



Citing Responsibly, Avoiding Plagiarism: An NPS Refresher



Citations make your research credible: they validate claims discussed in your writing, give credit where credit is due, and allow other researchers to follow in your footsteps. To determine if you need a citation, ask yourself the following questions as you write and revise:

- Do I know this information/data because I read it somewhere?
- Is this my own analysis based on my personal knowledge or research, or is it analysis I borrowed from another person or author?
- Is this knowledge the result of emails or conversations? (You still must cite unpublished information.)

You do not need to cite your own experience and findings, or common knowledge.

Common knowledge is something your readers already know. For example, “The average adult body contains about 250 grams of salt” or “George W. Bush served as president of the United States from 2000 to 2008.” As a rule of thumb, if you can find an unattributed fact in five credible sources, a citation is not needed. Consult a faculty member from your department or your reference librarian if you are unsure if something is field-specific common knowledge.

Include a citation or signal phrase when you borrow a source’s idea, statistic, or wording.

Your readers should understand which pieces of information came from which sources (cite!), and which are your original thoughts and data, or common knowledge (don’t cite).

One citation at the end of a paragraph typically cannot “cover” the entire paragraph.

Ensure the source is clear upfront and throughout the paragraph. A good rule of thumb is to cite the source completely *the first time it is used in each paragraph*. Then make it reasonably clear—using [signal phrases](#), sentence flow, and/or additional citations—that you are continuing to discuss information from the same source.

Differentiate between information that is paraphrased and information that is directly quoted.

Generally, a phrase that contains five or more consecutive words exactly as they appear in the source should appear in quotation marks (proper nouns and common language excluded) or be [paraphrased](#). Remember: whether you are paraphrasing or quoting source information, always cite it.

Try to limit direct quotations.

While quoting can be effective—and sometimes essential for precise wording—[paraphrasing](#) demonstrates your understanding of the topic and your critical thinking skills. Generally, the vast majority of your paper, around 90 percent, should be written in your own words rather than directly quoted from other sources.

The Graduate Writing Center and Thesis Processing Office can help!

Writing coaches and thesis processors can help you build your attribution skills. You may also ask a writing coach to run a draft paper through NPS’s plagiarism-detection software; the coach will meet with you to discuss problem areas and guide your revisions.