

A Reading Resource on Academic Standards and Conventions

Prepared by Jahnavi Rao and Meghna Goyal

Academic standards are practices, institutional guidelines and rules of thumb that are critical in the maintenance of the value of formalized scientific research and scholarship. The standards that are commonly accepted and expected of any piece of academic writing whether for publishing in peer-reviewed journals or for student essays in universities, can be opaque to understand for beginners. This resource has been prepared as an aid to students as they write term papers and theses through their degree programs. This guide focuses primarily on research conducted for the social sciences, qualitative analyses and policy-centred research.

In order to ensure the overall usefulness of scientific research in the natural and social sciences, the rules of ‘academic integrity’ are more or less uniformly adopted and consistently applied to each academic exercise. Since academic research is necessary to understand the world around us and manage its outcomes for society, false and misleading methods, data and results need to be avoided.

Misleading research can accumulate as newer scientific developments consistently build on established, accepted and peer-reviewed research. Similarly, in university education, cheating on exams and assignments, reduces the quality of the pedagogical exchange as well as the quality of academic training. Yet, academic standards are not easily or commonly understood. This reading resource has been prepared to guide students through the requirements of academic reading, research and writing while abiding the codes of the formal academic tradition.

The first significant section of this resource is designed to address the constituents of a legitimate academic study. It is meant to answer the question, how does one contribute to scholarship that adheres to formal requirements of the academic system. This section outlines why this is important and what the common ways of failing to meet the standards are. It also discusses some institutional constraints that prevent students at higher educational institutions from following standard practices, and that might goad researchers into careless or dishonest publishing. This discussion should aid students in avoiding common pitfalls and into adapting to the often-harsh contemporary academic institutional environment. The second section guides students on the value and process of conducting a review of academic literature for a given research study.

Part 1: Academic Integrity and Why?

To follow the formal requirements of academic publishing's peer-review process, it is necessary to understand what makes up a legitimate academic exercise. An academic or scholarly piece of writing is typically associated with a 'new' and 'significant' contribution of evidence or idea to the current state of the literature. This prompts the question of what counts as new, significant or valuable to the literature. What idea(s) counts as meaningful critical thinking? Especially in the social sciences, what counts as a new 'discovery', 'innovation' or original contribution? How much can one 'borrow' from another idea or contribution that does not violate the 'reasonable' standards of academic tradition? Relatedly, when does borrowing become cheating or *plagiarising*?

Simply, an original contribution does not have to (and most often does not) entail complete newness or innovation; in the social sciences, it has to be original only (and at least) in one aspect: in its 'approach, theory, method or data' (Guetzkow et al., 2004). Among others, a contribution is new if it tests an existing theory with new data, if it discusses an existing theoretical or empirical discourse through a new approach, or if it devises a new method to test or measure an established theory.

In addition to the development of new *ideas*, a useful academic contribution is also one which *tests, applies, critiques* or *synthesises*. As an example, a review of literature revolving around a single research question or field, therefore, is also potentially an academic contribution. Such a review — by synthesising the current state of the literature — creates the basis for a coherent analysis of the question at hand. The process of a useful literature review involves selecting relevant literature that defines the field or the current state of knowledge on a specific research question and reading the results of individual contributions as interconnected and coherent. This process is inevitably one that involves the subjective and academic judgment of the reviewer.

Institutional features of academic value

It is important to flag here that in addition to these intrinsic features of a research exercise, there are various institutional and environmental determinants of what is considered valuable in the academe. For instance, in the social sciences, it has been noted by several researchers in the field, that the content of an academic exercise is often linked to the personal characteristics of the researcher's morality, integrity and ethic. The alignment of these with the publisher's peer-review process is often essential in determining what gets published (Guetzkow et al., 2004).

