

Common Knowledge & Attribution

What is 'Common Knowledge'?

Common knowledge refers to information that is widely known and found undocumented in at least five reputable sources. For example, the idea that "writing is difficult" is generally accepted in the field of composition studies and supported by numerous credible sources.

When unsure whether something counts as common knowledge—cite it. It's always safer to over-cite than under-cite. Your instructor or editor can guide you on whether the citation is necessary.

Understanding Citation and Attribution

Citation isn't just about avoiding plagiarism—it's about giving credit and guiding readers to your sources. Different citation styles (like APA, MLA, etc.) have distinct rules, but they all follow the same core structure:

1. Signal Phrase (or "signposting"): Introduces the source in your writing (e.g., "According to Chen Li...").
2. In-Text Citation: Brief details (e.g., author's name, publication year, or page number) that point to the full reference (e.g., (Li, 2020) or (Li 7)).
3. Bibliographic Citation: Full citation that appears in the reference list or bibliography.

These three elements work together. A signal phrase starts the citation in your sentence, the in-text citation finishes it, and the bibliography gives full source details.

Example in APA Style:

According to Chen Li (2020), there are six best practices writers can use to avoid plagiarism. These include adopting note-taking habits that focus on attribution, learning about the citation style in question, and "understanding the why behind citation rules" to better apply them (pg. 7).

Reference:

Li, C. (2020). Best practices to avoid plagiarism. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 42(1), pp. 4–12.

This citation begins with a signal phrase (author and year), followed by paraphrase and a direct quote, and ends with an in-text citation. The full bibliographic entry is listed in the reference section.

Explore articles within your discipline to understand how sources are cited. Notice the

placement of signal phrases, in-text citations, and reference entries. Citation conventions can differ by field.

Refer to our companion resources on quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing to better grasp how to use source material responsibly and effectively.