

## Guide to Referencing

### The five reasons of referencing: A guide to the reasons behind referencing in University level reports, essays and other assignments.

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One of the most important but confusing aspects of study at university is the system of referencing used for assignments and reports. This will be quite new to most of you because it is not taught widely in schools. The system of referencing is important not just for university assignments, but is used in all jobs in both the public and private sector wherever reports are required. It forms the basis of providing proof in reports and gives your report credibility.

Most assignments require some sort of background literature review to be performed. Sometimes an entire assignment may be based on existing literature. In other assignments, the literature review may form part of an assignment in which experimentation or survey may be the main aim. In any case, the reasons for referencing are the same.

All disciplines have their own style of setting out a reference list. This guide does not list the rules of how to construct a reference list, but covers the more important aspect of why you should reference in the first place.

Most good essay or report *questions* require you to analyse some sort of issue, problem or system whether it be land clearing in Queensland, salinisation in the Murray Basin, participation in Landcare in N.S.W., interaction of tourists and protected areas in national parks, the role of nitrogen in wetland food chains, the ecology of native grasses or mammals, or the history of Australian Football in country Victoria. Very few, if any, essay questions are simple and straightforward. If you think you can answer your essay question with just one reference, speak to your lecturer and discuss the question with him or her (you should actually speak to your lecturer before you attempt any question).

Many people believe that referencing is taking what is written in a text book and "putting it into your own words". This is a very small part of why we reference our work. There are several reasons relating to why referencing is such an important part of any assignment. The reasons are:

1. to give evidence that you have done some research of your own;
2. to present many different points of view.;
3. to prove what you say;

4. to give support to your own opinions or experimental work; and
5. to show where you have found information that is not your own.

## **Reason 1**

### **Reference to give evidence that you have done some research of your own**

In all assignments, lecturers require you to demonstrate that you have in fact done something. Proving you have done some research of the existing literature is just as important as proving you have gone into the field and measured the vegetation, trapped the animal or gone out and surveyed people. You prove you have researched the literature by showing you have read a sufficient number and breadth of references. This demonstrates to your lecturer that you have done more than relied on one reference and shows you have actually done some work. Many people believe that the only reason assignments require references is to show where you obtained your information. When students are marked down for using only one reference, many complain that "all the information I needed was in the one book!". This approach does nothing to demonstrate to your lecturer that you have actually done much work.

In the extract below, every sentence contains a reference at its end. This demonstrates a wide reading of the literature and instils in the reader confidence in your report's information.

There have been studies of the effects of acidity associated with sulfidic sediments on plants (e.g. Moore and Patrick 1991) and on aquatic organisms in aquaculture (Singh *et al.* 1988) and in the natural state (Sammut *et al.* 1995). Studies of the changes to the water chemistry of estuarine environments due to acid discharge include Sammut *et al.* (1996) in Australia, Nguyen and Wilander (1995) in Vietnam and Astrom and Bjorklund (1995) in Finland. In estuarine floodplain environments, the position of the watertable controls the oxidation of the subsurface, and major changes are associated with rain events that cause discharges of acidic water (Sammut *et al.* 1996).

## **Reason 2**

### **Reference to give many points of view.**

This reason follows on from reason 1. All topics will have literature that has been written by many different people. This results in information building on the work of previous authors and in some cases results in differing opinions. In rare cases, in less complex level one assignments for example, there may be few differing opinions (such as the biology of a native marsupial) but without searching through many different references you will not be able to demonstrate this. By examining a large body of literature you will come across many points of view, most of which will build on the published material of previous researchers and authors. This ensures that you do not accept as truth something that was published many years ago and has recently been refuted or updated. The extract below shows examples of quite old references but also more recent publications. It also reports on a number of related articles of research in slightly different areas.

These sediments occur in a wide variety of environments (Kawalec 1973) and have existed through much geological history (Apline and Macquaker 1993). Holocene (<10 000 years) sulfidic sediments have been forming in intertidal environments since the last glacial period (Dent 1986), resulting in laterally (Woodroffe and Chappell 1991) or vertically extensive deposits associated with a rise in sea level and marine transgressions (Craft *et al.* 1993; Jennings *et al.* 1993). However, in a study by Smith *et al.* (1999) extensive deposits were found in areas where sea level had been constant. These sediments continue to accumulate in present-day intertidal environments, coastal lake bottoms and salt-marshes (Lin and Melville, 1992) although in some salt marshes no evidence of pyrite has been found due to an inadequate supply of sulfate (Jones, 1998).

### **Reason 3**

#### **Reference to prove what you say.**

All answers to essay questions will contain facts. Sometimes these facts may appear very obvious to you. In first year assignments, even in cases where you think something is very well known and obvious, you should give a reference for it. You should assume your marker knows next to nothing about the question and you have to prove that what you are saying is in fact supported by other published material. There are several reasons for this. First is that it shows that you have gone out and checked the facts. This is illustrated below:

The climate is humid and subtropical with average annual rainfall >1400 mm: a pronounced wet season extends from December to March, cyclonic activity is common and very high rainfalls of short duration have been recorded; summers are warm to hot, and winters are warm and dry, and moisture deficits on the north coast of NSW are common in spring and early summer (Bureau of Meteorology, 1972).