Let's discuss another example. An institutional determinant of academic value is geo-politically determined: the dominance of the English language in the international academic atmosphere (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Paltridge, 2004). Non-anglophone speakers and those engaging in the academic profession. Academic success i.e., career progression and job security are often tied to research publications. These, in turn, are linked to

- (i) geographical,
- (ii) geopolitical, and
- (iii) geolinguistic factors.

First, the location of the university and the department etc. are relevant. Second, policies governing the university, research output and evaluation systems determine the worth of academic text production. Third, the languages used in academic text production and dissemination also determine the worth of the publication in the academic 'market'. The learning curves for the English language for non-Anglophone cultures are more often than not, unaccounted for in the academic market. Often, good research goes unpublished because of linguistic errors in writing academic papers. Needless to say, this is not ideal for furthering the goals of science and creates barriers for students and early-career academics.

All this is to say that even though the internal rules of value creation in the academic exercise are consistent, they are not universal and absolute. The market is governed by the dictates of funding. In addition, academic culture is subject to hegemonic ideals that are often established by the dominant institutions from which the rules trickle down to the rest of the world, not adapting to the local contexts and situations (Canagarajah, 2002). In this regard, academic value is not disassociated with the market.

Now, students' and researchers' work should maintain the tenets of academic value for two reasons. First, efforts in the short run are geared toward individuals' professional goals; these require that the rules of the game are abided by. Second, most accepted rules and academic conventions are integral to the progress of science and are necessary to channel scientific findings toward our collective goals.

Although the peer-review process is generally considered good at ensuring the 'goodness' and reliability of the works published, it is not entirely immune to pitfalls (Bell, 2017). The Sokal-squared experiment¹ is a concerning exercise. As previously discussed, however, the drivers of research and institutional funding as well as academic pressures to produce time-constrained output can occasionally diminish the

¹ Further details here: <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/33543>. The experiment involving 'bogus academic papers' was largely criticized, and most papers were not accepted for publishing.

peer-review process. This is to say that the burden of ensuring academic value should be shared by individual academics and students: science should be practiced in good faith.

What violates integrity: manipulating research

Let's discuss the common ways in which one — intentionally or otherwise — violates the principles of academic integrity. A major one is that of plagiarism. Plagiarism or *copying* can refer to obviously egregious issues as the *verbatim* duplication of another's work (in part or full) and intentionally representing it as one's own. Technically, if over 5% of a student's submission or an academic paper is found to be copied from another source, it is considered an unacceptable submission. Software such as Turnitin have made it easier to detect such instances, and students are often required to make submissions through this software. Acceptable rates of matching phrases differ by local contexts, and even from one instructor to another.

The issue, however, goes beyond simply copying and pasting. The paraphrasing of another's original ideas and representing them as one's own also constitutes plagiarism. Although claiming credit for others' work is unacceptable behaviour, plagiarism is often a confusing area for students. Since any valuable academic work is acceptably, and even necessarily, based on others' work (we are always “standing on the shoulders of giants”), what is acceptable borrowing and what crosses the line into plagiarism is not straightforward. The issue of plagiarism is clearly, therefore, linked to what produces academic value.

Let's reiterate, borrowing another's ideas legitimately is crucial for good research. The difference between legitimate borrowing, testing, and building on other's work, from plagiarism is a matter of both quantity and responsible citation. As long as the entirety of one's work is not based on the ideas, methods, and data of another's, one can legitimately borrow from another's.

Paraphrasing another's ideas to build on them, test them, or critique them, are acceptable academic exercises. Borrowed ideas must, however, be referred as such in the body of the paper. These references are called *citations*. There are some defined and laid-out academic formats (styles) for such citations. The most common forms of citations are the American Psychological Association (APA), the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the Chicago/Turabian style. Citations guide the reader to the original source of the evidence or idea presented immediately before it. It helps the researcher assign responsibility for the idea where it belongs.

