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# Citation Help in Databases: Helpful or Harmful?

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**Citation Help in Databases: Helpful or Harmful?**

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### **Abstract**

A review of the help files in several major databases revealed that database vendors have begun including information on citing sources, which has the potential to be very useful to students. Surprisingly, 94% of the citation examples in the databases reviewed had errors. The average number of errors per example was 4.3. The citation help appears to have been put together quickly, with little thought and no proofreading. Librarians must insist that vendors correct or remove this information.

### **Keywords**

Citations  
Citation style  
Databases  
Help files  
Accuracy

### **Introduction**

There is a widely held perception among librarians and other educators that plagiarism is on the rise in both secondary and higher education, fueled in part by the realities of writing in the electronic age. No doubt the availability of Web-based term paper mills has made the more blatant forms of cheating easier, but subtle forms of plagiarism also appear to be more widespread. Whether from laziness or ignorance, the ease of copying and pasting from electronic documents can easily lead to academic dishonesty.

Institutions have dealt with the issue of plagiarism in several ways. This issue of academic dishonesty has received a more prominent position in standards of conduct or honor codes, which often clearly delineate what constitutes plagiarism. Instructors and their institutions have taken advantage of the same digital technology that makes it easy to plagiarize by using anti-plagiarism software and database services to examine student writings. Teachers have been urged to design their assignments to emphasize the research process over the final product, requiring students to demonstrate their progress through a series of intermediate steps.

Librarians participate in information literacy initiatives, in which a key objective is to teach students about the ethical use of information so that they will avoid plagiarism. In a typical information literacy course, students are taught to correctly identify the intellectual contributions of others through the proper use of citations and bibliographies. Students are introduced to proper citation formats, and assignments often include an annotated bibliography or research paper requiring a specific citation style.

The skill of applying proper citation formats is one that many students struggle to master. Students have difficulty with it for a variety of reasons. Freimer and Perry note that

Many students come to college with very little experience in writing research papers, and have never acquired the habit of precise citation in an appropriate format....They are generally unfamiliar with the world of scholarship and with the role of a bibliography or a reference list in scholarly activity. (Freimer and Perry 1986, 11:350).

This is evidenced by students' lack of understanding of library terms. In a 1989 survey of first year college students' knowledge of library terms, "citation" was one of the least understood terms (Naismith and Stein 1989, 50:548). In another survey of first and second-year university students, "citation" and "bibliographic information" were two of the least recognized terms (Hutcherson 2004, 65:351.).

To properly cite sources, students need to be familiar with the different types of scholarly sources (books, periodicals, symposia, dissertations, government documents, etc.) and the different formats of these publications (paper, microfiche, microfilm,

computer data file, etc.) (Basefsky 1982). The World Wide Web has compounded the difficulty of citing sources by adding publication types, including Web sites, blogs, and e-mail, as well as additional formats for existing publication types, such as online periodicals and government documents.

In addition to lack of experience with scholarly sources, students must cope with a wide variety of citation styles and style manuals that are often ambiguous or difficult to use. Three of the most widely-used citation styles, MLA, APA and Chicago, have markedly different rules regarding arrangement, capitalization and punctuation of bibliographic information within a citation. Many undergraduates are required to use different styles in different classes during their college career, and do not get a chance to become proficient in any particular style.

Faculty often do not perceive formatting citations as a problem for students and so offer little support. This leads students to seek help from librarians. Traditionally, librarians have provided assistance with this task in a number of ways. They answer questions about citation style at the reference desk, create summarized style guides, and cover the topic in information literacy classes. New ways for students to get help with formatting citations include bibliographic citation management programs such as EndNote and RefWorks that allow users to store and organize references and automatically create bibliographies in many different styles. There are also free or inexpensive Web sites like Citation Machine (<http://citationmachine.net/>), NoodleBib (<http://www.noodletools.com/>) and EasyBib (<http://www.easybib.com/>) which automatically produce citations or bibliographies.

