Building Credibility with Comprehensive Citation Practices

Pavithra Subramanian[1,*] Raghuraman Soundararajan[1,*] Jyotsna Makol[2]

[1] Department of Radiodiagnosis, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India
[2] Tulsi Das Library (Postgraduate) Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, India

Address for correspondence Raghuraman Soundararajan, MD, Department of Radiodiagnosis, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur, Maharashtra 441108, India (e-mail: raghuraman.raju93@gmail.com).

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Abstract

Honoring those who paved the way and paving the way for others is an old saying and practice that emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the contributions of others while also guiding and mentoring those who follow in your footsteps. In academic and scientific writings, citations are very important for maintaining the integrity, credibility, and progression of scientific knowledge. This article examines the significance of citations, their various types and methods, and the different styles used. By focusing on best practices and common errors, this article aims to guide researchers in effectively incorporating citations to enhance their work's visibility and impact. It analyses the different types of citations, including direct quotes, paraphrases, and summaries, and discusses the major citation systems such as the Vancouver and Harvard styles. The article also examines the common errors in citation practices and offers guidelines for accurate referencing. It also reviews various reference management software that facilitate to organize and automate the citation process. The impact of citations on bibliometric measures such as impact factor, H index, CiteScore, etc., which assess the influence and productivity of research, is also discussed. Further, the article briefly delves into the utility of artificial intelligence in citation management and future directions in citation practices. The goal of this article is to elevate the quality and credibility of academic publications in the area of medicine by focusing on the principles and methods of effective citation.

Keywords

- citations
- quotations
- reference management software
- references

Introduction

With ongoing advancements in science and technology, there is a tremendous increase in the volume and rate of academic publications. In medical literature, citations play a fundamental role in shaping the integrity, credibility, and progress of scientific knowledge. Referring to and citing existing literature are indispensable components of academic writing. While "citations" refer to the source of borrowed information (definitions, classifications, results, figures, etc.), "references" enlist the sources of information cited in the body of the text. This article reviews the importance, various types, and methods of citations in academic publications.

* *These authors contributed equally and shared the first authorship.*

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Importance of Citing References

Citing references in scientific publications is essential to maintain integrity and promote the visibility of research. Citations ensure that due credit is given to the original ideas and outcomes of other researchers.[1] They provide context and background information on the preexisting knowledge in a particular field. This allows readers to trace the origins of methods and interpretations used in a study, which guides future research.[2] When credible sources and preexisting data on a topic are cited, the reader is assured that the author has conducted a thorough literature review, enhancing their reputation. Citations are one of the most fool-proof methods to avoid plagiarism and uphold ethical integrity.[3] Further, they foster an academic environment by linking researchers with similar interests and promoting collaboration within the academic community. In summary, citations ensure transparency, acknowledge contributions and support the advancement of knowledge within a particular field of study. Despite being an important part of a manuscript, misquotations and bibliography errors are common, with their prevalence ranging from 50 to 70%.[4]

High-quality citations refer to data from a relevant, original cited source. "Empty citations," which simply refer to other studies supporting a claim and do not directly report the claim, must be avoided. They misrepresent information without citing the original source, rather, they cite a more recent publication that cites the native source. High-quality citations also validate results by referring to individual, empirical studies, without misrepresenting their content. Articles from top journals should not always be considered as the ultimate truth, rather, they should be analyzed in an unbiased manner. Also, the publications contradicting the outcome of a study should be pointed out neutrally and should not be argued with.[5]

Parts of Citations

A citation has three parts: (1) *Quotation*, which quotes or provides a summary of others' work, (2) *in-text reference*, which is a brief address to the source, and (3) *reference list*, which mentions the name of authors, source, and date of publication.

