

Academic Writing and Referencing: a Sine Qua Non for Academic Excellence

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Abstract

The need to properly document sources of information and, indeed, credit original owners of intellectual property for their works is a standard practice in the world. Failure to acknowledge or properly document sources cited in one's work often lead to accusations of plagiarism and copyright infringements, which have dire consequences on the moral reputation and academic excellence of the authors. Closely related to this is the universal requirement for all scholars to be conversant with the techniques of referencing and reference system. This paper discusses the mandatory ethical requirement that academics must always acknowledge others' idea incorporated into their works to avoid plagiarism through the art or science of acceptable referencing.

Keywords:

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Background to the Study

Reference writing is an important mental and physical exercise. It is a necessary requirement for some kinds of writing and optional in others. However, researchers, young academics, postgraduate students and, indeed, many writers are often faced with one major problem: how to report and document sources of their research findings. They are often faced with the problem of choice of an appropriate referencing style just as adhering to an acceptable referencing tradition or guide. Although, there is no uniform standard of referencing and documenting sources of information, adhering to a particular standard referencing guide is a mark of scholarship.

Specifically, referencing in academic writing distinguishes scholars from laymen. Academic writing entails writing reports of empirical or field studies, technical or methodical reports, theoretical or philosophical enquiries, projects, theses, dissertations, research reports, conference or seminar papers, among others. The vigorous nature of academic writing stands it out from the rest, such as the journalese writing style with little or no referencing. Academic writing, therefore, is no loose talk, mere continuous writing, or unreferenced narrative with little or no facts or evidence of strong claims. Academic writing is scientific, verifiable, and objective with documented facts. When you write, you direct readers' attention to other works, especially materials you have used or quoted to buttress what you have written.

Proper citing and referencing in one's work makes it easy for others to locate the sources of materials used in the work. It allows the writer the space to demonstrate the credibility of his work. It provides a scale to assess the author's ideas from those of others, prevents plagiarism. Above all, it gives the author an opportunity to show respect to others.

In academic writing, the term "documentation" refers to "a record, usually inscribed or written, which conveys information and which is relied on to establish facts and include any form of graphic, acoustic or haptic record (book, cutting, map; manuscript; drawing, periodical etc.)" (University of Maiduguri: Library Instruction Manual, 1999). Aguolu (1999) posits that documentation is "a word both frequently misused and imprecisely understood; with the word itself carrying wide connotations." He further quotes *The Chamber Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1972) as defining documentation as "preparation, setting forth or use of documentary evidence and authorities."

When writing a scholarly publication, it is necessary to support every piece of information with a reference. Aguolu (1999) observes that today the non-acknowledgement of sources of quotations which one has used or of the significant ideas of another writer, which one has integrated into one's written work, is highly reprehensible, if not downright dishonest. In the light of this, the failure to acknowledge sources of quotations and/or ideas of others lead to plagiarism also baptized as "intellectual theft" or "intellectual property theft".

Plagiarism: Definitions and what it is

Scholars, teachers and students alike in the tertiary institutions often engage in the enterprise of critical writing, research and paper publication in their bid to push further the frontiers of knowledge. They often resort to the use of outside sources to establish credibility of their work and indicate their accountability to their source materials. This is so because, as Human Development (2009) has noted, a research paper presents the result of one's investigations on a selected topic based on one's own thoughts, facts and ideas that one gathers from a variety of sources, thus being a creation that is uniquely one's. However, academics are often plagued with the temptations to plagiarize other peoples' works. This is because of a variety of reasons.

Academic writing is not easy. Some authors do not know how best to create their own sentences. Thus, when a writer is bereft of how to construct their own language, the only way out is to plagiarize the language of others, usually, word for word or, in some cases, paraphrasing other authors' language. In a number of cases, some writers lack ideas. What they do is to appropriate other authors' ideas and claim them as theirs. Direct copying has often resulted from writers who think the works they use to write their lack an identifiable authorship. Inability to attribute authorship has often resulted to plagiarism. To submit an article or a portion of another person's work in order to gain promotion or recognition has often occurred in some cases. In all these, what frees the authors from the accusations of plagiarism is the inability to acknowledge the sources of the works used in the works.

