

ATtribution

A Crash Course on a Cornerstone
of Journalism and Professional Communications

First: Forget about Citations

Citations (e.g. parenthetical, footnotes, endnotes) are primarily used in **academic texts** to tell a reader **where the ideas information presented came from.**

This is important because it shows that a writer's work is not **plagiarized**, giving credit to facts and ideas that are not the writer's own. They also enable readers to **find the original source of information or ideas and evaluate it themselves.**

However, in journalism and most other forms of professional communications (Public Relations, Advertising) citations are **NOT** used, but we still have a duty to show people where information is coming from. Instead of citing, we **ATTRIBUTE** information, or identify where ideas and information originally came from through **natural language embedded in the narrative of the text.**

Farming's Influence on Education. One result of the newly circulating print information was the “need for acquiring scientific information upon which could be based a rational technology” that could “be substituted for the current diverse, empirical practices” (Danhof 69). In his 1825 book *Nature and Reason Harmonized in the Practice of Husbandry*, John Lorain begins his first chapter by stating that “[v]ery erroneous theories have been propagated” resulting in faulty farming methods (70). His words here create a framework for the rest of his book, as he offers his readers a narrative of his own trials and errors and even dismisses foreign, time-tested techniques farmers had held on to: “The knowledge we have of that very ancient and numerous nation the Chinese, as well as the very located habits and costumes of this very singular people, is in itself insufficient to teach us . . .” (75). His book captures the call and need for scientific experiments to develop new knowledge meant to be used in/on/with American soil, which reflects some

So, Why No Citations?

There are three main reasons why journalists and other professional communicators **DO NOT** use citations:

1. **To make the writing flow more smoothly** for readers. People have maddeningly short attention spans. Citations halt the eyes as they make their way through a body of text. Our goal is to get readers from A to B as smoothly and quickly as possible.
2. We mostly write for **common people** who may or may not be as educated as we are. Citations are primarily for scholarly texts, not stuff average people read on a regular basis. When we write something we're usually trying to reach the widest audience possible. Citation-less writing is **more accessible** for readers.
3. **To make writing more natural and less burdensome on our end...** Writers have to produce material quickly. The easiest way to write is to compose text the way we speak.

Attribution = Citations

In a [blog post](#) describing proper attribution techniques for journalists, Louisiana State University journalism professor Steve Buttry, describes attribution as “the difference between research and plagiarism.”

Because humans are not omniscient beings, professional communicators rely on third party sources for information for our writing. **To avoid plagiarizing, we must attribute, or identify, who all sources are** and clarify why they matter in the context of what you are writing about.

SOURCES

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graph TD; SOURCES --> People; SOURCES --> Documents;
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People

- Interviews
- E-mails
- Letters
- Social Media
- etc...

Documents

- Books
- Websites
- Reports
- Broadcasts
- Articles
- etc...

ATtribution is...

A writing method that journalists use to show the audience where the facts and quotes they are reporting came from. When a reporter interviews someone and uses their quote in a story, they attribute the quote to that person (e.g. *“I had a really good time at the baseball game,” said Dr. Emil Strangelove in an interview with the Post on Monday*), often with other background information, so that the audience knows that information was obtained by the reporter directly (original reporting) and that a **real, traceable person** uttered it.

Similarly, **information obtained from documents** - like books, other news articles, government reports, etc. - **is always attributed** (e.g. *Baseball became a large sport in America during the 1800’s because it offered city dwellers a cheap option for entertainment, according to “The History of Baseball” by Homer J. Batswings, a 2002 book chronicling the rise of the sport in the U.S. -OR- The man bit the dog after a significant struggle, the Associated Press reported on Wednesday.*)

Attribute Early And Often

The Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication's [guidelines on plagiarism](#) provides a good example:

“It’s important that when you use information from a source in a story, **the attribution follows immediately.**

Example: You are doing a travel story on Bisbee, Arizona. You find the following information on the Bisbee website: *Old miners’ boarding houses have been refurbished into many charming small bed and breakfast establishments, of which no two are alike. Former saloons are now quaint shops, antique stores or art galleries, cafes and restaurants.*

In your story you paraphrase the information: *Bisbee is known for old miners’ boarding houses that have been turned into bed and breakfasts and saloons that have become shops, art galleries and eating establishments.* You include a textbox with your story that includes the website www.bisbearizona.com. This is not sufficient.

