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EDITORIAL: Rules for References: Suggested Guidelines for Choosing Literature Citations for Research Articles in Applied Psychology

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Have you ever looked up a reference cited in a research article and found that it offered little in the way of proof or evidence for the point it was used to support? Or, worse yet, it had nothing to do with the point at all.

This common occurrence leads to concerns about quality control in the referencing process. There is almost nothing helpful written on this topic, and few people in the profession can even identify how they learned to do it. Therefore, we conducted a survey of reviewers' opinions of the proper rules for when and how references should be used to support points made in research articles in applied psychology and related fields.

Approximately 300 reviewers responded to the survey, or about two-thirds of the 450 asked. They included the editorial board and ad hoc reviewers for *Personnel Psychology*, and the boards of *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Academy of Management Review*.

The reviewers' opinions were distilled into a set of rules or guidelines for proper referencing in research articles. Only those rules that the vast majority of reviewers agreed with were retained. This set of suggested guidelines is like the Article Review Checklist (published as an editorial in the Fall, 1993 issue). As with the Checklist, these rules are not meant to be applied in some mechanical fashion or to replace the good judgment of the scientist. Instead, they are meant to be reminders of good practice in typical situations. We hope these "rules for references" will be a useful tool for reviewers, researchers, and students.

Rules for References

1. References are generally considered essential for the following purposes when writing research articles:
 - a. To acknowledge the source of a finding, theory, definition, technique, instrument, formula, or some other piece of information.
 - b. To recognize similar findings, theories, ideas, or opinions.
 - c. To recognize contradictory or different findings.
 - d. To support a point not well known or not universally accepted by readers.
2. References may also be needed for the following purposes:
 - a. To support a conceptual point or assertion.

- b. To justify the use of a method, technique, or instrument (e.g., reliability, validity, or appropriateness).
 - c. To support the importance or viability of a research topic, question, or purpose of a study.
3. References are not needed to support obvious or well accepted assertions or techniques, and fewer references are needed for tangential as compared to central points in an article.
 4. Assuming all other things are equal, references to findings in original reports of research and findings in meta-analyses are considered strong support.
 5. Findings in narrative reviews of research and references to theories may also be considered strong support in some instances.
 6. In general, references to the following sources are not considered strong support:
 - a. References to mere statements made in research articles that are not findings.
 - b. Textbooks.
 - c. Professional or trade journals, and similar non-refereed sources.
 - d. Newspapers and other popular press sources.
 7. All other things equal, preference should be given to articles that are:
 - a. Seminal (original) in an area of research.
 - b. More methodologically or conceptually rigorous.
 - c. More recent.
 8. Conversely, less preferred articles include:
 - a. Those that are selected solely because they are better known or more cited.
 - b. Those that are unavailable to other researchers and generally non-refereed (e.g., technical reports, working papers, etc.).
 - c. Those that are of limited circulation or difficult to obtain (e.g., conference papers, dissertations, etc.), unless they are the only sources available for the given purpose.
 9. Overall, the quality of a reference depends on the context within which it is being used. If it is appropriate to the context, then it is a good quality reference (e.g., popular press references may be appropriate to show public awareness of an issue).
 10. There are differences in referencing strategies for different types of articles. For example:
 - a. Review articles should be more comprehensive in the references included, while research articles should be more limited.
 - b. Articles in new or underdeveloped areas of research might include fewer references than in well developed areas. In addition, references to research in other disciplines that might be related to the new topic should be included when possible.
 11. Multiple references may be used for each of the following purposes:
 - a. To show that a topic is controversial or to recognize other view-points.

- b. To show different types of support (e.g., different types of studies, both research and theory, etc.).
 - c. To show the history of a research area or both early and recent work.
 - d. To show that other literature exists or that the literature is large.
 - e. To recognize multiple contributors to a literature.
 - f. To fully support the assertion being made.
12. Multiple references should not be used merely to show thoroughness and scholarship, or to educate the reader.
13. In general, the use of excessive numbers of references and extraneous or marginally relevant references should be avoided.
14. Self-references are appropriate when the author's research is directly relevant to the points being made. Self-references may also be needed to identify other articles that come from the same data set.
15. Excessive self-referencing should be avoided. In addition, self-referencing should not be used in place of more pertinent references, or merely to show that the author has expertise in the area.
16. References should always be double-checked to ensure that they correctly support the point being made.
17. Reference lists should always be double-checked to ensure accuracy and completeness (e.g., dates, page numbers, etc.).

By Michael A. Campion

Special thanks to the reviewers who participated in this project. We hope their insights and advice will improve the quality of references in articles published in our field. This project was conducted by Michael A. Campion (Editor), Carl P. Maertz, David K. Palmer, and Hweehoon Tan of Purdue University.