Janicke (2002) submits that plagiarism is a difficulty concept to define. It includes a range of actions from failure to use proper citation to wholesale cheating. Plagiarism occurs when a person uses or reduces another person's idea or a part of his work, paraphrases a research finding and pretends that it is one's own. Melemee (2004) quoted *The Oxford English Dictionary* as defining plagiarism as "the wrongful appropriation or purloining, and publication as one's own, of the ideas or the expression of ideas... of another." Jill (1997) refers to plagiarism as the presentation or submission of the work of another without citation or credits. He further affirms the foregoing statements when he states that whenever the thoughts, words, drawings, designs, are copied and displayed as your own work, this is plagiarism. Accordingly, Spatt (1983) captures plagiarism as a practice where there is a failure to acknowledge thus:

Art, graphics, computer programs, music, choreograph and other creative expression. The work may consists of writing, charts, pictures, graphs, diagrams, data, websites, or other communication or recording media, and may include words, ideas, computer code, or any work by someone else without giving proper credit is plagiarism.

Melemee (2004) views the term plagiarism as applying to the imitation of the structure, research and organization of any work. The word plagiarism was first used in its current sense in the first century AD by the Roman poet, Martial, in a sarcastic to demean another writer who had cribbed some of Martial's verse (Melernee, 2004). Similarly, Babbie (1998) asserts that when we borrow words and ideas from others, acknowledge that we are doing so, and we give our readers a full bibliographic reference so they would be able to locate and read the original.

It is a truism that academic writing and research cannot be conducted in a vacuum. This is why Davis (2001) avers that in writing, we draw upon others' words and ideas and the intellectual heritage underlying human progress. In the same vein, scholarship entails, not just researching, understanding and building upon the work of others, but also giving proper credit to any given borrowed information (Davis, 2001). Davis(2001) further stresses that plagiarism refers to using another's work without giving credit. It is thus required that others' words must be put in quotation marks or referenced. The sources and ideas must be cited even if those ideas are paraphrased.

Accordingly, the Washington State University or WSU (2004) indicates that there are two circumstances that could give rise to charge of plagiarism:

- i. Cheating (intentional plagiarism)
- ii. Misuse of sources (unintentional plagiarism)

WSU (2004) notes that cheating occurs where one knowingly appropriates the work of others and passes them off as one's works. These occur in a variety of these situations:

1. Copying entire documents and presenting them as one's own;
2. Cutting and pasting the work of others without properly citing the author;
3. Stringing together the quotes and ideas of others without connecting their work to one's own original work;
4. Asserting ideas without acknowledging their sources, reproducing sentences written verbatim along others without properly quoting and attributing the work to them.

WSU (2004) describes intentional plagiarism as the appropriation of ideas and materials of others to a lack of understanding of the conventions of citation and documentation. WSU (2004) classifies what does not need to be cited as follows:

1. Common knowledge (often determined by audience and context).
2. Things within the public domain such as
 - i. Dictionary definitions
 - ii. Information from common encyclopedias
 - iii. Most headline news
 - iv. Any art, music; science, invention that has an expired copyright or over which no ownership or current proprietary interest
 - v. Work created before proprietary laws were created
 - vi. Mathematical formulas
3. Your own words and ideas in your own work
4. Clip Art on your Computer.

WSU (2004) terms the following as Grey Areas, that is, areas in which citing and referencing are required: new scientific discoveries even if headline news and things that maybe common knowledge to you but not to others. The following according to Washington State University (2004) are the areas:

When Citation and Attribution are needed:

1. Any facts taken from sources that are not common knowledge or are not in the public domain
2. Any quotation even if you are quoting something (e.g. quoting from a dictionary or encyclopaedia)
3. Using proprietary materials such as pictures, sounds, and videos.

Referencing and Citation Styles

To avoid unpleasant circumstances and situations being termed fraudulent, there is the need to document all sources used in the process of preparing academic papers Oyetunde (2002) notes that:

If you fail to rise to the challenge of documenting your sources accurately, you will not be taken seriously or you will be regarded as irresponsible or a fraud. Above all you will be guilty of plagiarism, an offence which may attract serious penalties, if discovered

An important requirement of accurate documentation is doing it in a consistent way, using a designated referencing style. Thus, Badcock (2001) avers that when you write an essay and include someone else's ideas you need to acknowledge this original source. This is called referencing or citing and the detailed description you need to provide is called a reference or (a citation). Referencing is an acknowledgment of another person's intellectual work (Badcock, 2001). The act of using and not referencing another person's work is called plagiarism. Badcock (2001), acknowledging the necessity of referencing, observes thus:

Referencing makes it possible for your reader to locate your sources independently, whether out of interest or the need to verify your information. And also by referring to the work of others you are indicating that you have read widely, that you have relied on quality sources and that you are aware of the body of knowledge that already exists in your topic.