You must attribute the information to the website immediately after the reference: *Bisbee is known for old miners’ boarding houses that have been turned into bed and breakfasts and saloons that have become shops, art galleries and eating establishments, according to the website, [Bisbearizona.com](http://www.bisbearizona.com).*

If you use information from the website later in the story, you must attribute it to the website again.”

When Is Attribution NOT Used?

There are **three circumstances** when journalists and other professional communicators **ARE NOT** obligated to use citations, according to the Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication's [Guidelines on Plagiarism](#):

1. **COMMON KNOWLEDGE:** “When information is commonly known to a majority of people, you don’t have to attribute it,” notes ASU’s guidelines. Everyone knows the moon is in the sky, the earth rotates around the sun, that the White House is in Washington D.C.. DO NOT assume something is common knowledge. When in doubt, see if the event, person or idea appears in multiple dictionaries, books or other reference works. [According to Perdue University’s OWL Writing Lab](#), writers can assume information is common knowledge if it is found in **at least five “credible” sources**, e.g. dictionaries, reference works, news reports.
2. **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:** If the information you want to use has been featured in a multitude of other sources (books, websites, news reports), you may not need to attribute it. For example, if you wanted to write *Football player Tom Brady’s suspension from the National Football League resulting from his alleged participation in the “Deflategate” scandal in September*, you would not need to attribute this information because it has been reported in almost every American news publication.
3. **OBSERVATION:** If you **directly observe** something **first hand**, like a building collapse, you do not need outside sources to confirm that the building collapsed. You saw it, you can report it. However, if you are trying to say WHY it collapsed, you might need outside sources. Direct observation might not tell you the ultimate circumstances behind the collapse. Just because you observe something does not mean you know the whole truth of how or why that thing happened.

Direct Attribution

DIRECT ATTRIBUTION is when a writer uses words, a phrase or a passage **VERBATIM** (or word-for-word) in their writing.

When writers use verbatim statements from person or a document, these words are **ALWAYS encased in quotation marks** (“ ”). This lets the reader know that those words are exactly as the source said them.

After the source's words are encased in quotation marks, the writer identifies who uttered them. For example:

*“I had a really good time at the event,” **said** Dr. Strangelove after the Humane Society’s annual gala on Friday.*

-OR-

*“The New York Yankees are the worst baseball team in history,” **writes** journalist Harold Stringers **in** “**Baseball: A History**,” a book chronicling the history of America’s most popular sport.*

When to Use Direct Attribution

Professional writing is not entirely made up of quoted statements. Good writing is a balance of paraphrased information, quotes and interpretation.

1. **The words/information cannot be found anywhere else and they offer unique insight to whatever you're writing about.** For example: *Police reports say violent crime has risen in St. Charles County over the past two years. "What the reports don't say is that along with rising violent crime rates, the area has also seen higher rates of unemployment in the last two years," said Ted Burroughs, who heads up the county's Commission on Crime Impacts.*
2. **For emotional impact, to add color or simply oddness.** For example: *"It was then that I knew the case was truly lost," said attorney Hank Grand, who represented Tom Jones in the recent legal battle. -OR- Before he died in May, John Sloop was known widely throughout the community for his work in education and his outgoing personality. "Mr. Sloop was quite the character," said Sloop's neighbor, Tom Burns, "he was always whistling the tune of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy.'"*
3. **The source is a person of prominence or importance** whose word is the definitive source on the issue you are writing about. For example: *"We are going to attack Iran," said President Obama in a White House press conference on Thursday afternoon - OR- "This will lead the company toward new innovations," said FakeTech's CEO Bob Smith during the company's annual board meeting.*

Indirect Attribution

INDIRECT ATTRIBUTION is when a writer **PARAPHRASES** words, a phrase or a passage from a source in their writing.

