

# Citing and Referencing in APA Style: Preliminary Insights



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## Introduction

APA Style emerged as a part of the Behaviorist movement in Psychology.

APA is a genre different from other genres in the Sciences and Arts & Humanities, but all genres require disciplinary and rhetorical knowledge.

Documentation (i.e., citations and references) distinguishes scholarly work from popular work.

Although a number of citations reflect the intellectual contribution of an article to a research literature, authors may have other motives to cite.

We addressed whether students have a narrow or broad understanding of APA Style to test the limits of learning about documentation via osmosis.

## Method

This is a qualitative study of N = 102 second-year psychology students (80 females & 22 males).

After counting sentences in response to the prompt,

- Do you regard citations and references as
- (a) conventions of APA format and style,
  - (b) facts, or
  - (c) something else altogether

Explain your view of the purpose of citations and references in APA research reports.

the researchers:

Coded whether students regard citations as (a) conventions of APA format and style, (b) facts, or (c) something else altogether. We called this view.

Coded responses about the role of citations and references by applying categories and reasons of Willet (2013). We called this motives or reasons.

Coded whether students complained or stated a negative negativity. We called this complaints.

## Special Thanks

We thank UW-Eau Claire's poster printing service maintained by Learning and Technology Services and funded in part by Differential Tuition.

## Results

Table 1: Percent of Students Advocating Seven Views

Percent	Label	Role or Function of Citations and References
41	C	Convention Alone
31	F	Fact Alone
11	SE	Something Else Alone
11	C + F	Both a Convention and a Fact
02	F + SE	Both a Fact and Something Else
02	C + SE	Both a Convention and Something Else
02	C + F + SE	Convention, Fact, and Something Else

Table 1 shows that 4 of 5 students attribute a single role to citations and references whereas less than 1 in 5 students advocate a combination or complex view.

Table 2: Percent of Students Endorsing 18 Reasons

Percent	Category	Reason
67	Other	Other. Any type of citation not in the other 17 sub-classes
45	Building	Building by citing own work or that of others
37	Supporting	Justifying the topic of research
37	Credit	Paying respect
14	Signposting	Helping and interesting less informed readers
13	Future	Mapping out future work planned by writer
09	Competence	Displaying knowledge of the literature
09	Tying	Tying in with others' methods
06	Tying	Tying in with schools of thought
03	Engaging	Identifying inconsistencies in source's position
02	Supporting	Justifying the method
02	Position	Exemplars of position
01	Signposting	Keeping the argument on track
01	Supporting	Justifying claims
01	Position	Detailed explication of positions and results
01	Position	Tracing positions over time
01	Engaging	Praising but then identifying problems with the source
00	Credit	Self-defense

Table 2 shows two of three students offer their own reasons for citing, while four of ten students noted Building by citing, Justifying the topic, and Paying respect. Only one of six students identified Helping less informed readers and Mapping future work as reasons for documenting.

## Results

Alternative functions of citations from students:  
 "Resources can provide ideas for research topics and methodology."  
 "I cite sources to avoid plagiarism."

14% of students complained or expressed a negative view of APA style and format such as:  
 "APA style is relatively difficult to do. I feel that it should be simplified. They change it almost every year anyway...Don't make us relearn this over and over again."

## Discussion

Students have a limited repertoire of reasons for creating citations and references in APA reports.

Belief that citations play a single role conveys minimal understanding of APA style and format.

Professors can broaden the teachings of APA Style to provide students with a better understanding of how, when, why, and where citations are used.

Future research will include information gathered directly from students on how they learned APA style and their understanding of APA Style.

## Remediation

**We recommend these instructional practices:**

Students read Hendricks and Quinn (2000) to learn strategies for citing and referencing.

Teachers downplay requirements for a minimum number of sources and promote the selection and use of sources that represent various categories and reasons or motives to cite.

Students complete an exercise in verifying, evaluating, and correcting sources in a faulty list.

Students could rewrite a portion of an APA style research report in other genres. The contrast would make clear the alternative conventions of APA, MLA, and Chicago style.

Teachers still emphasize the format of citations in text and references in a list also but convey the more sophisticated elements of documentation.

Instructors annotate one version of their own publication and ask students to infer the motives to cite. Students could do this with their own papers.