Many library subscription databases have begun including information about preparing citations within the database's Help file. In theory, this should be a welcome development. Students increasingly access databases from outside the library, where direct assistance from librarians is not readily available. While it may be convenient for students to access information on citing sources in the same database they find the sources, is this information accurate enough that librarians can direct patrons to it with confidence?

This paper will examine the information on preparing citations in seven different databases widely offered by undergraduate libraries: EBSCO Academic Search Premier; Gale InfoTrac OneFile; Xreferplus; ScienceDirect; Sociological Abstracts via CSA; Wilson Education Full Text; and LexisNexis Academic. The examination will cover the types of information available and the accuracy of the information, and suggest some changes to make this information more useful to students.

### **Methodology**

The seven databases were examined for help on citing sources. The location of the help was noted, along with key features (Figure 1). The text of each help section was read for accuracy. Examples of citations were reviewed for errors against the appropriate style manual: *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition; *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition; the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed.; or *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.

For EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Wilson Education Full Text, LexisNexis Academic and Gale InfoTrac OneFile, citation examples were available in the Help files. For the Xreferplus

database, which offers preformatted citations, five entries were selected for review. For CSA, which creates citations on demand, a search was performed in the Sociological Abstracts database, 10 sources selected from the search results, and citations created in APA, MLA, Chicago and Turabian styles, yielding 40 examples.

A description of each error found was entered into a spreadsheet along with the database name, category of error, and citation style. The categories of errors used were punctuation, capitalization, syntax, retrieval statement, use of italics/underlining, names, and date. A syntax error was defined as an error in which the order of the elements in the citation was incorrect, elements were missing, or elements were present in the citation that should not have been. Any omission, incorrect placement, or improper inclusion of information about online sources (such as the date accessed, database name, url, or library where accessed), were categorized as retrieval statement errors.

## **Results**

Figure 1 shows a summary of the citation help features for each database. Of the seven databases examined, only one, ScienceDirect, did not provide any information on citing sources in the traditional manner. A review of the ScienceDirect database uncovered no general information on citing sources or specific examples of how to cite a full-text article from the database. Step by step information is provided about how to create a digital object identifier (DOI) link, which is permanent and may be used to cite and link to electronic documents. This is located within the article citation under a link entitled “Cite or Link Using DOI.” There is also detailed information about exporting article citations to bibliographic citation management

programs such as EndNote. This information can be found in the article citation under Actions/Export Citations as well as in the Help section.

The Xreferplus database provides preformatted citations in APA, MLA and Chicago style at the bottom of each entry. A reference to the style manuals is included as well as a disclaimer that “While every effort has been made to follow the citation styles there may be minor discrepancies due to the necessities of online aggregated publishing.”

The CSA interface includes a feature called QuikBib that creates a bibliography of selected records in html, text, rtf or MS Word format in a choice of eight different styles: APA 5<sup>th</sup> ed.; APA 5<sup>th</sup> ed, annotated with abstracts; AMA 9<sup>th</sup> ed.; Chicago 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (author/date); MLA 6<sup>th</sup> ed.; MLA 6<sup>th</sup> ed. with subscriber information; Turabian 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (reference list); and Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals. This feature is located under Print/Email/Save. There is a disclaimer to “Always check your references for accuracy.”

Limited general information on each style is provided on an “output style instructions” sheet that includes a link to the official style guide Web site. There is no reference to the official style manual for any of the styles.

The remaining four databases (EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Gale InfoTrac OneFile, Wilson Education Full Text and LexisNexis) all provide help on citing sources within the Help file. They all contain general information about citing sources and citation styles and examples for both APA and MLA styles, EBSCO Academic Search Premier includes it for Chicago and Turabian as well. EBSCO Academic Search Premier was the only database to reference the official style manual. EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Gale InfoTrac OneFile and Wilson



Education Full Text all include a link to the official style guide Web site, and they all include some sort of disclaimer about accuracy. LexisNexis Academic did not provide a reference to the official style manual or Web site, or include a disclaimer.