Quotation and In-Text Referencing

Information from other sources can be mentioned as direct quoting, paraphrasing, or providing a summary.[6] When quoting directly, the information is presented in the same words used in the source, placed within quotation marks. It is used when the original words, rather than paraphrasing, add clarity to a statement. Direct quotations are also preferred over paraphrasing when mentioning well-known facts or historical data.[7]

When paraphrasing, the author analyzes previously published information and expresses it in their own words. Paraphrasing and summarizing data need skill and knowledge, and do not mean mere usage of synonyms or "patchwriting" sentences.[8] While paraphrasing it should be ensured that the original statements are accurately presented, without misunderstanding.[6]

When summarizing, the author provides a brief report of published information in a neutral, affiliating, or distancing tone, depending on their stance.[2] Appropriate verbs are used to express the author's opinion on the matter. For a neutral approach, verbs such as "describe," "suggest," "state," etc. are used. Using the present tense in the verb implies that the source is recent and relevant, while the past tense indicates that the source is older.[9] Verbs affiliating with the cited literature include "recognize," "identify," "reveal," etc., and verbs distancing from the literature include "assume," "claim," "hope," etc.

Quotations in the text are followed by in-text citations referring to the source of information. These briefly address the source in the text and may be presented in any of the three major systems: "citation-sequence," "citation-name," and "name-year" systems. In the "citation-sequence" system, the list of references is numbered in the order of appearance in the text.[10] In the "citation-name" system, the reference list is arranged according to the alphabetical order of the first author names, irrespective of their sequence of appearance in the text.[11] In the "name-year" system, the reference list is arranged first by the surname of the author and then by the year of publication. In case there are two references by the same author, chronological hierarchy is followed in the reference list, that is, the latter follows the earlier publication. If the first author and publication year are the same for two references, they are differentiated by alphabetical letters after the year of publication (e.g., *Author*2023a followed by *Author*2023b).[12] The "citation-sequence" and the "citation-name" systems are also known as the Vancouver and Harvard systems, respectively; these are the commonly used referencing systems in biomedical literature.[9] These are explained later in the article.

Reference List

The reference list is located toward the end of the manuscript and has an entry corresponding to every citation in the text. The exceptions are personal communications and unpublished data, which are cited in the text, but not added in the reference list.[11,13] The recommended methods of citing various sources of reference, such as journal articles, books, Web sites, etc. are given in ►**Table 1**.

Styles of Citation

Various systems of citation and referencing are used in the literature, and the system used depends on the scientific discipline and the preference of journal/publisher. In medical literature, the Vancouver (citation-sequence) and Harvard (name-year) systems are commonly used. In the footnote/endnote system, references are listed at the bottom of the page, and they are cited as superscript numerical throughout the text.[13] Other systems which are less commonly used include the American Medical Association, the Modern Language Association, the American Psychological Association, and the Chicago Manual of Style. These citation

Table 1 Styles of citations with reference styles

Citation styles	In-text citation format	Reference style
Vancouver style	Numeric citation: [1] or (1) or superscript number: 1	Author(s). Title of the article. Journal name. Year;volume(issue):page numbers.
Harvard styles	Author(s) last name (year) or (author(s) last name, year)	Author(s). Year. Title of the article. Journal name, Volume(issue), pages.
Chicago style	(Author[s] last name year, page number)	Author(s). "Title of the Article." Journal name, volume no. issue (year): pages
National Library of Medicine style	Superscript number: 1 or parenthetical number: (1)	Author(s). Title of the article. Journal name. Year month day;volume(issue)
American Psychological Association style	(Author(s) last name, year)	Author(s). (Year). Title of the article. Journal name, Volume(issue), pages.
American Medical Association style	Superscript number: 1	Author(s). Title of the article. Journal name. Year;volume(issue)
Modern Language Association style	(Author[s] last name page number)	Author(s). "Title of the Article." Journal name, vol. Volume, no. issue, year, pp. pages.
Turabian style	(Author[s] last name year, page number)	Author(s). "Title of the Article." Journal name volume, no. issue (year): pages.
Institute of Electricals and Electronics Engineers style		Author(s). "Title of the Article," journal name, vol. volume, no. issue, pp. pages, year.

