

Does an insistence on detailed and ‘correct’ referencing inhibit students from thinking for themselves?

Dr Peter Levin

formerly of the Teaching and Learning Centre,
London School of Economics and Political Science,
author of *Write Great Essays!* and *Excellent Dissertations!*¹

Based on a presentation to the symposium on ‘Referencing and Writing’ sponsored by the LearnHigher and Write Now Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and held at the University of Bradford on June 8th, 2009

Contents

1. Introduction, and a personal take on referencing practice
2. Prescribed uniformity: the referencing fetish
3. The excessive and the irrational in common referencing styles
4. The reading-to-writing process
5. How the referencing fetish impacts on the reading-to-writing process
6. How the referencing fetish inhibits students from thinking for themselves

1. Introduction, and a personal take on referencing practice

Let me begin with some clarification. For the avoidance of doubt, and in view of the title of my talk, I should say at the outset that I am not an advocate of careless, incorrect and incomplete referencing in academic writing. I do share the common view that quotations and paraphrasings *should* be referenced and that this should be done ‘properly’.

I started preparing for this symposium by reflecting on my own referencing practice. I identified six rules which I think I follow.

Rule 1. Enable your readers to track down your written sources

This is obvious but still needs stating. It means that your references should be accurate and sufficiently detailed to enable any reader – who might be a specialist, or might not – to track down the written sources that you’ve used and find the originals for themselves.

Rule 2: Use a style appropriate to your subject

For example, writing on law topics has particular requirements arising out of the kind of material that is drawn on (statutes and case law) and arising out of the tradition established by professional lawyers. For some subjects, especially in the humanities and the social and political sciences, it is very convenient to make use of footnotes or endnotes for details and asides, so it makes sense to use a footnote or endnote style for referencing too. In the exact sciences it appears rare for writing to entail incidentals of this kind, and so a style such as the one known in the UK (but not in the USA, interestingly) as the 'Harvard' style will usually be satisfactory. Choose your style according to your subject. One style does not fit all!

Rule 3: Connect with your readers

Your references should be designed and deployed with your readers and the needs of your readers in mind. Unfortunately, many academic writers seem to use references primarily to impress their readers with the breadth of their reading (the name-dropping syndrome) or to impart authority to their opinions. Speaking for myself, I want my references to be helpful to all my readers, whether specialists, students or lay people. I often want to amuse my readers; sometimes I want to offer them reassurance. Occasionally I want to go down a little side-track while making it clear that it is a side-track and not the main route: footnotes and endnotes are ideal for this purpose because readers can bypass them if they wish. So ask yourself: who am I doing this for and what do I want them to get out of it?

Rule 4: Be transparent

Think of your references as providing a window into your mind. Use them to enable your reader not only to see what you yourself have read, but also to see how you have used that material, and to judge whether you have used it appropriately and whether your reasoning from it is sound. All too often, academics use references as a block, a screen. They convey the implicit message: 'Here is my authority, do not question it.' They conceal the mind of the writer. Be transparent: allow your reader to question what you have written.

Rule 5: Be consistent

Choose a referencing style and apply it consistently. Inconsistency will distract and annoy many readers. Moreover, it will give rise to the suspicion – possibly justified – that the work is the product of a mind lacking in discipline.

Rule 6: Use common sense

Your referencing style should be easy to comprehend, and not more detailed than the first five rules require. I am astonished – and horrified – by the level of detail which is nowadays prescribed for referencing styles. Students writing essays and dissertations may well be told that what they have done is wrong if they have not conformed in every precise particular to the guidelines prescribed for them, and told that such 'failings' will be penalized, will lead to marks being deducted.

In my view, Rule 1 – Enable your readers to track down your written sources – incorporates all that you need do to acknowledge written material that you have drawn on. As for unwritten material, such as ideas that flashed across the horizon in lectures or in conversation in the pub or coffee bar, by all means mention contributors/participants in your acknowledgments if you wish, but since there is nothing for your readers to track down there is nothing to reference.

Incidentally, there is no copyright in ideas. The UK Intellectual Property Office demolishes this notion succinctly and comprehensively: ‘Copyright doesn’t protect ideas. The work must be fixed (e.g. written or recorded)’ in order to be protected.² Thus there is no such thing in English law as the ownership of ideas. Nor can there be such a thing as the theft of ideas. ‘Theft’ is defined in English law as follows: ‘A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it ...’³ You can’t deprive someone of an idea. (Notice that plagiarism too can’t amount to theft. Someone who plagiarizes is manifestly not doing so with the intention of permanently depriving the original author of the material.)