The number of examples provided by each database (or generated by the authors for review), along with the number of errors and errors per example are shown in Figure 2. Errors by category and database are shown in Figure 3. Errors by style are summarized in Figure 4.

In all, 92 examples were reviewed in six databases. A surprising 86, or 94 %, contained errors. Of the 92 examples, only six examples were completely error-free. Two of these examples were in EBSCO Academic Search Premier and four were in Gale InfoTrac OneFile. There were 400 errors in total, or 4.4 errors per example. Gale InfoTrac OneFile had the fewest errors and lowest rate of errors per example at 17 and 1.7, respectively. Xreferplus had the highest rate of errors, with 84 errors in 15 examples, for a rate of seven errors per example. Wilson Education Full Text had 3.4 errors per example, followed by EBSCO Academic Search Premier with 4.4, Sociological Abstracts via CSA with 4.7 and LexisNexis Academic with 5.0.

Almost half of the errors were in the retrieval statement (46%). Syntax was the next highest category of errors with 23 %, followed by capitalization at 12 %, punctuation at 10 % and use of italics or underlining at 6 %. There were relatively few errors in the format of names and dates (1 % and 2 %). Turabian was the most problematic style, with an average of 5.6 errors per example, followed by MLA with 4.9 errors per example and Chicago with 4.1 errors per example. APA had the fewest errors per example at 3.4

## **Discussion**

As library patrons increasingly access databases from remote locations, the accuracy of available help within the online products becomes more important. Students searching from a dorm room or an off-campus apartment may not have the ready access to a reference librarian that research within the walls of the library affords. In this context, it is important for student success that the citation help files and research aids provided within online databases be easy to find, be comprehensible and, above all, be accurate.

It is noteworthy that all seven of the databases examined in this study had some provision for helping students to cite references. This seems to be a reflection of the emphasis libraries place in promoting correct citation usage among students. The amount of citation support ranged greatly in these databases, from the minimal provision of Digital Object Identifiers (DOI) and the help file explanation of how to cite them in ScienceDirect, to the QuikBib feature offered by CSA that automatically generates bibliographies in a choice of eight different styles.

## **Location of Help**

The inclusion of help features in a database is only useful if the searcher can readily locate it. A study of the use of library Web sites by experienced researchers found that placing redundant links to research tools and resources throughout various Web site levels helped researchers complete information-seeking tasks (Mack, Manoff, Miller and Smith 2004). It is logical to expect that students would be more likely to access help on formatting citations if the help were available both at the bibliographic record level and in the database's help file.

Of the four databases that offer information in the Help file on citing sources (EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Wilson Education Full Text, Lexis Nexis Academic and Gale InfoTrac OneFile), none has a direct link to this information at the bibliographic record level. In three of the databases, EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Wilson Education Full Text, and Lexis Nexis Academic, this information is only two clicks away from the bibliographic record screen, within the Help file. For these databases, the link to the Help file is present on all screens in the database, but there is no indication that this file includes information on citing sources. (Insert figures 5-7).

In the Gale InfoTrac OneFile database, the help file is context sensitive. For example, in the main search screen, the Help link on the left navigation bar is labeled “Help – Searching.” On the search results page, the Help link is labeled “Help – Citations.” (Insert figure 8). At the bibliographic record level, the citation help is replaced with help on displaying articles. The complete Help index is only reachable on certain screens. While the help on citing articles is only one click away on the search results page, it’s harder to locate if the user is on any other screen in the database. For all four of these databases, a descriptively labeled link in the bibliographic record that goes directly to the information on citing references would make the help more accessible.

The Xreferplus database provides preformatted citations in three formats directly beneath each full-text entry, where users are likely to see them. (Insert figure 9). There is a short entry on citing sources in the help file, but it is very brief and offers no examples of the different citation styles supported by the database.

ScienceDirect has a link to information on citing or linking using a DOI directly above each bibliographic record. (Insert figure 10) There is no information in the help files on formatting citations.