styles are briefly outlined in ►**Table 1**. Since the Vancouver and Harvard systems are commonly used in medical literature, only these are explained in detail in this article. A group of medical journal editors informally met in 1978 in Vancouver, British Columbia, to formulate the guidelines for manuscripts submitted to their journals.[14] Their consensus came to be known as the Vancouver style, and these were first published in 1979. The Vancouver requirements were developed by the U.S. National Library of Medicine. The Vancouver group has since expanded into the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors and meets annually to update guidelines on "the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals."[15] The Vancouver style follows the author-number system; references are numbered consecutively in the text using Arabic numerals in parentheses, and the reference list follows the order of appearance of references in the text. Examples of using the Vancouver style for various types of references are shown in ►**Table 2**.

The Harvard system or "author-date" system is a less popular referencing style. It was named by an English visitor impressed by the author-year citation system he encountered in the library of Harvard University.[16] When following this system, the author's name and year of publication are given in the body of the text, and the references are arranged alphabetically at the end of the text. If there are up to three authors, their last names are mentioned in the in-text reference. If there are four or more authors, the citation is abbreviated with "et al" following the last name of the first author.[17] The Harvard system is sometimes criticized due to difficulties faced by the readers while looking up for a reference since they are not arranged in the order of appearance. Most journals specify the reference system to be used in submitted manuscripts. Some journals provide detailed guidelines on how to format references according to their preferred style, ensuring consistency and adherence to established standards. According to the style, the format in which the citation is written and punctuated varies for different kinds of scientific publications such as articles, books, newspapers, magazines, and other electronic sources. The representation of various sources in the Vancouver style is depicted in ►**Table 2**.

Reference Management Software

Reference management software helps in collecting, storing, and organizing references. They also enable in-text citations to be added in the text and automatically generate a bibliography of references in the preferred style. Commonly used reference managers include Zotero, Mendeley, EndNote, and RefWorks. These maybe web-based or can be installed as an application. They allow downloading references as PDFs, screenshots, webpages, etc. and organize them into the selected folder, which can be used multiple times, as well as shared with other collaborating researchers. Reference managers also automatically update the references and bibliography when citations are added to or removed from the text.

The reference management software uses specific file formats for tagging information of citations (RIS, BibTeX, EndNote, Medlars, and RefWorks) into the appropriate fields (e.g., author, title, journal title). RIS (.ris) was developed by the Research Information Systems and includes two letters, two spaces, and a hyphen indicating the citation details as TY

Table 2 Methods of citing various publications in Vancouver style

Source	Vancouver style
Journal article	Author(s). Title of the article. Journal name. Year; volume(issue)page numbers.
	Jordan LC, DeBaun MR, Donahue MJ. Advances in neuroimaging to improve care in sickle cell disease. The Lancet Neurology. 2021 May 1;20(5):398–408.
Book	Author(s). Title of the Book. Edition. Place of publication: publisher; year.
	Demaerel P. Recent Advances in Diagnostic Neuroradiology. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Nature;2001.
Book chapter	Author(s) of the Chapter. Title of the Chapter. In: Editor(s), editors. Title of the Book. Edition. Place of Publication: Publisher; Year:pages.
	Krishna V., Sammartino F. and Rezai A.R. The Use of New Surgical Technologies for Deep Brain Stimulation. Elsevier;2018:77–485.
Conference paper	Author(s). Title of the paper. In: Editor(s), editors. Title of the Conference; Date of the Conference; Location. Place of Publication: Publisher; Year:pages.
	Brown L, Thompson R. Innovations in Medical Imaging. In: Williams K, editor. Proceedings of the International Conference on Medical Science; 2024 Aug 1–3; Paris. New York: Springer; 2024:8–97.

—"type of reference," AU—"author," PY—"publication year," T1—"primary title," T2—"secondary title" (journal title), SP—start page," EP—"end page," VL—"volume," and IS—"issue".