2. Prescribed uniformity: the referencing fetish

Behind my six rules lies a single principle: fitness for purpose. It seems to me that the powers that be have completely lost sight of this principle. It has been displaced by another principle, rigorously enforced: the principle of *uniformity*. Thus in the UK we find the Harvard style enforced – across whole institutions in some cases (In the autumn of 2005 Colin Neville found two in a sample of only 25)⁴ – despite its manifest unsuitability for certain fields and subjects.

Now, I yield to no-one in my appreciation of consistency, and I have never been unhappy to be described as a pedant, but I have to say that this insistence on a prescribed uniform referencing style is giving pedantry a really bad name. Frankly, it goes beyond pedantry: it has become a fetish.

Footnote: Fetish: an excessive and irrational devotion or commitment to a particular thing. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, second edition, 2003.

Please note that, applying common sense, for the purpose of this talk it is not necessary to consult specialist texts in psychology or sexual behaviour for a definition of ‘fetish’: all we need do is establish that when we are using the word we all mean the same thing by it, and the definition in an authoritative dictionary serves that purpose perfectly well.

Footnote for super-pedants: Fetish: an excessive and irrational devotion or commitment to a particular thing. Soanes, C. and A. Stevenson (eds) (2003), *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, second edition, p.638

This second footnote is an extension of the previous one. It conforms more closely to the 'referencing stereotype' by virtue of including the editors' names, the place(s) of publication, and the page number. But, as common sense might suggest, none of these is necessary – or indeed makes it easier – to track down the source.

3. The excessive and the irrational in common referencing styles

Here are two instances of 'excessive and irrational devotion or commitment' on the part of the enforcers of referencing styles. These instances relate to books (rather than journals), and they illustrate how none of the referencing styles in common use has kept up with the modern world. One is the insistence on including place of publication as an ingredient of a reference; the other is the failure to specify that the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) should be included in references.

1. *The insistence on including place of publication as an ingredient of a reference.*

Place of publication is redundant in today's webbed and globalized world. Many large publishers don't have a single place of publication: Oxford University Press publishes in Oxford and New York, for example. You don't need to know place of publication even for small publishers. If you want to find out who is the publisher of *Cite them right*, a Google search will immediately take you to the web site of Pear Tree Books in Durham, UK. You do not run the slightest risk of confusing them with The Pear Tree Books in Douglass, Texas; or Peartree Books in Clearwater, Florida; or Pear Tree Press in New Kingston, Jamaica; let alone Pear Tree Press in Aotearoa, New Zealand; or the Pear Tree Press (music publisher) in Massachusetts. Unless you are dealing with historical publications – items published before World War II, let's say – you simply do not need to know whereabouts a book was published in order to track it down. Requiring students to cite place of publication of sources in their essays is excessive and irrational.

2. *The failure to specify that the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) should be included in references.*

The ISBN system was introduced in the UK in 1967 and adopted for international use in 1970, so it has been around in the UK for more than 40 years and as long – or nearly as long – elsewhere. It is extraordinarily useful. If you know a book's ISBN – whether it comprise ten digits or (more recently) thirteen – all you need do is search for it in a good academic library's online catalogue, such as LSE's, and you will immediately be shown all the other details of the book.⁵ I find it truly bizarre that none of the standard referencing styles in use today incorporates the International Standard Book Number. To ignore ISBNs is utterly irrational (as it is to ignore its equivalent for journals, the International Standard Serial Number, ISSN).

As an academic myself and as someone who cares deeply about higher education, I feel obliged to apologise and offer my sympathy to all students who are on the receiving end of this insistence on archaic referencing styles. Who is to blame for this state of affairs? I can't say for certain, but they are certainly people with bureaucratic rather than academic minds. It's all a bit anal-retentive, isn't it.

Footnote: Anal-retentive: excessively orderly and fussy, supposedly owing to conflict over toilet-training in infancy. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, second edition, 2003

4. The reading-to-writing process

What is the effect on students of the referencing fetish, this insistence on detailed and 'correct' referencing, this 'excessive and irrational devotion or commitment'? Does it indeed inhibit students from thinking for themselves?

In order to answer these questions, we need to know something about the process by which students produce their written work – their essay or dissertation. It's a process which begins with reading – usually, where essays are concerned, of items on a 'reading list' – and ends with the submission of a piece of written work. What do we know about this process, this reading-to-writing process?

Let me offer you a framework here. I suggest that the process consists of a four-stage reiterating cycle (imagine a helix, a spiral):

1. Reading and making notes: selecting and copying.
2. Translating from 'academic-speak': paraphrasing and annotating.
3. Gaining understanding, including 'writing as thinking'.
4. Writing as presenting. Editing, with the reader in mind.

