

Sample Essay

The following winning essay was submitted in 2009 by a UK higher education student for an essay writing competition sponsored by the *LearnHigher* Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) network. The set title was 'What is the point of referencing?', and there was a maximum word limit of 1,500 words.

There is a tutor commentary on the points made by the student to the left of the essay.

What is the point of referencing?

The introduction to an essay is very important. Here the student immediately addresses the question.

The reasons why accurate referencing is essential for academic work are not immediately apparent, particularly for students new to higher education. This essay will, therefore, examine why referencing is an essential part of academic writing and in the process address the question: 'what is the point of referencing?'

The student introduces the main reasons for referencing.

There are three main reasons for referencing. Firstly, referencing helps student writers to construct, structure, support and communicate arguments. Secondly, references link the writer's work to the existing body of knowledge. Thirdly, only through referencing can academic work gain credibility.

Summarises the structure of the essay.

This essay will discuss these three aspects of referencing in detail, examine their validity, identify how referencing affects a writer's writing style, and show how referencing helps students to present their own ideas and opinions in assignments.

Engages with the first of the reasons for referencing: construction of arguments. The student draws on the work of a published writer (Becker) in support of the four points made.

Becker (1986) believes the construction of arguments is the most important function of referencing systems. There are four dimensions to this. Firstly, drawing on existing literature, academic writers can construct their own arguments - and adopting a referencing system supports this process. Secondly, it helps to structure the existing information and arguments by linking published authors to their respective works. Third, referencing helps academic writers identify sources, gather evidence, as well as show the relationships between existing knowledge. Finally, referencing also provide a framework to

Note the systematic way the ideas are presented: 'Firstly...; Secondly...; Thirdly...; Finally'.

The writing is descriptive at this point in the essay.

enable writers to structure their arguments effectively by assessing, comparing, contrasting or evaluating different sources.

The word 'However', signals a change of direction: the writing becomes more analytical. It goes beyond the four points described in the previous paragraph to make a new contribution to the discussion.

However, merely describing existing research, rather than producing their own contributions to the discussion, is inadequate for most academic writers. It is important for every academic writer to avoid this narrow-minded argumentation trap; academic writing is not just about compiling existing arguments, but adding new perspectives, finding new arguments, or new ways of combining existing knowledge.

The student illustrates the point made with a practical example (Barrow & Mosley).

For example, Barrow and Mosley (2005) combined the fields Human Resources and Brand Management to develop the 'Employer Brand' concept.

Develops the point s made in the previous paragraph, and focuses on the importance of supporting arguments in assignments with valid evidence.

When the argument has been constructed, it needs academic support – and only references can provide this required support. We all know that academic works are not about stating opinions - as that would be akin to journalistic comment - but arguments are supported by evidence, and only arguments presented with sufficient and valid support are credible.

The word 'Hence' is a word that can be used to present a particular point of view.

Hence arguments are only as strong as the underlying evidence: arguments relying on questionable sources are – well, questionable.

The student is still developing the issue about construction of arguments, but moves on to an important point about referencing: that it provides a framework to distinguish the student's ideas from those of other writers.

Referencing also enables writers to communicate their arguments efficiently. The referencing framework allows them to produce a holistic work with different perspectives, whilst still emphasising their own positions; quotations, for example, help the reader to differentiate the writer's opinions from others. Again, if arguments are badly referenced, readers might not be able to distinguish the writers' own opinions from their sources. Especially for academic beginners, referencing helps them to adapt to the precise and accurate academic writing style required for degree level study. Neville (2007, p. 10) emphasises this issue of writing style, and identifies the quest to "find your own voice" as one of the main reasons for referencing. In academic writing, this requires developing an individual style that is neither convoluted nor convivial in tone, but which is clear, open but measured, and is about identifying and using evidence selectively to build and support one's own arguments.

The student reinforces and supports the point made by citing the work of a published author.

The student uses a quote to give interest to the writing and as a lead-in to the second of the four reasons for referencing: about linking to established bodies of knowledge.

Uses a quotation to reinforce the main point in this paragraph.

Explains why linking into existing knowledge is important for academic writers.

The student returns to a point made earlier (about separating out own ideas from those of others) but links it this time with the issue of plagiarism.

