

# How to select and cite scientific works

**Mohsen Rezaeian**

## Correspondence:

Professor Mohsen Rezaeian  
 PhD, Epidemiologist  
 Social Medicine Department  
 Occupational Environmental Research Center  
 Rafsanjan Medical School  
 Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences  
 Rafsanjan-Iran  
 Tel: 03915234003  
 Fax: 03915225209  
**Email:** moeygmr2@yahoo.co.uk

## Abstract

Scientific progress depends on past achievements. Therefore, it is necessary to select and cite very accurately previous works in order to prepare solid ground for further progress. The aim of the present article therefore is to provide some practical guidelines in the selection and citation of previous works when writing a scientific article.

**Key words:** References, citations, guidelines

## Introduction

"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". This historical famous quote which has been reused by Sir Isaac Newton in a letter to Robert Hooke ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing\\_on\\_the\\_shoulders\\_of\\_giants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing_on_the_shoulders_of_giants)) clearly highlights the importance of previous scientific works in further progress of any given subjects of human knowledge.

Scientific progress depends on past achievements. Therefore, it is necessary to select and accurately cite previous works in order to prepare solid ground for further progress. The aim of the present article therefore is to provide some practical guidelines in the selection and citation of previous works when writing a scientific article.

## Practical guidelines

1. Before writing a scientific article make sure you read all the relevant and valid literature related to the topic. In this context relevant implies literature that helps you to write the Introduction, Methods and Discussion sections of your article. Furthermore, implies articles which are published in the peer reviewed prestigious journals.
2. Bear in mind that literature, such as theses, meeting abstracts, weblogs, newspapers, etc. should be avoided as much as possible. This literature is usually categorized as "Grey literature" i.e. literature that usually does not pass peer review process. Moreover, try to minimize the use of textbooks.
3. When you determine all the relevant and valid literature you can start the process of writing. Be careful to cite a reference whenever an idea is given. However, when you have some references that support one idea and you should select between them, cite more "up-to-date" and "easy to access" articles.

4. "Easy to access" or "open access" references are those that you need not pay money to read. However, you should be able to distinguish between real and prestigious "open access" journals from less prestigious ones.
5. Never cite a reference before you thoroughly comprehend it. Similarly, it is not wise to cite a reference only because someone else has cited it. The reason for this is clear as people might erroneously cite previous works. It is your duty to read the original reference and only then cite it as appropriate.
6. On very rare occasions when you do not have access to the original reference you should tell the reviewers and readers of your article that you are citing a reference (e.g. A) that you have read in another reference (e.g. B). In your reference list first give the details of reference A and then say "cited in" and then give the details of reference B.
7. In order to avoid plagiarism and self-plagiarism it is wise to avoid copy and pasting from your references even if they encompass some of your previous articles. Instead, you should get the main idea, re-write or paraphrase and place the proper citation immediately after it.
8. On the rare occasions when you decide to directly quote a sentence or two from a reference, make sure to use quotation marks and place the proper citation immediately after them, similar to what I have done at the beginning of this article.
9. Always carefully follow the "instructions for authors" of your target journal. Bear in mind that usually two major types of style might apply in referencing i.e. the Vancouver and the Harvard styles. The Vancouver style is used more frequently compared with Harvard style.
10. In Vancouver style each reference is identified by a number based on its order of appearance in the text. Then the details of the references are arranged in the reference list based on their number. In Harvard style each reference is identified by the surname of its first author plus the year of publication. Then the details of the references should be arranged alphabetically in the reference list.
11. Nowadays different software has been designed to help the authors to automatically place relevant literature in their articles. Although using such software would substantially ease such cumbersome activities authors should check meticulously their final draft as some unwanted errors might have occurred.
12. Based on the "instructions for authors" of your target journal use the appropriate number of references. However, if such number is not given within the "instructions for authors", use most of your relevant and valid references. As a golden rule it is always better that reviewers ask for reduction of the number of your references rather than asking you to raise them. One of the worst criticisms that reviewers might put forward would be that you have missed one or more relevant and valid items of literature.

## Conclusion

The importance of proper citation of previous scientific works in the further progress of any given subjects of human knowledge is evident. In this article twelve practical guidelines are provided to help authors how to select and cite valid previous works when writing a scientific article.

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