The CSA interface has the ability to export formatted citations in eight styles from the Save/Print/Email function on the results list page. (Insert figure 11) There is no indication that clicking on the Save/Print/Email function provides citation assistance. Information on how to use the QuikBib function to generate bibliographies is included in the Help file, which is linked on all screens.

#### References to Sources of Style Information

While citation examples in the Help files should provide students with guidance in formatting their bibliographies, it is inevitable that students will encounter sources which do not fit a limited number of examples. The seven databases offered a variety of references to additional sources of information. Only two databases, EBSCO Academic Source Premier and Xreferplus, suggested that students consult the official style manuals for more information. Strangely, Gale InfoTrac One File refers students to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* as well as the APA style Web site, but for MLA style, only refers students to the Web site.

Sociological Abstracts via CSA, Wilson Education Full Text and LexisNexis Academic provide links to at least one of the style guide's Web sites, but do not reference the style manuals. While it would seem obvious that students who are working in an electronic database would prefer to consult a Web site over a print manual for citation help, the style guide Web sites vary widely in

the amount of information they provide, with some offering very little in the way of specific examples or detailed help. It would be preferable that the help files direct students to both the Web site and the print manual for additional information.

Of the seven databases examined, the Help files of EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Gale InfoTrac OneFile, Wilson Education Full Text and LexisNexis Academic all advised the user to consult with their instructors, editors, institution or library for style preferences. Obviously, this is good advice. Since many academic libraries maintain Web-mounted electronic style guides prepared specifically for their students, it would be very helpful if the database Help files were customizable to allow direct linking to those guides. In that way, students would be much more likely to access the library's citation resources at the point of need.

#### Accuracy of Examples

When trying to format citations, it can be very helpful to have access to samples of correct citations for a variety of material types. The databases varied widely in the number of examples provided in the Help files, from a low of zero in ScienceDirect, to a high of 12 in Wilson Education Full Text, as is shown in Figure 2. At first glance, it would seem that the significant number of examples offered by many databases would be a boon to students. Surprisingly, and unfortunately for students, rather than providing accurate information, most of the examples found in the databases surveyed were riddled with errors.

The most common type of error, accounting for 47% of the total errors, involved mistakes in the retrieval statement. Electronic resources are a relatively recent phenomenon and not all style

manuals provide clear instruction on how to cite them, so it would be most helpful to students if the electronic resources could provide correct examples of how their materials should be cited. For example, Sociological Abstracts via CSA is a database containing abstracts and indexing only. It is not full-text, yet all the citation examples generated by the QuikBib feature include retrieval information indicating that the articles were obtained full-text online. This error, along with several others, can be seen in the four examples that follow.

**APA**

Ortiz, A.T., & Briggs, L. (2003). The culture of poverty, crack babies, and welfare cheats: The making of the “healthy white baby crisis”. *Social Text*, 21 (3(76)), 39-57. Retrieved January 20, 2005, from Sociological Abstracts database.

**MLA**

Ortiz, Ana Teresa, and Laura Briggs. “The culture of poverty, crack babies, and welfare cheats: The making of the healthy white baby crisis”.” Social Text 21.3(76) (2003): 39-57. Sociological Abstracts. CSA [insert library name here]. 20 Jan. 2005 <www.csa.com>.

**Chicago**

Ortiz, Ana Teresa, and Laura Briggs. 2003. The culture of poverty, crack babies, and welfare cheats: The making of the “healthy white baby crisis”. *Social Text* 21 (3(76)) (fall): 39-57, [www.csa.com](http://www.csa.com) (accessed January 20, 2005).

**Turabian**

Ortiz, Ana T., Laura Briggs. 2003. The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats: The Making of the “Healthy White Baby Crisis”. *Social Text* 21, no. 3(76): 39-57. Database on-line. Available from CSA, Sociological Abstracts, 200404907 </pre></body> </html>.