In addition to plagiarism, falsifying the data of field research or experiments, or misrepresenting facts, data or the work of others are common unethical practices in the academic profession. A valuable text ensures that the evidence presented in defence of a claim is verifiable and justified. It ensures that legitimately borrowed ideas are not misrepresented or distorted in favour of a conclusion that is decided by the researcher prior to conducting the study.

A well-cited academic text ensures that citations are made both within the body of the paper as well as at the end in a list of *references*. Both in-text citation and a list of references direct the reader to the text that has been used in the text. In-text citations are especially useful in demarcating what the ideas and evidence provided by papers that came before the one in consideration, and the contribution of the author.

The prevalence of manipulation and student plagiarism

Plagiarism is an increasingly concerning issue among students, even at the post-graduate level. Similarly, misrepresenting facts or literature, omitting data points or the selective presentation of data are often also commonly observed, especially in student submissions. The causes of a high prevalence of plagiarism are several. Most concerningly, it is the lack of adequate dissemination from institutions to students about the specifics of formal requirements. Second, inconsistencies between

institutions within a local context, and internationally, can be a murky area to traverse at first.

Third, plagiarism is often dependent on real time constraints that are often harsh but are critical for evaluation and grades. In most masters' programs, students have to figure out formal requirements at the same time as designing and implementing a research design in the span of a few weeks. Academic pressure builds as masters' degrees and grades become a route to entering the academic profession (Macfarlane & Jefferson, 2022). The pressure to compete with peers who have had more training in the business of academic writing, can often be persuasion enough.

Similarly, a fourth motivation is the academic pressure to 'publish or perish'. The pressure to publish for career advancement, moves researchers and early-career folks to falsify or misrepresent data (Lee, 2014). Studies in which the evidence produces 'negative' results — those that fail to support the research hypothesis — are often not selected for publication. In general, this has meant that the competitive pressure has increased scientific bias by forcing 'positive' or confirmatory results (Fanelli, 2010).

A further set of obstacles that students and researchers face is that of a real bias or skew in both what is accepted for publishing and what research projects receive funding (Bell, 2017). The bias is decided by funding organizations' goals, priorities and ideology. As an example, take research funded by commercial interests; when large food manufacturing corporations like Coca-Cola disproportionately fund research on nutrition, they produce results that favour their marketing and commercial interests (Fabbri et al., 2018). Additionally, gender and linguistic biases also affect chances of publishing for individual scholars notwithstanding the inherent worth of their research.

Another obvious obstacle faced by students in early research and a survey of existing literature, is the steep paywall created by academic journals that block access to crucial reading material and previous research. In the absence of institutional

subscriptions — which depend on financial resources that are available to individual institutions — students are not likely to be able to access reading material.

These real constraints to doing science in the good faith must be acknowledged. However, even as these institutional constraints exist, institutions also serve as support mechanisms for students to carry out good research. Academic training, the support of faculty, access to previous research and workshops on academic writing, can aid students as they pick up the art of conscientious science and effective communication through the written word. At the same time as we challenge these conventions and institutional requirements collectively as academics, we must create systems and networks of support for each other, as we travel the field of knowledge production.

A short guide to citing

Citations must be made for any idea borrowed from another, or any piece of evidence used to support the argument of in a student paper. After one has picked their style of citation (from among the MLA, the APA and the Chicago styles)², an in-text citation is made by mentioning the surname of the first author(s), and the year of publication. This should be followed by an entry in a list of references that is placed at the end of the paper or submission. Thy style of reference must be made in a uniform fashion and should include *each* paper cited in the text. It must be noted that academic papers that informed a student as they did research, but which is not directly referred to in the text of the paper, need not be cited or included in the list of references.

As the quality and seriousness of research progresses, the number of academic papers that must be cited increases significantly. This makes managing citations manually difficult to achieve. Remembering what was borrowed from where, to arrange them systematically and to create a list of references that is alphabetically arranged and

² This document has been prepared using the Zotero software and uses the APA style of citation.

formatted suitably, is a time-consuming and labour-intensive task. Digital tools such as Zotero, Mendeley and Citavi aid this process by automating it. These tools do two things: (1) they manage a database of all papers that one reads, (2) they insert citations in the required format as one writes their paper, and they automatically create a list of references from the in-text citations.