Cites and quotes from a published source to support the points made in this paragraph. Note how the student makes a writing bridge from this paragraph to the next.

The previous paragraph was largely descriptive in nature. But the word 'however' again signals a change to more analysis. The student brings in a criticism of referencing made by two commentators, Thody (2006) and Thompson (2003).

Note the way the student makes a writing 'bridge' to the next paragraph

Immanuel Kant said "Science is organized knowledge." This short quote brilliantly captures the point that the primary mission of science and other disciplines is not to promote individual achievements, but to establish a connected, collective, and recognised body of knowledge.

This is the most fundamental reason for referencing from a theoretical point of view. Hence some authors identify this as the principal reason for referencing: "The primary reason for citation [...] is that it encourages and supports the collective construction of academic knowledge" (Walker & Taylor, 2006, pp.29-30).

The writer's references are links to this network of knowledge. Without these links an academic work would operate within an academic vacuum, unrelated to existing academic knowledge. A writer needs to show how his or her work relates to current research and debates in their chosen subject area.

Referencing not only connects a student writer's work to existing research, but clearly distinguishes the writer's own ideas from established arguments –and failing to indicate that ideas are taken from the existing body of knowledge would be plagiarism. This is one of the five principles of referencing identified by Walker and Taylor (2006).

Neville also identifies the link to existing knowledge as one of the main reasons for adopting a referencing style; he highlights "tracing the origin of ideas", "spreading knowledge" and "indicating appreciation" (2007, pp.9-10), which leads to the next point.

Referencing a work indicates that the writer finds the referenced material important: hence references create 'academic clout' in an assignment. In the global academic community a more-cited article will find more recognition. However, this practice is not without its critics. Thody, for example, calls this the "sycophantic" use of referencing - and it can certainly be used to "flatter your mentors" (2006, p.186). Thompson calls this "ritualized obedience to the reigning authorities" (2003, p.27).

So the important issue here is not about selecting references for their expediency value, but for their enduring quality. This brings us to the next point: credibility.

Uses a quotation as a way into the discussion about credibility.

Also uses quotes from published authors to lend support to the points made.

Note the way a point is introduced and then emphasised with a practical illustration: "Some readers, for example, ..."

The word 'therefore' introduces a summary of the main point in this paragraph.

'Finally': the student signals that the essay is reaching its conclusion.

The concluding paragraph reminds the reader of the essay question and of the main points made in the essay.

We are left with a sense that the student has answered the question.

Martin Joseph Routh said in 1878: "You will find it a very good practice always to verify your references, sir!" Correct referencing enables, therefore, the reader to check sources and verify conclusions. The issue of credibility is identified by commentators as a key issue in referencing. Nygaard, for example, identifies credibility as the main reason for referencing: "The goal of referencing is to enhance [...] your credibility as an author" (2008, p.177). Neville came to the same conclusion that "to be taken seriously, [a writer] needs to make a transparent presentation of valid evidence" (2007, p.10). Also the Academic Learning Support from Central Queensland University (2007) sees the credibility of arguments as primary motive for correct referencing.

References allow the reader to trace the source of the writer's arguments, consult the original independently and verify whether the writer's usage of the sources is valid. Some readers, for example, interested in a point in question, might want to verify the writer's interpretation of a referenced work. The quality of references is, therefore, extremely important for the credibility of an academic work. Arguments are only as good as the underlying references - untrustworthy and unreliable sources can even invalidate an argument, while reliable and dependable sources strengthen the writer's argument.

Finally, the writer's selection of sources also demonstrates whether the writer has evaluated all important arguments and has a thorough understanding of the subject. Only a credible work that takes all important arguments into account will find acceptance in the academic world.

So what is the point of referencing? This essay has presented three main arguments why academic writers have to adopt a referencing system: Firstly, it helps to structure, support and communicate arguments. Secondly, it links the work to the existing body of knowledge, although it is also important for writers not merely to present the ideas of others, but to contribute where possible with innovative ideas of their own. Thirdly, only referencing can give the argument credibility – and this is a particularly significant element for success in the academic world.

(1200 words)

The student presents all the sources cited in the essay in the author-date (Harvard) style of referencing.

References:

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