

Common knowledge

Common knowledge refers to facts that are so widely known it is unnecessary to reference them. Common knowledge is general knowledge.

For example, the following points are common knowledge in Pakistan:

Beijing is the capital of China.

Islamabad is the capital of Pakistan.

Pakistan Resolution was passed on 23 March 1940.

These facts are so widely known that it is unnecessary to provide a source to support them.

Common knowledge may vary from country to country. In Argentina, for example, the date of the passing of Pakistan Resolution date is not widely known.

Common knowledge may also vary from discipline to discipline. What is common knowledge in sociology, for example, may not be common knowledge in psychology. Some disciplines (such as in the sciences) incorporate facts into common knowledge faster than others. As you develop familiarity with a discipline you will become more aware of what is common knowledge and what is not.

Distinguishing common knowledge

Common knowledge can be identified by considering two important questions:

- Is the fact widely known?
- Is the fact disputed by anyone?

A widely known fact will appear in several different sources, particularly in general reference sources like encyclopædias or dictionaries. Common knowledge will also be widely known to your audience.

If there is academic disagreement about a fact it should not be treated as common knowledge. Likewise, interpretations of facts can be different between different sources, so the interpretation is not common knowledge.

Referencing common knowledge

Common knowledge does not need to be referenced. Most academic writing, however, does not focus on common knowledge. Instead, different interpretations and applications of facts and concepts are discussed, and these do need to be referenced appropriately.

Referencing styles

There are several different styles of referencing:

- APA
- MLA
- Oxford
- Harvard
- Chicago

Each style has its own rules for properly citing sources.

- Author-date styles (e.g. APA, MLA, and Harvard) put the author's name inside the text of the assignment
- Documentary-note styles (e.g. Chicago and Oxford) put the author's name in a footnote at the bottom of each page, or in an endnote at the end of the assignment

All of the most common styles list every source used in a document at the end, in a reference list or bibliography (see [reference list vs. bibliography](#) for the difference between these).

The styles differ in format. For example, an [APA in-text citation](#) incorporates the author's name, the year of publication, and sometimes the page number, separated by a comma:

(Lazar, 2006, p. 52)

An [MLA in-text citation](#), on the other hand, does not include the year or commas:

(Lazar 52)

Likewise, an [APA reference list entry](#) puts the year in brackets after the author's name:

Lazar, J. (2006). *Web usability: A user-centered design approach*. Boston, MA: Pearson Addison Wesley.

An [MLA works cited entry](#) puts the year nearer the end of the entry:

Lazar, Jonathan. *Web Usability: A User-Centered Design Approach*. Boston: Pearson Addison Wesley, 2006. Print.

There are other differences between these two styles: APA gives first initials whereas MLA uses full first names; MLA includes the medium at the end of the entry. When formatting a reference, follow the style you have been set closely.

What type of source is this?

In order to correctly reference material, you first need to identify the type of source: is it a book, a journal, or something else?

This section describes the distinguishing characteristics of these different source types.

Books

Books are printed and bound documents on a particular topic or set of topics. Most books are written by either one person or a small group of people, but there are exceptions to this: edited books, conference proceedings, encyclopædias, and dictionaries.

Edited books and anthologies

Edited books and anthologies are books containing writing by several different authors. Typically, each chapter is written by a different author, and the whole compilation is organised by a named editor.

To identify edited books, look at the table of contents. In edited books, each chapter or section has a different person's name. In the library catalogue an editor's name will be listed instead of an author.

Each chapter in an edited book is referenced separately. See edited books and anthologies in APA and MLA for details and examples.

Conference proceedings

Conference proceedings are books that collect many different presentations and papers from an actual meeting, conference, or symposium. Like edited books, each chapter is written by a different author, and the whole compilation is organised by a named editor.

Published conference proceedings look similar to edited books, but usually have the name of the meeting in the title (e.g. *Proceedings of the IASTED International Conference on Information and Knowledge Sharing*).

As with edited books, each chapter or section is referenced separately.

Encyclopædias and dictionaries

Encyclopædias and dictionaries are collections of a number of small articles or definitions (often on a single topic). They almost always have “encyclopædia” or “dictionary” somewhere in the title (e.g. *Britannica encyclopedia of world religions*, *The Oxford English Dictionary*).

As with edited books, specific entries can be referenced separately.

Journals

Journals are periodically published collections of articles on a particular subject, similar to a magazine or newspaper. However, the target audience of a journal is usually academic, professional, or technical. Journals represent the cutting edge of research in a field: pioneering studies and analyses are published here first.

Journals differ from magazines in a number of ways :

Magazine	Journal
General audience; easy to read	Academic, professional, or technical audience; may use a lot of jargon
Lots of advertisements	No (or very minimal) advertising
Articles provide broad but not necessarily deep coverage	Articles are in-depth, and contain a thorough reference list
Not usually peer-reviewed	Peer-reviewed

This last difference is especially important. Peer review means that experts in the field (often academics) have checked each article before publication, to ensure that there are no inaccuracies.

When writing an assignment, journal articles are more likely to be comprehensive and useful than general magazine articles. For more on this, see identifying academic sources.

Many academic journals are available online, either directly or through the library's article databases.

Journal articles are referenced individually.

Grey literature

Grey literature refers to publications that you are less likely to find in a library: institutional reports, brochures, press releases, etc. They are usually more difficult to access than books or journal articles, and are less likely to be useful for academic assignments.

Reference list vs. bibliography

Reference lists (in MLA style called “lists of works cited”) contain a complete list of all the sources (books, journal articles, websites, etc.) that you have cited directly in a document. That means that if there are in-text citations for a source there is a reference list entry, and vice versa. Bibliographies, on the other hand, contain all sources that you have used, whether they are directly cited or not. A bibliography includes sources that you have used to generate ideas or ‘read around’ a topic, but have not referred to directly in the body of the document.

Styles of reference list and bibliography

- APA reference list
- MLA list of works cited
- Oxford bibliographies
- Harvard reference lists
- Chicago bibliographies

Annotated bibliographies

An annotated bibliography is a type of assignment that involves a list of sources, but also a summary and evaluation of each source's content and purpose. For more information, see annotated bibliography.

In publications

Books and other publications often distinguish between “selected” bibliographies and “full” bibliographies. Selected bibliographies only list a few of the most important works cited. Full bibliographies list every work cited and potentially other relevant sources.