In the BibTeX format, the reference comprises three parts namely a case-insensitive entry type (represented as @book/@article/@conference), a unique cite key (usually the last name of the first author with the year of publication), and key-value pairs containing the bibliographic information (such as title, author, publisher, address, edition, year). Nonstandard field types such as DOI, ISSN number, ISBN number, and web-page URLs are not supported by all reference management software.

It is important to consider various key factors while choosing a reference management tool, including the features offered by the software. ►**Table 3** outlines the differences between the four commonly used software namely

Table 3 Comparison of various commercially available reference management software

Feature/software	Zotero	Mendeley	EndNote	RefWorks	BibTeX
Cost	Free (premium storage available)	Free (premium storage available)	Paid	Paid	Free
Availability	Windows, macOS, Linux, Web	Windows, macOS, Linux, Web	Windows, macOS	Web-based	Windows, macOS, Linux
File formats supported	RIS, BibTeX, EndNote	RIS, BibTeX, EndNote	RIS, EndNote, BibTeX	RIS, EndNote, RefWorks	BibTeX
Support for non-standard fields	High (DOI, ISBN, URLs, custom fields)	Moderate (DOI, ISBN, URLs)	High (DOI, ISBN, URLs, custom fields)	Moderate (DOI, ISBN, URLs)	High (via LaTeX customizations)
PDF management	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Annotation tools	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Integration with word	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Integration with LaTeX	Yes (with plugins)	Limited (via BibTeX export)	Yes (via BibTeX export)	No	Yes (native support)
Cloud sync	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (manual syncing)
Collaboration features	Yes (groups and sharing)	Yes (groups and sharing)	Yes (shared libraries)	Yes (shared projects)	Limited (via shared .bib files)
Import options	Manual, import from Web, PDF	Manual, import from Web, PDF	Manual, import from Web, PDF	Manual, import from Web, PDF	Manual (text editing or tools)
Export formats	RIS, BibTeX, EndNote, XML	RIS, BibTeX, EndNote, XML	RIS, BibTeX, EndNote, XML, CSV	RIS, EndNote, RefWorks	BibTeX
Customization and flexibility	High (via plugins)	Moderate	High	Moderate	High (through LaTeX and BibTeX options)

Zotero, Mendley, EndNote, BibTeX, and RefWorks. It unfolds their basic features and their availability and ability to integrate with different writing software.

Drawbacks and Problems with Citations

There is no denying that citations are crucial for maintaining academic integrity and dissemination of knowledge. However, they come with their own set of challenges. The most common issue is misquoting or mispresenting sources, which leads to the spread of inaccurate information. Many bibliographic errors are found, such as incorrect author names, titles, and publication details, which can undermine the credibility of the work.[4] Moreover, the overuse of citations, particularly when referencing marginally related work, can clutter a paper and detract from originality. Also, the complexity of managing citations between multiple styles and formats can lead to inconsistencies while using different tools or collaborating across disciplines.

Poor citation practices negatively impact the quality and integrity of research. Apart from factual errors, other commonly encountered citation malpractices include quoting incorrect citations, misinterpretation of results (intentional or unintentional), unnecessary extrapolation of outcomes of cited work, preferentially citing irrelevant works of colleagues, ignoring a more suitable reference, etc. Other issues such as citation padding and self-citation have been described later. The pertinence of a citation is one of the determinants of its validity. Citing impertinent references is considered invalid. Some workers also argue that citations made in the introduction/review of literature sections are impertinent, since if they were valid to the study, they should be used in the methodology/results/discussion sections.[18]

