How to do proper referencing in your academic papers

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Referencing is an essential aspect of academic writing. It helps credit the sources you have used in your research and ensures that your work is based on sound evidence. Especially for students, this helps to ensure that the work they are submitting is original. Both Undergraduate and Postgraduate students will often find the need to do proper referencing for their papers and theses, and as such, here are some essentials to keep in mind when compiling references for your academic courses.

Understanding the referencing style

Before you begin referencing your sources, you must understand the referencing style required for your paper. Different academic disciplines and universities have different referencing styles, such as MLA, APA, Harvard, and more. There is no specific rule on which format is used where. These formats vary in its style of bibliography, in-text referencing, and more based on the information needed to do so.

"You can utilise a relevant style guide or manual to ensure that you are formatting your references correctly," said Dr Shanawez Hossain, Researcher & Assistant Professor at Independent University, Bangladesh. He explains that these citation manuals are typically user-friendly, so there is no need to feel intimidated.

Keeping track of your sources

As you conduct your research, keeping track of your sources is vital. For instance, you can create a bibliography or reference list as you go along. These sources should typically include peer-reviewed journals, book chapters and more in your relevant field of work. Depending on your need and style, a citation manager can help you to organise your sources and automatically format your references in the correct style.

It would be best if you also took detail when you are reading and researching, including the complete bibliographic information of the sources you are using, such as the full name of the journal or book, as well its title, date of publication, publisher details, page number etcetera. This will make it easier for you to find the sources again if you need to check or cite them in your paper.

Citing your sources in the text

When you use information from a source in your paper, you may need to cite it in the text to give the due credit. This is known as an in-text citation. The format of in-text citations varies depending on your referencing style, but they typically include the author's last name and the publication year. For instance, it could be used after a sentence in the first bracket e.g., (Khan, 2023), to indicate that the sentence was written by the author in that year. However, there are various other methods to write in-text citations based on your institution's preferred format, so do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you have any confusion.

Moreover, according to Muhammad Awfa Islam, Assistant Professor at the University of Dhaka, "Regular assignment as a part of the coursework with proper referencing can also be placed before the graduate admission committee as an academic writing sample while applying abroad." Top universities and their academic programs give high importance to proper referencing practices.

Creating a reference list or bibliography

A reference list or bibliography lists all the sources you have used in your paper. The format of this list will vary depending on your referencing style. Still, it should include all of the bibliographic information for each source, such as the author's name, the publication date, and the work's title. This can be done manually or using softwares such as Mendeley, Zotero or Paperpile.

Yasin Shafi, lecturer at Bangladesh University of Professionals, shares, "Microsoft Word has a simple yet effective built-in reference tool in the References tab." He further explains that this tool can produce citations in different formats and is easy for all sorts of users. This can be used as an alternative to other reference-generating applications.

Use of plagiarism checker

"In academia, we address plagiarism with zero tolerance, and therefore we strongly recommend that whatever work you do is original and reflects your understanding of the issue," shares Md. Ohidujjaman, Senior Lecturer at Independent University, Bangladesh. He further recommends making sure that due credits are given to anyone whose work has been used in your paper.

It is essential to use plagiarism checkers to ensure the originality of your work. There are several online plagiarism checker tools available for free such as Scribbr and paid versions such as Turnitin. These tools help you identify if any text in your paper matches any existing text on the internet.

Seek help if unsure

Mr Awfa suggests reaching out to your instructor or supervisor for guidance if and when you need it. According to him, "Proper referencing practices can be only encouraged if the course instructor can emphasise on the importance of referencing properly as an academic requirement and for any scholarly work the student may get involved in the future."

Another excellent resource for help with referencing is your university or college's library. Many libraries have guides and tutorials on referencing your sources correctly, and librarians are often available to provide one-on-one help and advice. Plagiarism should be treated seriously as it can lead towards a loss of reputation, revocation of a completed degree, cancellation of research funds and other forms of punishments as it is not acceptable in the academic world.