

Authoritative References

When writing a term paper or any official report, inclusion of *authoritative* reference citations is essential. The references give the reader confidence that you have "done your homework" in preparing the report, they show how your results and conclusions fit within the established work of others, and they allow the interested reader to find sources of additional in-depth information.

Authoritative references are archival, corroborated, and sanctioned.

Archival means that the source is currently available, accessible by the public, and expected to remain available in the future. This would apply to books and magazines in a public library, official government documents, and bona fide electronic document repositories, such as the on-line research archives of academic institutions or professional organizations.

Corroborated means that the information appears in at least two separate and reliable sources, such as a magazine article by one author and the matching information in a research monograph by another author. Corroboration does not guarantee accuracy, but it helps prevent published errors—either accidental or intentional—from leading you astray.

Sanctioned indicates that the information is from a trustworthy and reputable source, such as a published encyclopedia, a professional society magazine, a scholarly peer-reviewed journal, or a similar source that is known to have reliable fact-checking procedures in place.

It is best to use a balance of different bibliographic references, like three taken from print media and three from electronic (web) sources.

Web sites and blogs that are user-altered or frequently changed cannot be considered archival, so they cannot be used as authoritative references. Wikipedia is a significant example of a useful but *non-authoritative* source: the articles can be changed at any time (not archival), there is no guarantee of corroboration, and the contents are not sanctioned by any official and trustworthy source. So, by all means go ahead and use Wikipedia and similar sites as you begin your literature search, but you should not cite the information from Wikipedia in your term paper or official report. Instead, use the links and leads typically found in Wikipedia articles to help you find and cite the *authoritative* sources.

Authoritative examples:

- An article in World Book Encyclopedia.
- A textbook from a reputable publisher such as Wiley, Prentice-Hall, McGraw Hill, etc.
- A news article published in Newsweek or a similar nationally distributed news magazine.
- The official web site of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (www.nist.gov)

Questionable examples that probably aren't *authoritative* by definition:

- Unreviewed documents from self-published web repositories (blogs, wiki sites, political sites, commercial advertising, etc.).
- Material received via uncorroborated email, via hearsay, or statements solely in oral form.
- Letters to the editor, opinion essays, and other informal personal communication items.
- Videos, books, web sites, or handbills intended to promote a deliberately controversial, decidedly partisan, offensive, or inflammatory viewpoint.

In general, please use the MLA style guide or another consistent format for all cited references. Order the references by the first author's last name, or use some other consistent approach (order of citation, chronological order of publication, etc.). If the item is anonymous (no author), start the entry with the title.

A few examples:

Book: [AUTHORS. TITLE. PLACE: PUBLISHER, DATE.]

Lewis, George, and Sylvia Grayson. A Big Red Example Book. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Journal: [AUTHORS. "ARTICLE TITLE." JOURNAL TITLE VOLUME (DATE): PAGES]

Jones, Sue, Steve Bent, and Shirley Ficus. "Building Tall, Building Small." Chronicles of Montana 21.4 (2001): 49-56.

Website: [AUTHORS. "DOC TITLE." SITE NAME. DOC DATE. SITE SPONSOR. ACCESS DATE URL]

Maher, Robert. "ENGR125CS Syllabus." Technology, Innovation, and Society Course. 2008. Montana State University. 10 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.coe.montana.edu/ee/rmaher/engr125/syllabus.htm>>.

NOTE that many publications have specific style guides and cited reference formats, so refer to those guides if you are preparing a paper for journal publication.