Let me take you through these.

Stage 1. Reading and making notes: selecting and copying what appear to be relevant passages. Put like that, it sounds a bit mechanical. It's not. You have to make judgments all the time, especially judgments as to whether something is relevant. When you're starting a new course, you probably have very little by which to judge relevance. And academics do not teach students how to read. They do not stand in front of their students with a book and show them what they do with it: how they themselves treat reading as a kind of 'treasure hunt'; how they themselves sort the relevant from the irrelevant; how they look for structure; how they zero in on conclusions; and so on. The result is that students set themselves the impossible task of soaking up whole books and articles. They fall asleep in libraries. They try to highlight the 'important' bits, and end up highlighting 90% of the book or article in front of them!

There's another sense in which reading is much more than a mechanical process. From my own experience, which is backed up by what students have told me, I think there's something that you might call 'peripheral reading'. It's analogous to peripheral vision. While you're looking for material that's relevant, you see other things out of the corner of your eye. You notice them without registering their significance. You've no reason to write them down, much less to note where you

saw them. They're there at the back of your mind – and there they stay, until you have a flash of inspiration later.

Stage 2. Translating, from 'academic-speak' – the specialized language of the subject – into language that makes sense to you. This involves paraphrasing and annotating, and *interpreting* what you read. It's important to appreciate the difficulties that many students experience here. Much academic writing is poor. Some of it is awful. You are all too likely to come across writers who aren't consistent in the words they use, and who don't offer a decent 'map' to guide the reader through their material. Many fail to make their basic assumptions explicit, and many omit steps in their reasoning. You may even encounter some whose command of English grammar, punctuation and sentence structure is weak. And some who produce a torrent not so much of academic-speak as of gobbledygook.

Anthony Giddens, former director of LSE, outlined the role of academic-speak in an interview that he gave to the *Times Higher*:

I'd spent most of my life writing books for an academic audience, and I used to make those more obscure than they needed to be because that sort of brought you esteem for your scholarship.⁶

If Professor Giddens's colleagues found his books obscure, you can imagine how they struck students!

Stage 3. Gaining understanding. By this I mean thinking and reasoning in the subject's language; questioning and evaluating what you read; making connections between material that's new to you and the knowledge you already have; putting concepts and theory together with empirical data; and so on. In this stage you are taking off, so to speak, from your readings: you're digesting and internalizing material, making it your own.

An important – indeed, essential – part of this stage is writing, producing successive drafts. You might call this 'writing as thinking'. How do you know what you think till you've seen what you've written? You're playing with data, facts, theories, concepts and ideas; juggling with them, fitting them together. You do this by drafting and redrafting, and redrafting again and again. You're formulating a structure in your mind.

You're actually doing something very sophisticated here. You're starting with a complex, jumbled, 'cloud' of material in your head, and out of it you're trying to draw something that is essentially *linear*, a chain of reasoning, with a beginning and an end, from introduction to conclusion. It's not only sophisticated: it's a very *difficult* thing to do. It requires a skill. And this is a skill which again, I need hardly add, students in British universities *are not taught*.

This stage too is far from being a merely mechanical one. Think about the language we use to describe it: 'Ideas pop into your head.' 'It was there at the back of my

mind.’ ‘I had a flash of inspiration.’ ‘It just struck me.’ ‘Got a tricky problem? Sleep on it.’

Stage 4. Writing as presenting. In this stage you are going over what you’ve written so far, now with the reader at the forefront of your mind. You’re making your piece of writing ‘reader-friendly’. You’re editing. You’re making sure that your paragraphs aren’t too long and aren’t too short. You’re cutting to meet the word limit. You’re checking that your references are all present and correct.

5. How the referencing fetish impacts on the reading-to-writing process

Now that we have a notion of the reading-to-writing process, we can rephrase my question, as follows: How does the referencing fetish impact on the reading-to-writing process? Here are the conclusions I have come to:

1. It teaches students – erroneously – that the reading-to-writing process is essentially a mechanical one.
2. It teaches students to act in a risk-averse way.
3. It leads to students not being given credit for the work they have done if their referencing is not perfect.
4. It places an emphasis on presentation, and this distracts students from learning.
5. It places an emphasis on *cataloguing* quotations and thereby distracts attention from the epistemic status of quotations and the use that is made of them.⁷

Let me spell these out.

1. *It teaches students – erroneously – that the reading-to-writing process is essentially a mechanical one.* It doesn’t allow for ‘peripheral reading’; it doesn’t allow for the sophisticated nature of deriving a linear formation from a cloud of material. It conveys the impression that what you have to do to write an essay is to cobble together a string of quotations and/or paraphrasings.