Some institutions have subscriptions to a service and provide students and faculty, access to them. Alternatively, some are free and open source such as Zotero³ (that has been used in the preparation of this resource). Familiarity with these easy-to-use softwares is gained quickly, so students can spend little time learning them to write their papers. By automatically classifying the citation sources between papers published in peer-reviewed journals, websites, newspaper article, reports, it can more easily switch between the right formats and ensure that all conventions are followed.

In addition to knowing how to cite in the appropriate way, it is also important to know *what* to cite. As discussed, the contributions of others that have been used to build the argument of a paper, must be cited. This is to say that it is not important to cite all or any statement of fact used in the paper, especially those that are usually universally accepted. Instead, it is necessary to cite any statement of fact or proposition that may not be considered universal, that has been concluded by other researchers in studies conducted independently, or one that is challenged in the current academic paper.

A guide to designing a research program

The research design of any academic project (long-term or short-term) involves certain key components. They include:

- Research question(s)
- Literature review
- Theoretical framework

³ It can be downloaded here: <https://www.zotero.org/>

- Methodology
- Data and analysis
- Results

While designing the agenda of a research program for a masters' thesis, the initial issue that students often face is formulating a research question that is capable of being addressed in a short time frame, within the confines of the resources that are available in that time. The net is often cast too wide: the research question is so broadly defined that it is easy to get lost in the vastness of the field. If the research question is not appropriately defined, it also becomes difficult to pin down the methodology, or narrow down on the collection of data.

Building a good research question is dependent on the second component listed above: the literature review, to which the second part of this resource is dedicated. A good research question identifies a *gap* in the literature and pinpoints those specific, meaningful and particular aspects of it which are sufficiently narrow.

Once the review of literature that centres on the question is completed, a gap in the literature is identified, and a research question is defined, the next step is to pick (within the process of the review of literature) an *approach* or a *framework* according to which the analysis of data is carried out, or which informs the logic or flow of the argument of the paper. A theoretical framework is a lens through which the methodology is designed, and the data is parsed. It is easy to confuse the methodology of a paper and the theoretical framework.

The methodology of a paper refers to the tools of analysis: empirical studies, for instance, can use primary or secondary data to conduct a quantitative or qualitative analysis. The design of the surveys or the estimates that are selected to stand as points of evidence are informed by the theoretical framework or approach.

The collection of data may be carried out for the specific purpose of the paper. Alternatively, secondary data collected in other sources or for the purposes of other

academic studies may also be used. The selection of data is done according to the particular needs of the research question. Data and its analysis should be transparently reported; a tenet of academic integrity is verifiability and reproducibility of data. Indeed, subjecting other researchers' data and analysis to critical analysis and reproducing the same results with the data, reinforces the worth of the academic exercise.

At the end, the results of the analysis of data should be reported clearly so that the conclusion of the study may be understood clearly.

A guide to sensitive academic writing

Writing an academic argument typically (but not necessarily in certain fields) involves the various components outlined above. Here, we use Swales & Feak (2004)'s guide to academic writing for graduate students to summarise some useful tips in this resource. Academic writing is a distinct form of writing altogether, which is starkly different from styles adopted in writing personal reflections or essays, or even writing for journalism. The style is impersonal, clear and is typically written for a knowledgeable audience i.e., an academic audience who are already familiar with a broad range of academic jargon.

This leads us to a general first tip: it is important to remember the audience for which one writes for. For students' theses, instructors and evaluation committees are usually the primary audience who are very familiar with the topic of the study. For research papers to be published in peer-reviewed journals, it is usually typical to define most jargon or terms, but write to "display familiarity and expertise in the particular area, beyond simply reporting on the research and scholarship of others" (Paltridge, 2004).