Citation bias arises from selective citation of work supporting the results of a study while consciously refraining from citing prior work contradicting the outcome.[19] As a result of it, the outcome of a study determines its chance of being cited, resulting in a bias. For example, if a study comparing the outcomes between patients treated with methods A and B finds method A to be superior, there are higher chances that previous studies that also show the superiority of method A are cited in the current study, and studies claiming method B to be superior are cited less frequently. Various studies have demonstrated that authors tend to selectively cite studies with positive outcomes, to enhance their results and make their study appealing to reviewers.[20,21] This leads to false polarization in a particular direction. *Outcome reporting bias* refers to selective reporting of certain findings within a publication. The probability of a work being cited also depends on the journal it is published in. For example, articles published in journals with higher readership and impact factors tend to have a greater chance of being cited.[22] Further, in an attempt to satisfy the editor of the targeted journal, authors may cite work published in that journal, even if irrelevant.

A meta-analysis on the citation rate and hit rate of studies on hip fracture trials (internal fixation vs. arthroplasty) showed that the overall citation rate was 48%, that is, only 48% of possibly citable relevant studies were actually cited. Further, studies with a positive result (favoring arthroplasty) were highly cited.[23] Another analysis of citations in original reports and review articles in ecology journals states that 22% of citations were inaccurate, that is, they misrepresented the cited authors' findings and 15% of citations gave unfair credit to the review authors for others' ideas.[24,25] Such misbehaviors could lead to redundancy in publication and misguidance of readers.

Antiplagiarism software primarily highlights instances where the text significantly resembles previously published work. When using direct quotations—that is, the exact words from a source—these should always be enclosed in quotation marks and followed by a suitable citation. For example: *"One of the main challenges of scientific writing is to pack vast and complex information into clear and well-structured texts. It is a skill that requires not only knowledge of the scientific field but also practice in writing"* (Rogers, S.M., 2014).[7] When following this citation style, both readers and plagiarism detection software can easily recognize that the words and ideas belong to the cited author.

However, it is important to ensure that quotations are sparingly used and that proper citation methods are followed according to journal-specific guidelines. Paraphrasing with correct citation is often recommended to illustrate the author's comprehension, rather than copying verbatim from the sources.[26]

Editor/Reviewer and Citation Checking

Together, editors and reviewers are the gatekeepers of academic and scientific writing as they ensure that only high-quality, reliable, and ethical research is published. In the context of citations and referencing, editors and reviewers have critical responsibilities to ensure that the citations which are used in the manuscript are accurate, relevant, and properly formatted. They ensure the adherence of the manuscript to the journal's referencing guidelines. They also ensure that citations and referencing are done appropriately to support claims.

Citation padding refers to the use of excessive citations that are not directly relevant, while *self-citation* refers to quoting an author's previous work in their current work. Editors and reviewers may perform random checks on citations to ensure that referred works are accurately represented, to verify the originality of the content, to highlight ethical considerations, and to address any instance of plagiarism.

Despite blinded reviewers having no access to the identity of the author, certain patterns in the manuscript may indicate self-citation, for example, if a manuscript carries a disproportionately high number of citations to a single researcher or research group. In some cases, citations of articles from smaller or less specialized journals may be a red flag as they may indicate an author citing their own lesser-cited work to increase their perceived impact. The editor can however determine if self-citations are excessive or unjustified based on available metadata. It is acceptable to

incorporate a reasonable amount of self-citation, particularly when it directly contributes to the topic. It can be dangerous to cite or rely on prior research if excessive or unwarranted self-citation is used.[27] A reviewer or editor may flag excessive self-referencing as a threat to the objectivity of the research.[28]

Ultimately, the editors and reviewers provide feedback to the authors and guide them to correct the issues. This includes suggesting the removal of irrelevant citations, the addition of missing ones, or correct formatting of the reference list.