2. *It teaches students to act in a risk-averse way.* The insistence on detailed and ‘correct’ referencing is invariably accompanied by warnings that if your referencing is not detailed and ‘correct’ you will be penalized. Taken in conjunction with the parallel warnings against committing the offence of plagiarism, the effect on students – who, remember, are not given any tuition in academic reading and writing – is in some cases nothing short of traumatizing. I have met many students, and heard the testimony of yet others, who are scared stiff of what will happen if they don’t get their referencing right. I know of no evidence to support the view that trauma is an aid to learning.

3. *It leads to students not being given credit for the work they have done if their referencing is not perfect.* Students are penalized if they haven't mastered the intricacies of referencing, but they are not rewarded when they manage to master the sophisticated nature of the reading-to-writing process. Essay marking seems to be more about criticizing than appreciating.

Think about plagiarizing for a moment. How do we spot material that has been lifted from a published source and passed off as a student's own? Very often there's something 'wrong' about it. Typically it's slightly off the point, or it doesn't fit with the preceding material, or it doesn't answer the question set. We spot it because it's *incompetent* plagiarizing. But sometimes the lifted material is bang on the point, and fits really well with the preceding material, and absolutely does answer the question set. This is *extremely competent* plagiarizing. The extremely competent plagiarizer has clearly mastered the topic, and demonstrated a keen eye for relevance. Should we not give the extremely competent plagiarizer credit for the knowledge, skill and understanding that he or she has demonstrated, instead of treating them in exactly the same way as the incompetent one? Let's have some appreciation here!

4. *It places an emphasis on presentation, and this distracts students from learning.* Referencing is all about presenting, Stage 4 in the process: it's all about showing the reader what sources you have read and used. Placing emphasis on detailed and 'correct' referencing distracts students from Stage 3 in the process, gaining understanding, when they're 'writing as thinking', drafting and redrafting. They get the implicit message that they should aim to get it right first time, to write the essay in one go; to leap from Stage 2 (translating) or even from Stage 1 (reading and making notes) directly to Stage 4. So this emphasis on referencing distracts students from doing the work necessary to gain understanding, from working through successive drafts, learning as they go.

5. *It places an emphasis on cataloguing quotations and thereby distracts attention from the epistemic status of quotations and the use that is made of them.* Below are some examples – quotations – to show what I mean. They are extracts from articles to be found in the recent plagiarism literature. (The authors of these articles are the secondary authors. The URLs for their articles can be found in the endnotes on Page 12. Do look them up and form your own view as to whether I have taken them out of context.)

Quotation/paraphrasing by the author of a secondary source	Comment
Vigue (1997) points out that there has always been the filing cabinet at the fraternity house where students could swap assignments ... ⁸	The term 'points out' suggests that a fact is being adduced. What we have here, however, is an unverifiable historical generalization that the secondary authors are treating as a fact
Connors ... argues that the Internet has made access to information and to pre-written essays very easy ... ⁹	This isn't an argument: it is a demonstrable fact (unless you want to quibble about the precise meaning of 'very easy')
[Park] states that 'plagiarism is doubtless common and getting more so' ... ¹⁰	Academic writers, like politicians, use the word 'doubtless' when they don't actually have evidence. Regard it as a synonym for 'I think'. The expression 'common and getting more so' is almost meaningless unless quantified
When stresses rise, students see plagiarism as a reasonable and reasonably risk-free way out of difficulties (Bannister and Ashworth, 1998) ¹¹	Another generalization: does this apply to <i>all</i> students? The secondary author avoids referring to the status of this purported fact by doing no more than referencing the primary source
Hart and Friesner suggest that studies of cheating behaviour in the USA date from the 1940s ... ¹²	Here is another purported fact, not a suggestion in the normal sense of that word. We are offered no evidence that no such studies were carried out prior to the 1940s
Waldmann states that because all mature professions have a well-developed code of ethics, this should be reflected in the education of the future professional. ¹³	The secondary authors are endorsing the primary author's slide from an 'is' to an 'ought', from a purported fact (about 'all mature professions') to what 'should' be done in the future. And what constitutes a 'mature' profession (bankers, property developers, estate agents?) is of course a matter of opinion

These six quotations are all impeccably referenced but they are all examples of what I call 'lazy citing'. They have two things in common: (1) they are being used to convey authority, to make a piece seem authoritative and implicitly to discourage questioning, and (2) they all demonstrate an inability to discern epistemic status, as evidenced in a failure to distinguish established facts and evidence from opinion, judgment, surmise and unverifiable historical generalization. I wonder how the authors have come to occupy positions in institutions of higher education.

