I'm Nancy Linh Karls from the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, welcoming you to this Writing Center podcast! This podcast series tackles issues of writing in and out of the university.

Today, I'm going to be talking about the essentials of APA documentation: how to cite sources within a paper and how to provide full source information in a reference list.

If you're writing a paper for a social science course, you may be asked to use a particular documentation system called APA. That's short for the American Psychological Association, whose documentation system is used not only in psychology courses but also in education, communications, nursing, anthropology, social work, and sometimes in business, political science, sociology, and other courses throughout the university.

As you write papers for these kinds of courses, your readers will want to know when you’re using ideas from sources and where those ideas came from. In these papers, it’s crucial to situate your research and your arguments in the context of previous research and theory.

To standardize how sources are acknowledged, the American Psychological Association put together a seven-page manual back in 1929 that explained how to cite sources. Over the years, a few more details have crept in, and the current, 5th edition—published in 2001—consists of 439 pages that tell you how to tell other people where your information comes from. The good news is that these 439 pages obey rational laws.

I’m now going to explain two key elements of APA documentation: first, how to cite a source within your paper and second, how to give full information about each source in a reference list at the end of your paper.

Let’s begin with how to cite a source within your paper. What you need to know is that the APA Manual emphasizes two key points: who did the previous research, and when. The who matters because your reader wants to know who is the source of the ideas you’re using. The when matters because your reader wants to know how up to date that source is.
After you’ve incorporated information from a source, you include, right there in parentheses in your own sentence, the author’s last name and the year the source was published. Author, comma, year—that’s it. You add a page number only if you use a direct quotation.

In some situations, you may want to emphasize the author you’re summarizing. In that case, you’ll put the author’s name in the main part of your sentence, rather than in parentheses. You’ll then put the year of publication in parentheses immediately following the author’s last name.

Note that one of the other principles of APA documentation is that you should summarize or paraphrase material from your source whenever possible. Unless the precise language in your source is critical to the point you’re making, you’re better off distilling the point of your source into your own words—while still indicating the source of those ideas, of course.

Let’s go back to your paper. So you’ve paraphrased the relevant bits of information from your source, and at the end of that sentence you’ve included the author-date citation in parentheses. This parenthetical citation, though, is a bit terse. How do I know which Adkins and Singh you’re writing about? And what if Adkins and Singh published two papers in 2001?

Here’s where we move on to the second key element of APA documentation: the reference list at the end of your paper. You can think of parenthetical citations as links that direct your reader to fuller information included in the reference list at the end of your paper. Those sources, or references, are arranged in alphabetical order by the authors’ last names.

On your References page, the author and the date are still the most important pieces of information, appearing at the very beginning of your entry.

After this information come the title of the article, the journal title and the volume number, and the page numbers of the article itself. This information helps the reader of your paper track down the original source.

Of course, not every bit of knowledge you use will come from an article published in a scholarly journal. What if you use online articles? Or what if you have a reason to quote? What if there are multiple authors of an article? What if you have an article published by the same author in the same year?
4:08  [Screen image: wisc.edu/writing / 608.263.3823] You can find detailed answers to these questions in our Writer’s Handbook at wisc.edu/writing. Or—if you are a currently enrolled student at UW-Madison—you can set up an appointment with one of our experienced and friendly writing instructors by calling 608-263-1992.

4:26  [Music fades in.] Thanks so much for listening to our podcast. From the UW-Madison Writing Center, I’m Nancy Linh Karls, wishing you happy writing!

4:37  [Music fades out.]

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