Although less common, citation and referencing errors may result in the outright rejection of manuscripts. Studies indicate that errors in referencing can be a factor in the rejection of manuscripts, with citation-related problems being a contributing reason in ~10 to 15% of rejections.[29]

Artificial Intelligence–Driven Citation Checkers

Ongoing recent developments in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI) have led to the development of AI-driven citation checkers. Commonly used online citation-checking tools include Trinka (https://www.trinka.ai/), Scribbr (https://www.scribbr.com/), and Scite Assistant (https://scite.ai/). These tools use AI to proofread the uploaded content and quickly provide corrections for grammar and citation errors, when common citation styles are used. In addition, they are also trained to detect AI-generated content, generated using large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, GPT-4, Bard, and Bing Chat. These tools instantly scan the uploaded content and highlight the LLM-created content, with their percentage.

Scientometrics and Citations

Measurement and analysis of scientific publications are often done using bibliometric methods. Impact factor and H index are important parameters to assess scientific publications. The impact factor measures citations of a published article in a journal. A journal's impact factor of a particular year is the average number of citations received per article in that journal, published in the preceding 2 years.[30] A journal with an impact factor of 7 in 2023 means that there was an average of seven citations of articles published in that journal during the years 2021 and 2022. It is calculated as a ratio of the number of cited articles published in the previous 2 years to the total number of articles published during those 2 years.

H index measures the impact and productivity of scientific publications, based on the most cited papers and the number of citations received in other articles. It can also be used as a measure of impact of a researcher based on citations received by that researcher's publications. For example, if a researcher has an H index of 7, it means that 7 of their publications have at least 7 citations each, and the rest of the papers have not more than 7 citations in other journals. Hence, the H index not only reflects the number of publications done by a researcher but also the number of citations for a publication. It helps in comparison of researchers in the same field and may not be comparable across different specialties.[31]

Other journal metrics include Eigenfactor Score, CiteScore, and SCImago Journal Rank (SJR). The Eigenfactor Score of a journal measures the number of times articles published in that journal in the past 5 years have been cited in the Thomson Scientific Journal Citation Reports year. Similar to impact factor, it is a ratio of the number of citations to the number of articles. However, it has the added advantage of eliminating self-citations by removing citations from the same journal. It also weighs each reference with a stochastic measure of the amount of time spent reading the journal.[32] CiteScore is a citation metric launched by Elsevier. It is calculated for the journals indexed in Scopus. Unlike the impact factor, CiteScore uses a 3-year period.[33] SJR also ranks journals indexed in Scopus database. SJR refers to the frequency with which publications in a journal were cited in other journals in the 3 preceding years (compared with 2 years for impact factor). However, SJR weighs incoming citations to a journal by the SJR of the citing journal, ensuring that citations from journals with higher SJR are given a higher rank than citations from a source with lower SJR. A journal with SJR >1 has above-average citation potential.[34,35]

Future Directions in Citation Practices

With the transition of scholarly correspondence from offline publications to online content, citations commonly include hyperlinks to web-based content. However, the linked content maybe dynamic, lack stability, and may change, over time. This results in "reference rot," which arises from "link rot" (when the linked page is not found, displayed as error 404) or "content drift" (when the linked content has changed/drifted over time). A few strategies have been described, to avoid reference rot.[36] Authors can create snapshots of web pages linked to citations in the manuscript preparation stage. This ensures that the metadata and the date and time of snapshot are recorded.[37] However, reference rot might have already begun before the article was published and some web content in the references might have changed/disappeared by the late editorial stage. So, it is prudent that the author and editor check and ensure that appropriate evidence is cited. Also, by incorporating saved copies of sources into their web-based citations, researchers can preserve the integrity of their citations.

Conclusion

Citations play a pivotal role in academic publications by ensuring the credibility, traceability, and academic integrity of research. They allow researchers to build upon existing knowledge, facilitate peer review, and guide readers to sources for further exploration. Proper citation practices not only honor the contributions of previous researchers but also enhance the reproducibility and reliability of scientific findings. As the foundation of scholarly communication, citations uphold the quality and advancement of science,

making them indispensable in the pursuit of knowledge and innovation. Properly citing references in scientific publications is a critical skill, and the current article reviews the basics of citations and references.

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