Paraphrasing is taking someone's words and **putting them into your own** while still retaining the original meaning.

As long as the repackaging of the words is an original composition, and not close to the original phrasing, and you identify where the information is coming from, you are not plagiarizing.

*Dr. Strangelove **said** he enjoyed the Humane Society's annual gala last Friday.*

-OR-

*Journalist Harold Stringers **believes** the New York Yankees are the worst baseball team in the history of the sport, **according to his book** "Baseball: A History."*

When to Use Indirect Attribution

Indirect attribution is used more frequently than direct attribution because it allows writers to:

1. **Simply the original source's language.** A speaker or document may talk about something in technical jargon or Latin scientific terms that the common reader may not understand. Paraphrasing allows writers to repackaging the information into common, everyday language that the average reader can understand.
2. **Shorten lengthy conversations or documents.** Writers use paraphrasing to condense rambling conversations or long texts. For example, the main points of a 4,000 word text or an hour long conversation can be reduced and relayed to the public in 40 words.
3. **To clarify the meaning or context of the information.** Combines common knowledge or background knowledge with the source's words to give greater insight than the direct quote itself. For example: ORIGINAL: *"Baseball helped Americans form a national identity through sport," said journalist Seymour Butts in "Baseball: A History"* PARAPHRASED: *After America gained its independence from Great Britain, the new country's inhabitants sought to form a national coherence. One way the emerging nation came together was through the sport of Baseball, according to journalist Seymour Butts in his book, "Baseball: A History."*
4. **To string together information reported by multiple sources.** For example: *"The storm caused damage to homes and automobiles across the St. Louis metropolitan area, according to various area police departments and fire departments.* This indicates that the writer contacted various police and fire departments around the St. Louis area for this information and condensed their responses into a summarized statement of fact. Another example: *The riots on Thursday crippled the French port town of Marseilles, according to various reports in the French press.*

HYPERLINKING: The Gold Standard of Digital Attribution

Today, most documents (reports, books, articles, etc.) exist somewhere on the internet in a digital format. Because of this, writers are able to link directly to the document containing the information they are referencing. Linking to a document that you are using as a source demonstrates **transparency** in where your information came from and **enables the reader to view and evaluate it** for themselves.

EXAMPLES:

Numerous scientists voiced concern over the U.S. Justice Department's handling of the case against Dr. Xi, according to a [New York Times article](#) published on Saturday.

'Attribute, attribute, and attribute some more. No material from another source should ever be included verbatim, or substantially so, without attribution,' [states an ethics handbook](#) on National Public Radio's website.

When using a document as a source in your writing, **try to include a hyperlink in the FIRST attribution.** If you use more information from this source later, you still need to attribute the source again, but a hyperlink is unnecessary because you already shown the reader where to find it in your first attribution.

EXAMPLE:

'Attribute, attribute, and attribute some more. No material from another source should ever be included verbatim, or substantially so, without attribution,' [states an ethics handbook](#) on National Public Radio's website.

[blah blah blah, more paragraphs]

"When in doubt, err on the side of attributing — that is, make it very clear where we've gotten our information (or where the organization we give credit to has gotten its information)," according to NPR's ethics handbook.

Attribution of Digital Documents

1. **Ensure you know concretely what you are linking to.** Simply saying that information came from FakeCorp.com MAY NOT BE specific enough, depending on the situation. Was it on a specific page or section of the website (e.g. the “About” page, the “Press” section)? What, specifically, IS the document - a blog post, white paper, promotional text, press release, product description? Is this website the original creator of this or did they repost it from somewhere else? Readers deserve to know where their information is coming from - be specific when using sources from the internet.
2. Include a **link to the original source document (e.g. page, press release, blog post, product description) when you first attribute** the source in a piece of writing.