The retrieval statements in the examples of full-text articles found in Wilson Education Full Text and LexisNexis Academic were also mostly incorrect. The format of retrieval statements is markedly different among APA and MLA styles. Strangely, retrieval statements in citations in Xreferplus were the same, as if these two citation styles were identical. This is illustrated by the examples below for the entry on “zydeco” from the Columbia Encyclopedia in Xreferplus.

**APA**

zydeco. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (2004). Retrieved 18 April 2005, from Xreferplus.  
<http://www.Xreferplus.com/entry/4308084>

### MLA

“zydeco”. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (2004). Retrieved 18 April 2005, from Xreferplus.  
<http://www.Xreferplus.com/entry/4308084>

Syntax errors, in which the order of the elements in the citation was incorrect, elements were missing, or elements were present in the citation that should not have been, accounted for 23% of the total errors. Below is an example in APA style from Gale InfoTrac OneFile with two syntax errors: “in” is missing before the encyclopedia name, and there is an unidentified number after the encyclopedia name.

Food Preservation (2000). *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (Edition 6) 13991. Retrieved February 14, 2002, from InfoTrac Web General Reference Center Gold A69027426.

More than half of the errors in capitalization were generated by CSA’s QuikBib feature, which does not have the ability to identify proper nouns, as shown in the following APA example:

Tessler, R., Adams, G., Houlihan, L., & Groza, V. (2004). Mother-daughter relationships among chinese and romanian adoptees. *International Journal of Child & Family Welfare*, 7(1), 26-43. Retrieved January 20, 2005, from Sociological Abstracts database.

At the top of the QuikBib bibliography, there is a general disclaimer to “always check your references for accuracy” with a link to “click here for more information”. Clicking for more information provides some general guidelines about APA style. About halfway down the screen are instructions to “Capitalize only the first word of the title and of the subtitle, if any, and any proper nouns”. However, it seems unlikely that users will find this information. CSA could

do a better job of alerting users to this flaw in the QuikBib feature by including a more explicit statement.

Other types of errors seem to indicate that the producers of the help files failed to do the most rudimentary proof-reading. Wilson Education Full Text gives a generic format for several types of sources, followed by specific examples. Unfortunately, the specific examples often fail to follow the generic format. For example, the generic example for a full text article in MLA format correctly shows all significant words in an article title with initial capitals, while the example that immediately follows has only the first word of the title capitalized. In addition, the retrieval information in the generic format is incorrect because the library name and location are not listed as elements.

**Citing a Full Text periodical article in the MLA style  
(a simplified adaptation)**

Author's Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." Journal/Magazine Title Date of  
[Indent 5 spaces] Publication: pages (s). Database Name. Online. H.W. Wilson.  
[Indent 5 spaces] Available: <electronic address> access date.

**Example:**

Willwerth, James. "Get off my turf." Time 24 Aug. 1998:68-69 Readers' Guide  
Abstracts Full Text Online. H.W. Wilson. Available:  
< <http://www.hwwilsonweb.com> > 30 Sept. 1998.

One example in MLA style from EBSCO Academic Search Premier that revealed a lack of proofreading follows:

Phillips, Charles. "A DAY TO REMEMBER April 22, 1989." American History 39.1 (2004):  
16-20. Academic Search Premier. EBSCOhost. Insert library name, City, State. 24 May. 2004  
<<http://search.epnet.com>>.

In MLA style, the first letter of all significant words in the title are shown in initial capitals, not in all capitals. When the citation was retrieved in the database, the article title appeared in all



capitals in the bibliographic record. Clearly, it had been copied and pasted as is into the help files, without any further review.

Xreferplus is perhaps the most misleading database examined as far as citation format goes. Students can obtain preformatted citations in any of three styles simply by clicking on a link below the reference, which they can copy and paste into a bibliography. In theory, this feature should greatly simplify the process of generating accurate bibliographies. However, the citations generated by Xreferplus were significantly inaccurate in all three styles, with an average of seven errors per citation. There is an additional link labeled “Citing this entry,” which contains a disclaimer suggesting that there may be “minor discrepancies” between the given citation and the style manual, but that “every effort has been made to follow the citation styles.” If students bother to check out the disclaimer, it is worded in a sufficiently weak way that it is unlikely that most would consider follow up by checking out the style manual.