A second tip concerns structuring the essay: academic writing typically follows a near-universal structure — a pattern that is repeated predictably. An introduction in the paper tells the reader exactly what to expect from the rest of the article. The

research question is then defined, and its importance is defended. Subsequently, the methodology is presented, the data is reported, analysed and conclusions drawn.

Third, the style of academic writing is distinct. Some key useful tips:

- i) Avoid vague phrases, especially when communicating the magnitude of something.
- ii) Even as many grammar check tools suggest the use of active voice, the use of passive voice in academic writing is common and expected.
- iii) Define jargon or field-specific terms as you go.
- iv) The use of connector words such as ‘however’ or ‘further’ helps the writer in focussing on and maintaining the ‘flow’ of the argument.

Such tips are not universal, but only rough rules of thumb that emphasize that academic writing is for a knowledgeable audience, focuses on a clear flow of logic, and does not embellish with too many personal references. A sequential structure is a critical component of academic writing.

In addition to the above, it is important to remember to be sensitive in one’s writing. Gender-neutral language is an important step in ensuring that both the content of the paper pays attention to the gender dimension of the research question under investigation, and that the reader does not feel excluded. A useful guide to using gender-sensitive language is provided by the UN Women available at: <https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml> (UN Women).

A final tip: good academic writing builds on feedback. The first draft of a paper is almost always not its best version. Sharing the responsibility of reading for each other and offering feedback is an important activity which improves the quality of one’s writing.

Part 2: Literature Review

A literature review is an indispensable part of any academic paper. It is critical for many reasons; doing one not only fulfils the formal requirements of a paper, but extensively helps the student in the process of research. We use Booth et al.'s (2021) and Jesson et al.'s (2011) guides to collect some points on why the literature review is critical for any research project, how to do one, selecting key pieces of literature for the review, and synthesising its results.

First, let's discuss the importance of a literature review for any research project. As alluded to previously, for the purpose of a masters' thesis, a literature review is important to identify research questions. By gauging the current state of knowledge of a specific field, it is able to point out gaps in the literature and contemporary debates within the field. These are indicators for a researcher about where a useful contribution can be made. For instance, if a literature review of the link between economic growth and development is undertaken, one is likely to find evidence in the literature (1) proving a positive causal link between the two, (2) proving a negative causal link, and (3) finding no link. A researcher might then identify space for new evidence that may be able to settle this debate, using for eg., a specific case study, or by analysing existing evidence through a theoretical approach that has not been used previously.

A literature review also identifies what has already been covered so that duplication might be avoided. Carrying out a systematic analysis of the research in a field also helps to create a coherent story about the progress of science on the issue and the trends in popular beliefs within the academic profession.

Next, let's move on to how to do a good literature review. These are the necessary steps one must undertake:

- 1) Define the scope of the literature: choose a field and sub-field on which to read. The scope must be adequately defined in advance that it is possible to have a limited list of reading resources to begin the review process with. This means that the researcher must begin with a prior research question on which to read literature. As the literature review progresses, the research question is defined and redefined by the researcher according to changing needs and comprehension of the field.

- 2) Search literature databases: Typically, this involves using key words in literature database tools such as Google Scholar to find papers. Identifying key words or concepts can guide the construction of a 'concept map' which can guide the search process. Once adequate familiarity with the field has been gained, the researcher knows the key journals in which relevant literature is usually published, or the main sets of authors who work on the issue. Other than strictly academic peer-reviewed contributions, 'grey' literature that covers reports and manuals by various think tanks, government or quasi-government bodies, and international agencies might also be useful. The reference list (containing the literature cited in that paper) of a key piece of literature can itself serve as a tool to find other pieces of important literature that address the same or similar themes.

