

## Academic Honesty: The Standard of Common Knowledge

When a person who is completely familiar with a field writes a review paper, the author knows which information is considered the common knowledge of the field, and no sources are given for statements of that kind. If, for example, the reviewer wished to state that in the United States women have a higher life expectancy than men, no source would be given because that is common knowledge. However, if the reviewer says that the difference in life expectancies as reported in 1983 was 8.2 years, a source would be given because that is specific information, not known by everyone, and the reader might very well want to know the source so that the statement could be verified. This case illustrated the general practice of deciding when citations should be given: no sources are given for common knowledge, but sources are given for statements which are not commonly known, statements about which there may be disagreement, or for opinions that are clearly those of a particular author. To continue the example, if one of the papers being reviewed attributes the difference in life expectancies of men and women to the greater incidence of smoking among men, the author should be given credit for the statement and its source should be stated.

One of the problems students face when they are writing review papers in fields where they are not expert is deciding which information comes under the heading of common knowledge. In cases of uncertainty, two suggestions may be helpful:

- (1) if many papers being used make similar assertions without giving sources, the information probably is common knowledge;
- (2) in cases of doubt, it is better to give too many references than too few.

### Examples of Common Knowledge

Not every fact in your paper needs to be documented. Facts that are widely known—common knowledge—can stand by themselves.

Examples of statements expressing common knowledge:

- George Washington was the first president.
- Plato spent most of his life in Athens.
- Maine has a lower yearly average temperature than Florida.

Any statement that originates from another source and contains information that is not common knowledge must be cited.

Examples:

- Civilizations that were aware of geese usually considered them intermediaries between heaven and earth (Toussaint-Samat 352).
- The Chinese fishing industry produces 800,000 tons of fish annually (Toussaint-Samat 328).
- The first international coffee syndicate was based in Germany (Toussaint-Samat 590).

These statements aren't surrounded by quotation marks because they aren't the original authors' words but must be cited because they express information that involves facts that are not commonly known.

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## **NUTS & BOLTS OF WRITING**

### **Documentation of "Common Knowledge"**

"Common knowledge" usually refers to... facts and information that most people already know or could easily look up. According to the sixth edition of the Little, Brown Reader, "Common knowledge consists of the standard information of a field of study as well as folk literature and commonsense observations" (547). *Little, Brown* continues: "You may treat common knowledge as your own, even if you have to look it up in a reference book" (547).

#### **When do you document?**

In general, you *don't* need to acknowledge ideas, experiences, or results if they are drawn from your own experience. You *do* need to explain how you reached your conclusions and demonstrate the basis of your assertions.

Major facts of history, standard formulas/equations, and authors of works are generally considered common knowledge.

#### *Example...*

The date of Bill Clinton's election is common knowledge, but the notion that he was elected as a result of a generational split is not and should be documented and supported.

*Little, Brown* also talks about "commonsense observations," notions that most people would hold true.

#### *Example...*

Most people would agree that national politics often impact on local events; a statement like this doesn't need to be documented. But if you say something like "The New Federalism promoted by Bill Clinton is really an old form of socialist politics," you need to document the source of this insight.