The second is that it guards against blatant errors. The number of times I have read in essays "the greenhouse effect is caused by the hole in the ozone layer" without a reference is extraordinary. The reason no one ever provides a reference for it is that the statement is quite incorrect, although the student thought it was fact. If the student had gone out and found a reference relating to greenhouse they would have learned that the statement is quite untrue and therefore not made such an error. In some situations where you are writing for a particular audience (such as a scientific paper in a refereed journal) it is valid to include statements without references which are accepted as fact within the particular scientific community you are writing. In essays and reports for university, assume your reader knows nothing and prove every fact you record with a reference.

If your report includes work performed by you, such as a field experiment, then of course this is where you do not need to reference. A similar situation occurs below where a description of a river in a study site section is not referenced because it was determined by going out and inspecting.

The study site was a sugarcane field on McLeods Creek, a right-bank tributary of the Tweed River, on the far north coast of New South Wales.

Similarly, all results determined by you, of course, do not need to be referenced.

#### Results

The pattern of watertable movement was one of a highly fluctuating, dynamic and responsive system. The rapid rise of the watertable following rainfall can be seen in Fig. 3. For much of the first half of 1998 the watertable was high, reflecting the high rainfall typical of this subtropical wet season. The position of the watertable during this part of the study suggests very little build up of acid in the soil profile. Throughout the remainder of the year the position of the watertable fell, and with the absence of a normal wet season at the start of 1999 the watertable reached the lowest position in the subsoil, 1.8 m below the surface. This is well below the upper boundary of the pyritic subsoil across the site and constitutes a period of maximum oxidation and production of acid. The watertables began to rise in March of 1999 and fluctuated according to the variable rainfall input for the remainder of the year.

### **Reason 4**

#### **Reference to give support to your own opinions or experimental work**

In many assignments you will be asked to evaluate something (a management plan or legislative process for example) or report on the significance of your findings (after an experiment is an example). It is in these situations that referencing becomes complex but it is here that good referencing really adds to any report you write. If we take the example of a management plan that has not been useful for, say, preserving an endangered species, then

you would need to prove this with some reference. If no such reference exists you may use a personal communication (see note below). If it is your own observation then you must state how you came to that conclusion (experimentation or survey for example). In all situations, **it is a matter of proving what you say** to the person marking your assignment. Sometimes, a situation may arise when you are stating an opinion or belief that is truly yours. In such a case providing no reference is quite valid and if you have referenced all other material properly then it will be obvious to your marker that it is your opinion and therefore quite acceptable.

In the example taken from a discussion of results below, two references are used; the first is used to support findings from the experiments undertaken, the second is included because the results differ from previously held beliefs and therefore demonstrates the significance of the results.

The magnitude of changes to the estuarine environment is related to the position of the watertable and any stored acid water in floodgated drains prior to any rainfall event, in addition to the volume of water applied. Acid water stored behind floodgates was also found by Sammut *et al.* (1996) on the Richmond River, NSW. A simplification of the processes occurring in acid sulfate soils suggests that a low watertable, such as recorded during drought, allows significant oxidation and production of acidity so that, following heavy rain, large quantities of acid are flushed into the estuarine system (Palko and Wepling 1995). However, the periods of record shown here indicate that the processes responsible for change in water quality are more complex and that in some cases a low watertable may in fact contribute to reducing estuarine acidification under certain climatic conditions.

## **Reason 5**

### **Reference to show where you have found information that is not your own.**

If you approach your assignments by concentrating on the first four reasons then the fifth is satisfied almost automatically. You will find that your assignments become easier to write, you won't have to rely on a single reference for whole paragraphs and you will have a detailed, well supported and well researched report.

### **A note on personal communications (pers. comm.)**

Pers. comms are used only when some information relevant to your assignment is not available in published sources. Pers. comm. information must be from first hand experiences of a person working in the area you are reporting on. Pers. comms must be from well qualified people and this must be demonstrated in a section at the end of your report by supplying full name, place of work and contact details. You should never use a pers. comm. to reference something you heard in a lecture or tutorial. Pers. comms must not be used when a suitable published reference is available.

### **Other common errors in referencing**

Do not rely solely on references contained in distance education modules. While the information in them may be valid it does not help to show you have examined a wide range of literature. Similarly, never reference something you heard in a lecture unless otherwise directed.

Always reference figures, maps and diagrams. If you feel your report would benefit by copying an entire figure you must put the source of the figure.

Only reference author's name and date of publication in the text of your report. This includes references found on the internet.

One final note on referencing. Many students ask "How many references do we need to answer the question". Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this. You need as many references as it takes to answer the question and demonstrate that you have satisfied the five reasons of referencing.

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