EXAMPLES:

FakeCorp has a long history of carbon neutral business travel, according to a [recent press release](#) posted on the company’s website, FakeCorp.com.

LINK DIRECTLY TO THE PAGE/INFORMATION YOU ARE REFERENCING, NOT TO THE WEBSITE’S HOME PAGE.

3. Once you have included a hyperlink to the source in the first attribution, you do not need to link it again if you use that source again.

EXAMPLE:

FakeCorp has a long history of carbon neutral business travel, according to a [recent press release](#) posted on the company’s website, FakeCorp.com.

[blah blah blah....more paragraphs]

FakeCorp instituted mandatory controls on carbon pollution resulting from business travel in 2006 after then-CEO Frank Jones viewed a moving documentary on climate change, the press release on the company’s website said.

Louisiana State University journalism professor Steve Buttry wrote in a [blog post on attribution](#):

“Don’t just attribute; link. Linking is an essential part of attribution in online journalism. Linking lets people see the full context of the information you are citing. Even when readers don’t click links, the fact that you are linking tells them that you are backing up what you have written, that you are attributing and showing your sources.”

The First & Subsequent Attributions

A few specific rules for the first time you introduce a source (document or person) into your work and for when you use that same source again within a piece of writing:

1. **Name the source fully the first time they appear in the text (First Attribution).**
 1. If a person, use their whole name and title and, if applicable, the company/organization they are affiliated with if relevant to the writing, e.g. *John Peterson, chairman of the Human Society - St. Louis branch* - OR - *principal Edward Jones, head of St. Andrews Academy in South St. Louis*.
 2. If a document, list the whole name of the document and, if available, who authored it and the date/year it came out e.g. *blah blah blah, according to "A History of Baseball," a book by Seymour Butts published in 2008...* -OR- *blah blah blah, according to a 2008 report by the St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District*.
2. During the first attribution, give some information to let the reader know why THIS source is credible to speak on the topic you are writing about, e.g. *blah blah blah, according to "A History of Baseball," a book by Seymour Butts published in 2008, **considered the definitive history of America's most beloved sport***. -OR- *blah blah blah, according to a 2008 report by the St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District, **the first report detailing local municipalities' issues with sewers overflowing because of rain storms***. -OR- *"I bit the dog," said Hank Smith, **who was arrested on Saturday night following an alleged incident of animal cruelty***. Establish why this person or document should mean something to the reader sooner rather than later in a text.
3. After the first attribution, subsequent references to the same source can be simplified, e.g. *Smith said* - OR- *according to "A History of Baseball,"* -OR- *the Sewer District's report said*. You have already established the source's credibility/importance in the first attribution, so you do not need to do it again. You can, however, weave other interesting background details into subsequent attributions.

U.S. Drops Charges That Professor Shared Technology With China

By MATT APUZZO SEPT. 11, 2015

WASHINGTON — When the Justice Department arrested the chairman of [Temple University](#)’s physics department this spring and accused him of sharing sensitive American-made technology with China, prosecutors had what seemed like a damning piece of evidence: schematics of sophisticated laboratory equipment sent by the professor, Xi Xiaoxing, to scientists in China.

The schematics, prosecutors said, revealed the design of a device known as a pocket heater. The equipment is used in superconductor research, and Dr. Xi had signed an agreement promising to keep its design a secret.

But months later, long after federal agents had led Dr. Xi away in handcuffs, independent experts discovered something wrong with the evidence at the heart of the Justice Department’s case: The blueprints were not for a pocket heater.

Faced with sworn statements from leading scientists, including an inventor of the pocket heater, the Justice Department on Friday afternoon dropped all charges against Dr. Xi, an American citizen.

It was an embarrassing acknowledgment that prosecutors and F.B.I. agents did not understand — and did not do enough to learn — the science at the heart of the case before bringing charges that jeopardized Dr. Xi’s career and left the impression that he was spying for China.

