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Teaching Citation Rhetorically: Reading, Not Just Writing

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Teaching Citation Rhetorically: Reading, Not Just Writing

I'm a librarian, so I see a lot of students who feel very strongly about citations. Their feelings often include anxiety, frustration, confusion, and even resentment that they need to deal with something that seems both mechanical and arbitrary. My feelings about citation are very different than theirs; to me, citation is both a useful tool and a connection to other scholars. It's deeply intertwined with information literacy, the concept that undergirds a lot of the teaching in librarianship, and it's a rhetorical act with meaningful consequences in writing of all kinds.

In fact, good citation practices are connected to almost everything we value as academics, but the pedagogy around citing often finds itself bogged down in the mechanical, technical, and time-consuming. We want students to learn about citations for many reasons:

- So that they can incorporate the work of others into their own writing gracefully and expertly
- To encourage them to honor the contributions of other writers, and to respond to those writers with their own ideas
- So that they can follow the conventions that subtly signal that they belong in this scholarly conversation
- To present themselves as knowledgeable about the subjects on which they are writing
- So that students' readers can trace the citations back to the sources and understand the conversation with which they're engaging – and I will add here that I also want students to learn to read citations so that they can also trace back to the citations their sources use.

In my experience, however, these lofty principles of scholarly communication sometimes get lost as we're teaching students how to put together a well-formed citation. My conversations with students suggest that at least some of them think that we want them to learn:

- A list of arbitrary, high-stakes rules
- Not to be cheaters and plagiarists

To students, citation is often about “getting it right” rather than making meaning. I have often seen (and been guilty of) providing information about citations under the label of “avoiding plagiarism” – which is certainly desirable, but which is also associated with a lot of punitive rhetoric that presents citation not as a persuasive tool but a high-stakes requirement. Obviously, students should not plagiarize, but when we frame citation only in terms of avoiding plagiarism, we are telling them that the purpose of citation is to avoid violating rules rather than to achieve rhetorical ends.

I’m here to argue for a pedagogy of citation that honors the rhetorical purposes of scholarly documentation. The principles of information literacy and the newest (eighth) edition of the *MLA Handbook* have been useful to me in developing such a pedagogy. I want to show how all these things are related, and to offer some suggestions.

My professional association, the Association for College and Research Libraries, publishes a Framework for Information Literacy. This Framework consists of six frames, each of which is a broad concept, a lens that helps us understand information:

- Authority is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as a Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

Notice that there is no frame specifically dedicated to citation and documentation. However, the importance of documentation is everywhere in the Framework document. If scholarship is a conversation, we need citations to carry it out. Citations constitute one way for authors to construct their authority within a specific context. Careful attention to documenting sources for a reader requires that we consider the process by which information is created, and so on.

I'm excited to find that the new *MLA Handbook* uses language echoing these broader concepts. It is much smaller than earlier edition of the handbook, but it nevertheless takes time to address the ways in which citation (in the words of the handbook) "helps the writer become part of a community of scholars and assures readers that the writer's work can be trusted" (6). In fact, there is language throughout the *Handbook* encouraging both students and instructors to approach citation with readers in mind.

If we want students to think about citations as messages to be read, we need to ask students to read – not just write – citations. One of the three principal recommendations in the introduction to the *Handbook* is to "make your documentation useful to readers," so we need students to have in mind the ways that readers work with citations: being attentive to the way that texts use sources, and tracking down the sources from citations.

Reading Citations in Context

Let's think first about how texts use sources. This is where two of the Frames of the Framework intersect: "Scholarship as a Conversation" and "Authority is Constructed and Contextual." The *Handbook* itself uses the conversation metaphor: "Academic writing is at its root a conversation among scholars ... Through their own published work, they incorporate, modify, respond to, and refute earlier conversations." Competent participation in the scholarly conversation depends deeply on the ability to claim authority within a specific context. Again, from the *Handbook*:

“The proper use of a field’s preferred documentation style is a sign of competence in a writer”
(6).