The inference that I draw from these examples of lazy citing is that the emphasis placed – by the plagiarism police in particular – on the requirement to catalogue one's sources is liable to distract the attention of academics and, as a consequence, of students, from paying attention to the epistemic status of quotations and acquiring the skill of using them appropriately.

6. How the referencing fetish inhibits students from thinking for themselves

I return now to the question in the title of my presentation: Does an insistence on detailed and 'correct' referencing – which, I conclude, amounts today to a referencing fetish – inhibit students from thinking for themselves?

Looking again at my list of the five ways in which the referencing fetish impacts on the reading-to-writing process, I have to answer 'yes, it does' on each of five counts:

1. By implicitly teaching students that the reading-to-writing process is essentially a mechanical one, it inhibits them from using their imaginations, from imagining different ways of constructing a piece of writing. In intellectual terms, it teaches the student how to be a pedestrian rather than how to fly.
2. By teaching students to act in a risk-averse way, it encourages them to use other people's thoughts rather than their own.
3. By helping to create a situation in which students are not given credit for the work they have done if their referencing is not perfect, they are liable not to be rewarded even if they have managed to master the sophisticated nature of the reading-to-writing process, which is very much about thinking things out for themselves.
4. By placing an emphasis on presentation, the fetish has the effect of distracting students from making an effort to gain understanding, a process in which thinking for oneself is a key element.
5. By placing an emphasis on cataloguing quotations and thereby distracting attention from their epistemic status and the use that is made of them, an opportunity is missed to encourage students to think critically, which is again a key element of thinking for oneself. Indeed, students who are remorselessly exposed to lazy citing may never come to appreciate that there is such a thing as the skill of critical thinking and that it can be learned.

In short, I conclude that an insistence on detailed and 'correct' referencing such as we see today amounts to a fetish which does indeed inhibit students from thinking for themselves.

* * *

But let me end on a constructive note. I began by summarizing my six personal rules for referencing, and I'd like to end by reminding you of them and commending them to you on both humanitarian and intellectual grounds as an antidote to the referencing fetish which has weaselled its way into the academic world:

Rule 1. Enable your readers to track down your written sources

Rule 2. Use a style appropriate to your subject

Rule 3. Connect with your readers

Rule 4. Be transparent

Rule 5. Be consistent

Rule 6. Use common sense.

Peter Levin

References

- 1 *Write Great Essays!* (2nd edition, 2009, in press) and *Excellent Dissertations!* (2005) are published by Open University Press
- 2 Intellectual Property Office, *Fast Facts*. Available online at <http://www.ipo.gov.uk/types/copy.htm>
Accessed 1 June 2009.
The IPO is the official government body responsible for granting intellectual property rights in the UK.
- 3 Theft Act 1968, S.1(1). This section is available online at http://www.legislation.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1968/cukpga_19680060_en_1
Accessed 24 June 2009
- 4 C. Neville, *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism* (Open University Press, 2007), pp.42-43
- 5 If you go to the LSE home page – <http://www.lse.ac.uk> – you will see, under ‘New and current students’, a link to ‘Library’. A click on that will take you to the Library home page, where there is a Search box ‘Search the Library Catalogue’. If you type in “9780198613473” (with or without the quotation marks) you will be taken immediately to the entry for *Oxford Dictionary of English*.
- 6 (A. Giddens) Reported in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, Textbook Guide, 28 May 2004, p.II
- 7 Epistemic: Relating to knowledge or to the degree of its validation. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, second edition, 2003.
- 8 J. Underwood & A. Szabo, *Plagiarism: Is this a problem in tertiary education* (JISCPAS, undated but 2003 or later), p.2. Available online at <http://www.plagiarismadvice.org/images/bin/underwoodtertiary.doc>
Accessed 5 May 2009.
- 9 As above.
- 10 J. Carroll, *Institutional issues in deterring, detecting and dealing with student plagiarism* (JISC, August 2004), p.1. Available online at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/plagFinal.pdf
Accessed 5 May 2009.
- 11 As above, p.4
- 12 R. Graham & M. Hart, *Plagiarism Is A Complex Issue, But – Universities Must Articulate a Moral Vision and Live Up To It!* (Paper delivered at the 4th European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies [ECRM 2005], Université Paris-Dauphine 21-22 April 2005), ¶3.1. Available online at http://www.business-kac.co.uk/plag_com2.doc
Accessed 5 May 2009.
- 13 As above, ¶9.5

pdf created using pdf995 free software