

Improving citation accuracy: A commentary for authors and reviewers

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Dear Editor,

Upon reviewing numerous scientific articles, we have noticed recurring errors in how authors cite the works of others. Some authors seem unaware of proper citation practices, and unfortunately, even articles published in peer-reviewed journals sometimes display citation errors. This suggests that reviewers may either be unfamiliar with correct citation methods or fail to thoroughly check references. In this commentary, we address two major citation issues we frequently encounter in our reviews and provide recommendations for proper citation practices.

1. Primary sources

When citing research findings, it is essential to reference the original study that first presented those results. Let us clarify this with an example:

Imagine Researcher A conducted a study and discovered a finding, that we will call Result A. Later, Researcher B publishes a paper in which they mention Result A and properly cite Researcher A's original study. Now, if we read Researcher B's paper and encounter Result A, we might be tempted to simply cite Researcher B's paper. However, this is not correct. Instead, we must identify the original study by Researcher A, verify its findings ourselves (if possible), and then cite Researcher A's work directly.

But what should we do if we cannot access Researcher A's original study? In such cases, we can still include Result A in our article, but we must make it clear that we are relying on Researcher B's citation of it. For example, we should write: "Result A was first reported by Researcher A (as cited in Researcher B, Year)."

This approach ensures transparency, giving proper credit to both the original study and the intermediary source.

This principle also applies when discussing well-known theories or concepts. For instance, when explaining Viktor

Frankl's theory of logotherapy, we should reference Frankl's original work, such as his book,¹ rather than relying on secondary interpretations or summaries of his ideas. Only in cases where the original source is inaccessible or the information is widely accepted as common knowledge (e.g., "the Earth revolves around the Sun" or "COVID-19 emerged in 2019") can secondary sources suffice.

Reviewers and editors must ensure that authors prioritize the use of primary sources in their references. This not only upholds the integrity of scientific communication but also acknowledges the rightful contributors to the body of knowledge.

2. Updated sources

When citing statistical data or reports, it is crucial to use the most recent version of the source, especially if the data might have changed over time. If the data have been updated, citing an older source can lead to inaccuracies.

For example, suppose you are reviewing an article submitted in February 2023, and the authors cite a 2014 WHO report that states more than 800 000 people die from suicide each year. However, the WHO published an updated report in 2019, which may contain new figures or insights. In this case, the authors should have referenced the more recent 2019 WHO report, not the outdated 2014 version. By doing so, they provide the most accurate and up-to-date information.

In another instance, consider an article discussing the prevalence of vertigo. The authors cited a study from the early 2000s that reported a certain prevalence rate. However, they failed to mention that the data might be outdated and that the prevalence of vertigo could have changed over time. The authors should have made sure to reference the most recent studies or reports, even if no new research has been conducted in the field. If no updated study was available, they should have explicitly stated that

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the data are from the 2000s and that more recent studies are lacking.

For example, the citation could be written like this: “In the year X, the prevalence of vertigo in region Y was reported to be 14% (Author, Year).” This approach not only provides the correct information but also shows that the authors are aware of the potential limitations of older data.

In some cases, if new research has not been published on a specific topic, authors should still make it clear which year the cited data are from, therefore readers are aware that the data may no longer be current.

This issue is particularly common in journals that use referencing formats such as Vancouver. In such journals, reviewers need to ensure that the year of the source is checked. Editors should remind reviewers to verify the timeliness of all references to avoid using outdated information.

Conclusion

Accurate citation practices are critical for maintaining the integrity of scientific communication. Authors must

prioritize citing primary sources and using updated references, while reviewers should carefully verify references for correctness and relevance. Editors play a vital role in ensuring these practices by guiding and reminding reviewers to adhere to these standards.

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Competing Interests

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Ethical Approval

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