

Citation for Non-Academics: What Journalists Teach Us

In “Journalism without Scandal,” a report posted Jul. 17, 2003 to *Poynteronline*, eighteen journalists of national standing debate basic practices in their profession. The following are several core principles excerpted from their discussion about responsible attribution and sourcing. These principles are relevant not only for journalists, but also for people like us who write for many purposes and audiences outside of academia.

**“Our responsibility to the reader
is to make clear where we got our information.”**

Journalists have the following options for clarifying the sources of their information:

“Use deft textual attribution”

Provide “detailed editor’s notes”

And (less commonly) utilize “the newspaper equivalent of ‘footnotes.’”

Using Deft Textual Attribution

Signaling of sources needs to be more thorough in journalistic styles than in many academic styles because academic citation can rely in part on parenthetical notes, footnotes, and a list of references to give full credit to sources. But have you ever seen a bibliography in a news magazine? Unlikely. Responsible journalists instead integrate the source information directly into their articles.

Here’s a sample of careful textual attribution of a source, excerpted from Malcolm Gladwell’s 2007 *New Yorker* article, “Open Secrets”:

The political scientist Alexander George described the sequence of V-1 rocket inferences in his 1959 book, *Propaganda Analysis*, and the striking thing about his account is how contemporary it seems.

Notice Gladwell’s thoroughness in introducing the author and the book while also leading into his own perspective on what readers of his article should understand about the book.

This elongated in-text signaling method could be equally appropriate in an academic style such as MLA, but here it is an example of responsible journalism that allows a reader to track this source with little difficulty despite the genre’s lack of a works cited page.

Providing Detailed Editor's Notes

Editor's notes placed before a story can be used to explain the sources and methods used by the writer(s) if it is impractical to fully attribute each source directly within the text. Here's an example from "How Five Lives Became One Horror When Terror Struck the Twin Towers," an article from *The Wall Street Journal*.

This article is based on interviews with more than 125 witnesses to the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center and its aftermath. These witnesses include survivors and their relatives, friends and co-workers, as well as relatives, friends, and co-workers of those who died or remain missing. All dialogue was witnessed by reporters or confirmed by one or more people present when the words were spoken. All thoughts attributed to people in the article come from those people.

Providing Footnotes (less common)

Although not yet a common practice, some highly acclaimed narrative news stories have adapted the practice of footnoting in order to fully account for sources of information that might not be clear from in-text attributions. The same *Wall Street Journal* story has footnotes at the end. Here is part of the source list:

Note on Sources

Moises Rivas:

Handwritten note to Mr. Rivas: reconstructed by Windows on the World banquet chef, Ali Hizam, from notes written to himself in his notebook. Mr. Rivas's clothing, phone call: interviews with wife, Elizabeth Rivas, and her daughter-in-law, Linda Barragan, who saw him leave home and who later talked to him on the phone.

Not Just for Journalists

You will have many occasions to write for your profession, and in your civic and family life as well. You may write a proposal for funding, an appeal to volunteers, a eulogy for a family member, a letter to the editor, or you may develop a newsletter, blog, or web resources. For a wide range of such professional, civic, and personal genres, the academic citation strategies of your college essays may not be appropriate. Yet the principle that journalists articulate, that of responsibility to readers and clarity about where information comes from, means you will still need to somehow provide evidence of your sources in order to be an ethical and persuasive writer. Journalists' citation strategies are ideal for such situations.

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WRITINGCENTER.CitationforNon-Academics.CollieFulford.CFS.03.12.09

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