Principles of Citation

Definition: Citation means telling the reader where you got your information. (Do not confuse it with evidence, which is the information itself. An article can have evidence without citing it.)

I. Why cite sources?
   a. Give credit where credit is due.
   b. Help the reader
      i. check your information (which also builds credibility)
      ii. learn more about the topic

II. What do you cite (what kind of information)?
   Everything that is not your own original work (original words or original research or original ideas), or common knowledge.
   i. Other people’s exact words (direct quotes, which must be in quotation marks)
   ii. Other people’s facts (any data, facts, stories, examples, names, numbers, information, etc., that you got from somewhere else)
   iii. Other people’s ideas (ways of thinking about things, connections, questions, etc.)

III. How do you do it?
   a. TAKE NOTES! Always keep track of where you got your information. Include all of the following:
      i. Author’s name,
      ii. title of book or article,
      iii. date,
      iv. who published it (if it’s a magazine, the title of the magazine; if it’s a book, the publishing company; if it’s a website, the name of the website and the organization that owns the website), and
      v. page numbers if they have them.
   
   This is called the publication data or publication information or bibliographic data.

   Have a notebook or file or folder where you record this information for every source you look at, even if you’re not sure you’ll use it. Never tell yourself that you’ll remember or you’ll go back and do it later. You won’t. Make it a habit to record the information immediately, before you start reading, or as soon as you take your first note.

   b. In the paper, use a 2-part system:
      i. In the body of the paper, after the quote/fact/idea that you got from someone else, give the author’s last name in parentheses. If there are page numbers, give the number too.
      ii. At the end of the paper, list the complete publication data for all sources that you used in the paper (not the ones you looked at but didn’t take anything
from). List the author’s last name and first name, then title, then the publisher (magazine, journal, etc.), then the date. Put them in alphabetical order by author’s last name:


For more information on citation rules, visit the MLA page on Diana Hacker’s website. This page will explain how to format the complete citation, how to handle different types of sources, and exceptions, like what to do when no author is given.

IV. Rule for quoting

When quoting:

1. either quote EXACTLY (word for word, comma for comma)
2. or rewrite COMPLETELY (entirely in your own words)

Example

Option 1: Quote exactly

“With the possible exception of the domestication of wheat, the green revolution is the worst thing that has ever happened to the planet” (Manning, “The Oil We Eat,” Harpers, February 2004).

Option 2: Rewrite completely

The green revolution has been one of the biggest catastrophes the entire world has ever experienced (Manning, “The Oil We Eat,” Harpers, February 2004). Notice that the citation is still required, even if the idea is expressed in your own words.

Unacceptable (halfway between Option 1 and Option 2):

Maybe except for the domestication of wheat, the green revolution is the worst thing that has ever happened to the earth.

For more on how to paraphrase (rewrite another’s words), see Plagiarism: What It is and How to Recognize and Avoid It, from Indiana University.