Author links to previous NYT article, attributing the information relayed in this paragraph to the linked article.

Mention of prosecutors indicates where information in previous NYT report originally came from.

Because the previous paragraph mentions prosecutors, we can assume this information is still from the linked NYT article

This sentence not attributed because it comes right after “prosecutors said” so it is implied that this information came from the prosecutors also

New information attributed to “independent experts”

Some clarification on who the “independent experts” are, why they matter as sources of information

By writing that the situation is an “embarrassing acknowledgement” the author is summarizing the situation. Does not require attribution because this is based on background knowledge and the previous reports mentioned above.

“I don’t expect them to understand everything I do,” Dr. Xi, 57, said in a telephone interview. “But the fact that they don’t consult with experts and then charge me? Put my family through all this? Damage my reputation? They shouldn’t do this. This is not a joke. This is not a game.”

Author attributes quote to Dr. Xi with background (“telephone interview”) of how they gathered the information

Not attributed in the text because this is background knowledge - widely reported in a multitude of media sources.

The United States faces an onslaught from outside hackers and inside employees trying to steal government and corporate secrets. President Obama’s strategy to combat it involves aggressive espionage investigations and prosecutions, as well as increased cyberdefenses.

But Dr. Xi’s case, coming on the heels of a similar case that was dismissed a few months ago in Ohio, raises questions about whether the Justice Department, in its rush to find Chinese spies, is ensnaring innocent American citizens of Chinese ancestry.

Link to previous NYT article on the case, letting readers see an example themselves of how innocent Americans of Chinese decent are being targeted by the Justice Department.

Informs reader where the quote in this sentence came from.
More specific than “the Justice Department said”

A spokeswoman for Zane D. Memeger, the United States attorney in Philadelphia who brought the charges, did not elaborate on the decision to drop the case. In court documents, the Justice Department said that “additional information came to the attention of the government.”

Because the reporter can’t know why the case was dropped on their own, this shows readers that the reporter talked to someone with authority on why the case was dropped.

Shows readers that the knowledge that the government can file charges again comes from “the filing”

The filing gives the government the right to file the charges again if it chooses. A spokesman for John P. Carlin, the assistant attorney general who is overseeing the crackdown on economic espionage, had no comment on whether Justice Department officials in Washington reviewed the case.

The science involved in Dr. Xi’s case is, by any measure, complicated. It involves the process of coating one substance with a very thin film of another. Dr. Xi’s lawyer, Peter Zeidenberg, said that despite the complexity, it appeared that the government never consulted with experts before taking the case to a grand jury. As a result, prosecutors misconstrued the evidence, he said.

Paraphrased information attributed to Peter Zeidenberg with background information on why he is credible as a source: “Dr. Xi’s lawyer...”

More paraphrased information attributed to Zeidenberg, with more background information on why he is a credible source.

Mr. Zeidenberg, a lawyer for the firm Arent Fox, represented both Dr. Xi and Sherry Chen, a government hydrologist who was charged and later cleared in the Ohio case. A longtime federal prosecutor, Mr. Zeidenberg said he understood that agents felt intense pressure to crack down on Chinese espionage, but the authorities in these cases appeared to have been too quick to assume that their suspicions were justified.

In Dr. Xi’s case, Mr. Zeidenberg said, the authorities saw emails to scientists in China and assumed the worst. But he said the emails represented the kind of international academic collaboration that governments and universities encourage. The technology discussed was not sensitive or restricted, he said.

More paraphrased information attributed to Zeidenberg.

Direct attribution of something Zeidenberg said.

“If he was Canadian-American or French-American, or he was from the U.K., would this have ever even got on the government’s radar? I don’t think so,” Mr. Zeidenberg said.

