

Composition Weekly



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CITATION POLICE: THE CITING FRENZY

Jen Schell kindly passed along an article from the Chronicle of Higher Education this week on how citations and formats are treated in the composition classroom and across campus. In his article "Citation Obsession? Get Over It!," Kurt Schick points out how "teaching" citation formats is "relatively useless to [students] as developing writers." Schick suggests that teachers should show their students how to responsibly incorporate and quote their secondary sources rather than getting caught up in the formalities of citation practice.

"We could then reinvest time wasted on formatting to teach more-important skills like selecting credible sources, recognizing bias or faulty arguments, paraphrasing and summarizing effectively, and attributing sourced information persuasively and responsibly." - Kurt Schick



In his article, Schick describes his university's current "citation crisis," as he dubs it. As multi-

media sources continue to be incorporated into academic settings, the issue of how to cite them seems to have become a source of anxiety for the "librarians, tutors, and concerned faculty members" of Schick's university. He explains how students (spurred by their teachers) are so caught up with properly documenting their sources that the library help desks can no longer hold to their mission of aiding students with citation concerns. While this may seem a little over the top, students express their anxiety over citation issues almost daily in the Writing Center at UAF - and it is not unusual for tutors to struggle with the formats of other disciplines when they are trying to assist students (even with the handbooks handy).

Is there a point to "teaching" MLA other than helping our students avoid plagiarism? Perhaps "what is the purpose of teaching formats" is a more inclusive (and less directed) question. I've often wondered what the purpose of MLA exercises were, even though I followed the path that teachers before me had set down by encouraging my students to practice MLA citations through handouts and scavenger hunts (and then further prompting my students when I commented on their papers). I think it's common for many teachers (especially new

teachers) to do this. However, do these types of abstract exercises convey to students the reasons why it's important to credit sources responsibly - or are students simply going through the motions teachers have asked of them?

With such abstract and formulaic stipulations on citing sources, many students don't retain the citation information we teach them. Moreover, students who use citation manuals properly (looking citation formats up each time they need to cite something), still confuse the various components required of a citation on a works cited page. I don't think this is due to a lack of attention to detail - rather, Schick is right in suggesting that citation formats are simply alien to many first year composition students. Formats other than MLA tend to be alien to many English majors (undergraduates, graduates - and dare I say lecturers and professors? I do.) If all of the information is there but jumbled - does it *really* matter if it's not in the proper order?

I found the above quote from Schick's article to be the most compelling element, as he suggests that the remedy is not to ignore MLA or citing/citations altogether, but to encourage students to think about the source they are using - why they chose it and how they use it. By challenging students to consider how a certain source supports their argument, rather than simply requiring them to include secondary sources documented in proper MLA format, students will make more conscious decisions as writers. Schick argues that formats are only "trivial roadblocks" that "discourage students from learning." He might have a point.

To access Schick's article, search Write Alaska's pages for "Citation Police." Thoughts? Please feel free to share them under the discussion section on that page.