### **Conclusion**

Information provided about citing sources varies widely among the databases reviewed, but all the databases which contained information had many errors. If students aren't confused about citation styles when they start their research, surely they will be by the time they consult the help files. It is apparent that much of this information was put together hastily, without reference to the official style manuals or any proofreading. This does not speak well for the quality control practices of database vendors or for that matter, their marketing savvy.

Inaccurate help is misleading to students and is a credibility issue for librarians. As librarians, we tell students that subscription databases are usually better sources for papers than Internet sites, yet they would get better instruction on how to cite sources by finding style guide pages on university Web sites than using the information provided in these databases. Given that there was an average of 4.4 errors per example, the information is currently not accurate enough to be recommended to students.

Having information about citing sources from a database available in the database itself could be extremely useful to students and a welcome enhancement to database Help files. However, to be useful, the information must, above all, be accurate. Many of the errors in the examples reviewed could have been detected easily by proofreading or checking the official style manual. Librarians must emphasize to database vendors that we would prefer no information to incorrect information. When choosing databases, the quality of the Help file should be an important selection criteria. Libraries spend significant amounts of money to subscribe to databases. Librarians must insist that any inaccurate information be corrected or removed. Anything less would be doing our patrons a disservice.

Students will be much more likely to find and use the help on citing sources if there is a link to it from within the bibliographic citation. To be useful to students, it must include examples specific to the database, rather than examples from the vendor's other databases. The help on citing sources should always refer students to the official style manuals for further information and include a disclaimer. Finally, the help should be customizable so that a link to the school's

style guide and to the email and telephone contact information for the reference desk could be included.

Figure 1.

	ASP	OF	XRP	SD	SA/CSA	EFT	LN
Citation Help	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location	Help	Help	Bottom of record	Record	Save, Print, Email	Help	Help
General Info	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Examples	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Preformatted citations	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Citations on demand	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
# Styles	4	2	3	0	8	2	2
Refer to manual	Yes	MLA-No APA-Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Refer to official Web site	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Disclaimer	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

Figure 2. Examples and Errors

	ASP	OF	XR	SD	SA/CSA	EFT	LN	Total
Examples	8	10	15	0	40	12	7	92
Errors	35	17	84	NA	188	41	35	400
Errors per example	4.4	1.7	7.0	NA	4.7	3.4	5.0	4.4

Figure 3. Errors by Category

	ASP	OF	XRP	SD	SA/CSA	EFT	LN	Total	% of total errors
Punctuation	10	3	16	NA	8	3	2	42	10 %
Capitalization	6	2	10	NA	26	2	1	47	12 %
Syntax	10	4	25	NA	48	2	3	92	23 %
Retrieval statement	7	2	30	NA	94	25	24	182	46 %
Italics/underlining	2	4	3	NA	5	9	2	25	6 %
Names		2		NA			2	4	1 %
Date				NA	7		1	8	2 %
Total	35	17	84	NA	188	41	35	400	100%

Figure 4. Errors by Style

	ASP	OF	XRP	SD	SA/CSA	EFT	LN	Total errors	Total examples	Errors per example
APA	1	5	30	NA	24	19	19	98	29	3.4
MLA	3	12	35	NA	78	22	16	166	34	4.9
Chicago	12	NA	19	NA	38	NA	NA	69	17	4.1
Turabian	19	NA	NA	NA	48	NA	NA	67	12	5.6
Total	35	17	84	NA	188	41	35	400	92	4.4

## Key:

ASP	EBSCO Academic Search Premier
OF	Gale InfoTrac OneFile
XRP	Xreferplus
SD	ScienceDirect
SA/CSA	Sociological Abstracts via CSA
EFT	Wilson Education Full Text
LN	LexisNexis Academic

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