To avoid being charged for plagiarism, authors, scholars, academics and writers need to provide a reference wherever they quote, paraphrase, or summarise someone else's work (Spatt, 1983). Accordingly, you must also reference any graphical information you use such as tables, photographs or diagrams (Badeock, 2001). Styles of referencing exist to ensure adequate documentation, citing and referencing. The most popular methods of citing and referencing sources are:

1. Modern Language Association Style (MLA): used in the field of Literature, Arts and Humanities
2. American Psychological Association Style (APA): used in Psychology, Education- and- other social sciences discipline.
3. Turabian Citation Style: mostly used by undergraduates.
4. American Medical Association Style: used in Medicine, Health and Biological sciences.
5. Chicago Manual Style
6. The Harvard system.

The system of referencing adopted is influenced by the requirement of the particular field of study, the journal editorial policy or the institution. This article examines the APA style of referencing. APA style makes a distinction between references and bibliography. References is a list of sources, which have been referred to in the work. That is, the works have been consulted and referred to in the body of the work. Bibliography, on the other hand, refer to sources read, consulted but not specifically quoted in the body of the world. In other words, bibliography consists of a comprehensive listing of materials consulted for guidance in the course of writing a paper without necessarily quoting from it

References usually appear after the last chapter of a work or last section of a complete paper before the appendix. In essence, every book, article, thesis or manuscript, which has been read and cited in the body of the work should be included in the list of references. Badcock (2001) enumerates materials that need to be referenced to include books or chapters in book, journals or newspaper articles, conference papers, video or television excerpts, personal communications, such as interviews, emails or letters and electronic sources, namely, web pages, journal articles from online databases, or even software.

APA Rules and Guidelines

APA style has specific rules and guidelines for citing and referencing materials used in a piece of work. These rules and guidelines are as follow:

1. References should appear in hanging indent form, that is, indent the second and the following lines 5 to 7 spaces or one half inch.
2. Name of periodicals (titles) should be in italics.
3. In titles of books, articles, etc., capitalize only the first word of the title and subtitle (if any), the first word after a colon or dash, and all proper nouns.
4. Title of the book should be italicized.
5. Arrange the items in your reference list alphabetically. Double-space each entry on your reference list, and leave no space in-between the same title.
6. In titles of periodicals, capitalize all major words and words of four letters or more.

The Anatomy of APA Reference

Basically, information about any sources must always appear in two places: in-text citation and in the reference list as Smith (2005) has shown below:

A. In-Text Citation

Citing Document with a Personal or Single Author

Use the surname first and the year of publication separated by a comma in parentheses. For example:

In a recent study of corruption, it was found that every politician is a potential criminal. (Fawehinmi, 2005).

If You Have just Stated the Author's Name in the Text

Put the year of publication only in parentheses. For example:

Osuala (1982) defines descriptive research as that research which specifies the nature of a given phenomenon.

Citing a Work with Two Authors

Always cite both names every time the reference occurs in the text. For example:
The application of Sharia in Nigeria is statutorily determined (Nchi & Mohammed, 1999).

Citing a Work with less than Six Authors

Cite all of them the first time and subsequently use the first author's surname followed by "et al" and the year.

Citing a Work that has Six or more Authors: APA rule requires writing the first author's surname followed by "et al", and the year: For example:

All societies since their formation have been concerned with the creation of information (Dan'Azumi et al, 2001).

Conclusion

Academic writing has been around since the beginning of scholarly writing. From the preceding discussion, it is shown that academics and students need to familiarize themselves with the style of documentation, citing and referencing peculiar to their disciplines and professions. Besides the needs to show originality of ideas, argument and scholarship, as well as give credits to works consulted by the author in their works, it has now become imperative for academics to be wary of plagiarism with its consequences. Above all, authors should adopt the appropriate rules and guidelines acceptable by the popular referencing styles. Adhering to the style guide helps authors to avoid plagiarism and charge of intellectual theft an pseudo-scholarship.

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