they would thus both need to look up that information and cite it.

? How do you decide if information is common knowledge?

Did you already know the information yourself?

A good test is to think of your own knowledge: Did you already know the information in the sentence? Or was it something that you learned in your reading on the subject? If it's something you learned in your reading, you should probably cite it.

Is the information shared disciplinary knowledge?

If you are writing within a discipline—within the field of history, child psychology, or biology—where there is common information that most people in that discipline would know, you don't need to cite that information (but see Rule 4 for a caveat to this point!).

Is the information shared cultural knowledge?

If you belong to a group where most people would know a particular piece of information (like GW students and professors knowing that GW opened as a university in the 19th century), you wouldn't need to cite that common, shared knowledge.

Are you a student writing to a professor?

Your professor may already know the information you're presenting. Nevertheless, their goals in assigning the piece of writing probably include wanting to see that you know how to cite your sources and wanting to know what sources you used. They're probably expecting to see citations for any information you learned about in your reading, or even in lecture.

How often do you need to provide citations?

Readers experience your writing one line at a time. When they see information that isn't common knowledge, they begin to wonder where that information comes from. Don't make them wait until the end of the paragraph - that's too late. **You need to signal where the information in each sentence originated.** Use the following examples as a guide; though they happen to use MLA citation style, the rules also apply to APA and Chicago Manual Style.

Many writers (especially in the social sciences and sciences) simply include parenthetical citations after every sentence that requires a citation. Others (especially in the humanities) find that practice stylistically awkward. Another option is to introduce the source within your text and then make it clear that the ensuing information comes from that source.

INCORRECT

In 2010, four WBC members arrived at GW to protest GW's gay-friendly university community. Two hundred counter-protesters gathered in response. The counter-protestors expressed their disagreement with the WBC in sometimes creative ways, including a Jesus impersonator who challenged the WBC sign reading "Jesus Hates You" (Rhodin).

CORRECT with parentheticals

In 2010, four WBC members arrived at GW to protest GW's gay-friendly university community (Rhodin). Two hundred counter-protesters gathered in response (Rhodin). The counter-protestors expressed their disagreement with the WBC in sometimes creative ways, including a Jesus impersonator who challenged the WBC sign reading "Jesus Hates You" (Rhodin).

CORRECT with in-text acknowledgements

In an online *Hatchet* article about a 2010 WBC protest at GW, staff writer Amy Rhodin reported that four WBC members came to GW to protest GW's gay-friendly university community. The article noted that two hundred counter-protestors gathered in response. The counter-protestors expressed their disagreement with the WBC in sometimes creative ways, including a Jesus impersonator who challenged the WBC sign reading "Jesus Hates You" (Rhodin).

BOTTOM LINE

If you're not certain whether or not a citation is needed, we recommend that you add one!