The Justice Department sees a pernicious threat of economic espionage from China, and experts say the government in Beijing has an [official policy encouraging the theft of trade secrets](#). Prosecutors have charged Chinese workers in the United States with stealing [Boeing aircraft information](#), [specialty seeds](#) and even the [pigment](#) used to whiten Oreo cookie cream.

Links lead to previous NYT articles, attributing what the “experts” said and how the Justice Department “sees” the situation to information gathered in previous articles.

Information in sentence attributed to *Columbus Dispatch* article. The link allows readers to view and access this information themselves and also acknowledges the original source of the information.

Other researchers and academics are being closely watched. The F.B.I. is investigating a Chinese-American mapping expert who abruptly resigned from Ohio State University last year and disappeared while working with NASA, [The Columbus Dispatch reported this week](#). In May, the Justice Department charged a Chinese professor and others with [stealing acoustics equipment](#) from American companies.

Links lead to previous NYT article, attributing the information in this sentence to the linked previous report.

About a dozen F.B.I. agents, some with guns drawn, stormed Dr. Xi’s home in the Philadelphia suburbs in May, searching his house just after dawn, he said. His two daughters and his wife watched the agents take him away in handcuffs on fraud charges.

Paraphrased information said by Dr. Xi to the author of this article.

“Unfortunately I think this is influenced by the politics of the time,” he said. “But I think it’s wrong. We Chinese-Americans, we contribute to the country, to the national security, to everything.”

Direct attribution of a quote to Dr. Xi.

Temple University put him on administrative leave and took away his title as chairman of the physics department. He was given strict rules about who at the school he could talk to. He said that made it impossible for him to continue working on a long-running research project that was nearing completion.

Links to previous NYT articles, attributing information to the previous reporting.

Dr. Xi, who came to the United States in 1989 and is a naturalized citizen, was adamant that he was innocent. But it was only when he and his lawyers reviewed the government’s evidence that they understood what had happened. “When I read it, I knew that they were mixing things up,” Dr. Xi said.

Direct attribution of a quote to Dr. Xi.

His lawyers contacted independent scientists and showed them the diagram that the Justice Department said was the pocket heater. The scientists agreed it was not.

Because the first sentence comes after a quote from Dr. Xi, it is implied this information came from him. The “scientists agreed” is a reference to the “panel of independent experts” mentioned earlier in the story.

In a sworn affidavit, one engineer, Ward S. Ruby, said he was uniquely qualified to identify a pocket heater. “I am very familiar with this device, as I was one of the co-inventors,” he said.

Direct attribution of a quote to Ruby from the affidavit.

Indirect attribution of information from a sworn affidavit written by Ward Ruby. It is indicated that the information came from a document, not from an interview the reporter conducted with Ruby.

A direct quotation attributed to the Justice Department, either uttered in court and heard by the reporter, in a transcript of the event, or from a press release on the event...
Not entirely clear!

Indicates reporter directly observed this in person, no attribution, just describing the scene.

Last month, Mr. Zeidenberg delivered a presentation for prosecutors and explained the science. He gave them sworn statements from the experts and implored the Justice Department to consult with a physicist before taking the case any further. Late Friday afternoon, the Justice Department dropped the case “in the interests of justice.”

“We wish they had come to us with any concerns they had about Professor Xi prior to indicting him, but at least they did listen,” Mr. Zeidenberg said.

Dr. Xi choked back tears as he described an ordeal that was agonizing for his family. “I barely came out of this nightmare,” he said.

Not attributed because likely from background knowledge, widely reported by other news organizations or the information is widely available through court records.

Direct attribution

Direct attribution

Don't risk plagiarizing!

ATTRIBUTE

Even if it is unnecessary, an attribution can be edited out later. It is better to **exercise caution when providing information to the public** than to **jeopardize the integrity** of your work.

If you doubt the originality of your own wording or **paraphrasing, Google that phrase or segment of text and see if any matches come up.** Always question the originality of your own writing and double check to see that you have not unintentionally lifted someone else's work. It's better to fix this proactively yourself than have the public, an employer or professor catch it.