

The Purposes of and the Value of Documentation

Ken Petress

Too frequently, students have not learned or have forgotten how to and why to document external influences in their writing -- and speaking as well. Any time others' ideas are borrowed by us to make a point, bolster an argument, or to enhance our own work, we are tacitly obliged to acknowledge such assistance. Academics have a term for violating this expectation: **plagiarism**. Plagiarism can be reasonably equated with intellectual theft; the claiming, albeit implicitly, others' ideas and efforts as one's own.

Citing what work included in our efforts belongs to others has several benefits: (a) such citation allows the audience to locate the entirety of those sources an author/speaker employs as evidence, support, or influence so that the context and content of that influence or content can be examined for the purpose of determining whether or not the reader/listener agrees with the writer's/speaker's use of such sources; (b) such citations offer insights as to the timeliness, cogency, breadth, and relevance of support/influence claimed by an author/speaker. We can learn much by analysis of message makers' choice of support and influence; and (c) such citations allow readers/listeners opportunities to expand their own understanding of ideas by including referenced works in their knowledge base.

Too often, students mistake the obligation to cite sources to only direct quotes. While quotations are to be acknowledged, paraphrases, process, blueprints, procedures, scientific experiments, TV show transcripts, courtroom testimony, and artistic interpretations, etc. must also be acknowledged. Some information falls into the category of "public knowledge." Such information as: Columbus sailed to North America in 1492, the value of pi is 3.146, and the sun "rises" in the east are examples of public knowledge. Such claims as: Roger Bannister was the first human recorded to run one mile in four minutes or less; butterflies and moths are both categorized as Lepidoptera; and there is a three step approach to rational emotive therapy all must be accompanied by verifying/supporting documentation in the form of an end/foot note or similar acknowledgement to readers/listeners.

Footnotes or endnotes are familiar and common ways to alert readers to the sources to sources of information or influence. There are several formats for end/foot notes. These formats vary by discipline, publication demands, and professor expectations. Any method of citation, to be thorough and totally useful, has to point the reader/listener to the exact source of the information to allow those who wish to share and validate the citation.

Citations must be accurate, thorough, and detailed. It is a roadmap to the information or influence that the writer/speaker is disclosing to the audience. Inaccurate, incomplete, or vague citations are of little use to audiences and can be maddening. It is unethical to fail to completely divulge the sources you employ in your writing/speaking.

When I wrote my dissertation, I came across a published claim that seemingly added to a belief I had and which needed greater support to be used. I was excited and endeavored to locate the original source. Alas, the citation was either inaccurate, misplaced, or fabricated and I lost a great deal of time and suffered frustration due to this problem. I was forced to abandon my desired claim due to a dearth of support for it.

I mention "influence" in addition to information as needing to be acknowledged. Some examples follow. I acknowledge to my students, when information in my class notes, lectures, and handouts, are influenced by colleagues or former students. The idea to include personal journals in some of my courses came from a colleague and a former student who had experienced this learning tool in other classes; I acknowledge these contributions even though I employ a slightly different approach than did they for assignments. The process needs to be acknowledged as having influenced my work. My decision to record letter grades and to calculate final grades the way I do is a choice I learned from an Educational Research professor I had in graduate school and this approach deserves to be acknowledged when I explain or defend my grading procedure.

The worth of some readings may be assessed while perusing the sources cited list, another form of documentation. If, for example, I see a purported up-to-date scholarly article on gender issues in classroom settings and fail to see at least some of the 20 or so scholars' names as referenced authors from education, communication, psychology, sociology, physical education, and anthropology, I likely will not consider that piece as I expect a well read, contemporary scholar to have read and been influenced in some way from some of the major gender theorists. I cannot in good conscience demand that my favorite sources be cited by others; however, I can reasonably expect that some major scholars' work has been used or rebutted by authors/speakers making major points in controversial issues.

Diana Hacker's Bedford Handbook for writers; the Modern Language Association [MLA], the American Psychological Association [APA], and the Chicago Manual of Style are four of the many style formats employed by academics. Each of the manuals I am familiar with contain examples of suggested documentation formats as

well as a well written rationales and explanations of documentation's function and purpose. I suggest students seek out a professor in their major field and discuss the one or few style options typically used and then read the appropriate style manual's explanation and format examples. This will allow you to properly and ethically cite sources in your own work.