

References for College Papers

Steven Dutch, Natural and Applied Sciences, [University of Wisconsin - Green Bay](#)

General Principles for References

- Use the most original source possible.
- Use the most up-to-date and reliable source available.
- Your paper is only as good as its weakest source.

How to let Professors know you are not Familiar with College Writing

- Use unacceptable sources (see below). Cite your class notes, your textbook, and the morning paper.
- Use out-of-date sources.
- Ask where to find references the week before the paper is due. Bonus points for cutting it even closer.
- Use unconventional or inconsistent referencing styles. Be creative. Make it up as you go along.

How to let your Professors Know you *are* Familiar with College Writing

- Start *early* to locate sources. That way, if you have trouble, you have lots of time to work out problems. Also, you will have time to think about what you have found.
 - Cite scholarly references only.
 - Cite recent materials.
 - Use accepted referencing styles.
-

The Following are Usually NOT Acceptable References

- Class Lecture Notes
- Textbooks
- Encyclopedias
- Dictionaries
- Popular Books
- Popular Magazines
- Newspapers
- Radio and TV Broadcasts
- The Internet

Why? For the most part, they are not original sources. So why do we have encyclopedias and textbooks? To provide an overview or introduction to a topic for complete beginners. These are meant to get you started on a subject; they are not research documents. If you want to document a point in a textbook or encyclopedia article, locate the original source for the idea. Start with the sources cited by the textbook or encyclopedia. I have written *tons* of encyclopedia articles, and I strive to do the most accurate job possible, but I know the limitations of encyclopedias from all angles.

But won't that take a lot of time? Yes. That's why you start work on research papers as soon as they are assigned.

I can't use the Internet? Not the way most people do. Most of what is on the Internet is the electronic equivalent of the other print sources listed and therefore not acceptable as a college reference. Also it's unregulated and there is no quality control. You can only use the Internet if it's the equivalent of other acceptable sources.

Exceptions

If the medium itself is the subject of your paper: for example, how textbooks have treated gender roles over time, or how dictionaries have defined controversial terms, or how popular magazines have treated AIDS. If your subject is children's literature, *The Cat in the Hat* might be an acceptable reference.

If the topic is a fast-moving one where most of the information has flowed through the news media, newspapers may be acceptable. However, for subjects like AIDS, Comet Hale-Bopp, or the Space Shuttle, where the quantity of published information is huge, newspapers are not acceptable.

Wikipedia

Many instructors forbid reference to Wikipedia at all. This surprises me, because I didn't think many professors allowed encyclopedia citations, period. Don't do it even if permitted, as a general rule. Just like you *can* drive 65 miles an hour in a dense fog, but it's not a good idea. Wikipedia suffers from the problem that it is not a primary source and has very weak quality control. More recently it's suffered from the problem of deliberate sabotage, vandalism, and censorship. It's generally reliable for checking routine facts and extremely specialized topics, and it's often the only source on popular culture. But don't use it if you're not familiar enough with the subject matter to spot biases or errors.

The Following MAY be Acceptable References

- Reputable News Media (Time, Newsweek, New York Times)
- Serious Popular Magazines (New Yorker, National Geographic)
- Government Publications
- Internet versions of these sources

News media are acceptable only if the story is so fast-moving or so recent that there are no scholarly publications on the subject, or if you are researching a news story that has not yet been reported in other forms. Bottom line: use the media only if there is no other source.

Serious popular magazines occasionally have articles by authorities, interviews (even *Playboy* can be an acceptable source at times; President Jimmy Carter got into political hot water over an interview there), or summaries of current topics of interest. Acceptability depends on how reputable the authors are and how thoroughly the publication checks its facts.

Government publications are acceptable if they are research or technical publications, but generally not if they are popular brochures or pamphlets.

The Following ARE Acceptable References

- Scholarly Periodicals
- Scholarly Books
- Reputable Translations of Foreign Works
- Student Theses
- Research Forums or Hotlines on the Internet
- Internet Periodicals by Reputable Organizations

Most of the information in academia does not flow through books! The real information flow is through periodicals. Even here, acceptability varies. *Scientific American* is acceptable for most college research papers, but not for a graduate thesis.

Scholarly books serve several purposes:

- They collect related articles on a subject from scattered sources.
- They contain specially-written articles contributed by various authorities to summarize the state of research on a subject.
- They summarize the results of research over a long period of time that would be too lengthy to publish as a periodical article. They can also include details that would be too obscure to merit inclusion in a journal article.

Locating Sources

I like to use what I term the "snowball" approach

- First, locate a good recent source on the topic
- What does your source use for references? Check them out for applicability.
- What do those sources use for references?
- After you have a good list of articles, you will notice certain key authors turning up repeatedly. Check bibliography sources (print or on-line) to find out what else these people have written.
- You will probably notice certain references turning up repeatedly. These are references considered crucial by active researchers in the field. You should cite these sources if they apply to your paper.

About the Internet

In its present state of development, the Internet is dominated by these sorts of materials:

- Electronic equivalents of popular media
- Advertisements
- Informal interest groups

None of these are acceptable references for college writing.

Academic uses of the Internet include:

- Course notes, outlines and syllabi. These are not acceptable for references. They are the electronic equivalent of course notes and textbooks.
- Archives of data, either recent or previously-printed data. These are generally acceptable.
- Research hotlines. Generally acceptable.

You will *not* find certain classes of works on the Internet:

- Previously printed books and journal articles. Some materials in the public domain are being archived, but copyrighted materials (almost anything in the 20th Century) are generally not available (legally). Even government documents in the public domain are generally not available; there are no funds to transfer them to electronic form. This will change because most published works are now prepared in electronic form and converting them to Internet format is easy.
- Tutorials on many subjects. This will change with time but right now detailed tutorials are hard to find. More and more university faculty are putting detailed course notes on-line, however. My experience with my own course materials is that if you build it, they will come, because hard information is still sparse on the Internet.

Bottom line: right now the Internet is dominated by the popular and trivial, or the advanced and specialized. If you want a good summary of plate tectonics or the Thirty Years War you can still find it faster in a good encyclopedia.

Internet Searches

Nobody cares *how* you find references. You can hunt in the library, ask other people, or use a dowsing rod, Tarot cards or a Ouija board. So searching on the Internet is perfectly okay - *even if your assignment forbids the use of Internet sources*. You will still have to use acceptable sources, but nobody cares how you find them. Only if your assignment forbids Internet searches - rare, but it might happen - are you barred.

Post-Web babies have no idea how tedious searching was before on-line bibliographies came along. I know this sounds like "walking ten miles through the snow to school," but it's true.

However, when you do a search on, say, Google, the address that comes up will be a long string of gobbledygook. *That is not a correct Internet citation!* That's a temporary search identifier created by Google and no two people will get that address. Also you have no guarantee that anyone who uses it will get through. You will have to obtain the actual URL of the site you're referring to and cite that. For example, I found a link to this page using <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=college+references+dutch+&btnG=Google+Search> but the correct URL is <http://www.uwgb.edu/dutchs/paperref.htm>.

Shallow and Deep Linking

Nothing infuriates me more than to do a search, be directed to a page, only to find that the actual page I'm looking for is in an archive or several levels deeper. On the other hand, pages that link to a specific image rather than to a page that contains it are said to be "deep linked." That's considered a breach of Internet courtesy and can be a problem because it might tie up access to the page. So if you refer to a source, refer to the *entire page*, but also refer to the *exact page*, not to a home page that may contain the information on Tuesday but not Thursday.