- 3) Managing references: In the process of preparing a review of literature, one inevitably reads more than one includes in the review. One needs a means to store citations and notes relating to each paper read, so the process of selection and citations can be smoothed. This requires a database management tool such as Zotero or Mendeley that also function as citation software.

- 4) Reading and selecting literature: In addition to reading the literature to differentiate between one author says from another on a given topic, it is important to *read critically*. Critical reading involves understand the ideas and evidence presented in a paper, weighing them against each other, understanding the arguments for and against them, and distilling the ideas

presented in different papers in a coherent story. Jesson et al. (2011) suggest, among others, the 'EEECA' model of critical reading. The EEECA model suggests (i) 'examining' or analysing the topic from various lenses, (ii) 'evaluating' the topic and the strengths and weaknesses of any given argument, (iii) 'establishing' relationships between the different phenomena under consideration, (iv) 'comparing' ideas against each other, and (v) 'arguing' for or against any given idea. Knopf (2006) suggests that while reading, it is useful to evaluating (a) the assumptions made by the author, (b) the logic of the argument created, (c) the validity of the evidence, and (d) the methodology. Making notes that constantly summarize and evaluate the key message of what is being read, aids the process of reading effectively and selecting key literature.

In addition to reading critically, one also needs to ensure that they read fully i.e., ensure that they are not reading in a biased way. A literature review must ensure that the various lenses through which any research question is analysed, are covered, as well as weighed against each other. It is useful to also analyse within this process why certain ideas become in vogue at certain times and others lose out. As one reads, one must also identify the key pieces of literature that cover the various aspects of the problems under study, the various lenses through which a problem is analysed, and those that define changes in the general opinion of the academic or non-academic community. These select pieces of literature are then actively used within the literature review to paint a broad-strokes picture of the state of the literature on a given topic. Academic papers with similar conclusions, methodologies etc. may be grouped together to represent one class of literature. Selecting, therefore, requires an active process of classification based on the academic judgment of the reviewer.

A general tip here is also to ensure that one does not get lost in the richness and vastness of the literature available on any given topic. The scope of the review must be set adequately; a literature review must also be set around one

or two questions, even as it serves as a tool to develop a research question in the first place. This process imitates a feedback loop.

- 5) Synthesising the review: After selecting the literature that will form part of the review, and that in general, will be used in the construction of the argument of the paper, writing the review will entail putting together the results of different contributions together, along with the individual evaluations of the worth of these sources. Additionally, however, the review must go beyond the mere reporting of the results and contributions of the different papers. It must evaluate and be able to tell a cohesive story of the contributions. Individual contributions must be appropriately classified into different categories. Subsequently, the categories of literature should be put together into a cohesive whole.

In the process of synthesising the literature review, a variety of systematic techniques can be used. As familiarity is gained with the general literature on the topic, it becomes possible for the reviewer to glean “meta-level characteristics” i.e., they become able to recognize what framework informs a particular academic contribution or how a concept used in it, has developed over time. (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

Synthesising is essentially a process of identifying similarities, “revealing incompatibilities”, and identifying “disconfirming” cases in the general pattern of the literature (Booth et al., 2021). This process can also be aided by creating literature or data maps that visually represent the main points of the paper thereby helping to classify elements of the review.

Here is an example template for reference:

Literature mapping

	Text 1	Text 2	Text n
Major research question			
Major claim			
Theory			
Method			
Gaps			

Identifying the themes listed in the first column above is useful in both critical thinking, categorizing and creating a synthesis. This is, however, only a rough guide, and should be reconstructed according to the needs of the researcher.

The steps outlined above are tools to prepare a literature review that serve both the researcher as well as the reader of an academic paper. To the researcher, they help formulate research questions, identify gaps, and connect their research to others' work. To the reader, the literature review helps summarize the background to the paper, familiarizes them with some useful jargon of the field, and situates them in the context to best absorb and understand the contribution of the current paper. The literature review, thus, smooths out the overall process of the research.

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