“Authority is constructed and contextual” means that authors of texts do their best to claim the kinds of authority that are most important in the community in which they write. Citations are a major tool in claiming authority because they present a relationship between the present source and the scholarly conversation on which it builds. I want students to be attentive to *exactly* what rhetorical moves authors are making when they cite. What kinds of sources does the author use, and what inferences can we make about these sources in particular? What parts of the paper have the most citations? How does the author switch from one citation to another? How do they introduce citation, and what kinds of work do these citations do?

When I’m working with students who are in another class, usually English or Comparative Literature, I often make a point of walking students through the bibliography, to help them see what sorts of sources the experts use, or I quote specific moments from an article in which the use of sources is important. With my credit course, though, I can do more. We look more carefully at which authors get cited in an article – and which don’t. We look at which rhetorical moments authors choose to cite each other, and what these citations accomplish. Students write a paper in which they analyze a reading using an abbreviated version of Mark Gaipa’s article, “Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for their Writing,” to identify the different rhetorical moves that authors may make when using sources.

Exercises like these are useful when I want to demonstrate to students *how* the scholarly conversation works and *why* they should cite others. I want them to understand that citations are not an add-on, and they’re not just there to “back up” the author’s argument, as students often

say. Instead, I encourage students be attentive to the types of work that sources can do in their writing.

In this kind of conversation, the particulars of the citation format can come up organically as we talk about authority and credibility. My interest in the function of documentation does not mean that we no longer care about citation rules, but that the function of these rules is to facilitate scholarly conversations. This version of the *Handbook* asks us to “remember that there is often more than one correct way to document a source,” acknowledging that citations may vary by context. One of my colleagues at Queens College uses translations of *Beowulf* as an example; an analysis of different translations would cite the translator as an author. My students often cited films and television shows, which present their own difficulties. We talked about how they can use the citations to emphasize which contributors are important to their analysis.

Known Items and Information Creation as a Process

The other use of citations is, of course, to guide readers to sources. We spend much more time teaching students to write citations than to read them, with the result that students often don't benefit from the rules of the citation formats we ask them to use. One of the primary principles in the introduction of the eighth edition of the MLA handbook is to “Make documentation useful to readers;” to my librarian ear, this is a way of acknowledging that citations are communicative, that they are to be read and not just written.

In all the teaching contexts I've mentioned before, I encourage students to track citations back to their sources, both because this helps them to get a better sense of the scholarly conversation and because these sources, too, are likely to be valuable.

In my credit course, I asked students to bring in drafts of their annotated bibliographies, and exchange them with classmates sitting in a different part of the room. The other students were

then to track down the works listed in the bibliography within the library resources (and I forbade them from using our discovery layer). I wanted them to experience the process of walking through a citation – to understand at least the basics the systematic and hierarchical organization of information. Articles, for example, aren't merely collected in databases but are published in journal issues, which themselves exist within a large and more complex disciplinary context. As academics, we often take for granted that information is produced and distributed within specific contexts, but students' relationship to information and especially scholarly information is different.

The Framework urges us to consider “Information Creation as a Process” – that is, to “look to the underlying process of creation ... to critically assess the information product.” During the process of locating an article in a journal, students are confronted with the evidence of this process through the structure it creates. More concretely, this process helps students to become more proficient at identifying the various parts of the citation, and understanding why citations are put together the way that they are. The *Handbook* provides material to consider this process while *writing* citations, by carefully aligning each element of a citation with one thing to consider while evaluating sources (13). I love this approach – but reading is important too.

When I ask students to read citations, and to track them down, I'm giving them another way to interact with citations. Bibliographies, just like the articles of which they are a part, are messages. They are intended to be interpreted – and students can interpret them. Ultimately, many of the rules of any citation format are unavoidably arbitrary – or to put it more kindly, conventional. However, reading them, and using them as signposts to find the works to which they refer, is a good illustration of the practical usefulness of these conventional standards. I

hope that students, by interacting with citations *as readers*, will take their readers into consideration when producing citations as writers.

Ultimately, I hope students can approach citation with less anxiety over punctuation and more care in communicating the nature of a source, its contribution to their own work, and the context in which it lives. After all, in our own writing, we cite to establish our authority, to show that we are taking part in a scholarly conversation, and to help our colleagues and readers. We know that citation is a rhetorical act, and our pedagogy should reflect that.

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