Know which sources require acknowledgment and which don’t

Not all facts, information, or observations need to be cited, but you must understand the distinction (and cite the source if you are unsure).

For an overview of related key topics on avoiding plagiarism, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

When you work with research sources, it is important to understand the difference between those materials that require acknowledgment and those that don’t. The basic rule is that if most of your readers won’t already know a piece of information, you need to share the source of the information in a citation. Writers who don’t provide this acknowledgment have committed plagiarism. Plagiarism is the use of the words or ideas of others while failing to properly acknowledge the source. Plagiarism comes with serious negative consequences and penalties, ranging from failing grades on a particular project to failing a course to being expelled. In your writing for school and beyond, be certain to acknowledge the sources of the information you use and clearly identify for readers the boundary between your words and ideas and those of your sources.

Common knowledge is the term to describe ideas and facts that are widely known. For example, many people know that Louis Pasteur invented the first vaccine for rabies and that the Beatles first arrived in the United States in 1964. Common knowledge can be located quickly in a variety of reference materials. Sometimes you may need to consider whether materials are considered common knowledge by the readers in your discipline. For example, the idea of a balance of power system will be familiar to readers of international relations texts but may need to be cited for readers who are not immersed in the information in the discipline.

COMMON KNOWLEDGE AND FACTS THAT DO NOT REQUIRE ACKNOWLEDGMENT: A SAMPLE SOURCE IN QUESTIA

This chapter from a reference book in Questia includes facts available from a wide number of sources.

Most readers will know the fact that the blues is a distinct genre of music. You do not need to cite a source for such common knowledge.

Learn It

Knowing which sources require acknowledgment can be challenging; if you have any doubt, include a citation. Materials that do not require acknowledgment include information that can be considered well known, facts that are widely available in a variety of reference resources, and data that you have recorded or gathered yourself. If you conduct field research, such as interviews and surveys, you can refer to your study in the body of your paper; you do not need to cite it in your bibliography.

MATERIALS THAT REQUIRE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

• Quotations and any paraphrases or summaries of the ideas of others
• Facts or statistics available in only a few sources or that are not widely known
• Controversial claims
• Opinions and judgments a source makes
• Visuals, including photographs, cartoons, graphs, diagrams, or other images (except those you create yourself)
• Web sources—these must be given the same treatment as print sources
• Help from classmates, an instructor, or others

There are variations on the rules governing common knowledge, depending on your discipline. If you are unsure about whether something is considered common knowledge and whether you need to cite the source for a particular piece of information, check with your instructor. For more information about plagiarism, most colleges offer official guidelines with very specific definitions. In the end, cite your source if you are unsure; you will never be wrong to err on the side of caution.

Use It

Read the following three short passages taken from student essays. Which of these contain information that would be considered common knowledge? Which passages require added citations that acknowledge the source for the information they present? How did you determine which passages need citations?

1. Women's sports took on new popularity in this country in the 1990s. The 1996 women's basketball team memorably won a gold medal at the Olympics in Atlanta. Meanwhile, professional women's basketball began in 1996 with the founding of the WNBA, with games beginning the following year.

2. The days before Kennedy was assassinated were challenging for Lyndon Johnson, who travelled on a re-election tour with the president across his home state of Texas. Newspaper headlines suggested that Johnson's political future was unclear, with headlines such as “Nixon Predicts JFK May Drop Johnson.”

3. Jake Adelstein, a journalist covering the Japanese crime world, brings Japanese yakuza crime organizations to the attention of a wider American readership. Many separate yakuza organizations exist throughout Japan, and together they represent the world's largest organized crime system. The police estimate that there are nearly eighty thousand members of yakuza organizations, while the American Mafia had only five thousand at its peak.

Use It: Suggested Answers

The facts and ideas about women's basketball presented in paragraph 1 are widely available in reference sources and therefore would be considered common knowledge. Paragraph 2 presents an assertion (that the days leading up to Kennedy's assassination were difficult for Johnson) and also quotes a headline; both require citation. Paragraph 3 describes and summarizes Adelstein's research on his subject, the yakuza. These specific facts about the size of organized crime must be cited.