

Referencing in Academic Assignments: Top Tips to avoid the confusion.

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Introduction and Concrete Experience:

Referencing is the practice of acknowledging other pieces of work that have been read or used to compile academic assignment work, or publications. It is generally accepted amongst academics that different referencing styles are preferred by particular academic disciplines because they work better with the kind of published materials that are most commonly used for that discipline. There are many styles but two of the most common are Harvard and Vancouver. Harvard style referencing uses author names and dates within the narrative of the writing, whilst Vancouver style references other works by using a numbering format. When asked to write an assignment at University, it is usually expected that evidence, research or wider reading is cited within the main narrative of the assignment and the reference list is given at the end of the piece of work. It is important to manage all sources carefully and reference them correctly, however, there is often confusion amongst students in how to reference correctly. A common mistake students often make, is the placing of the reference outside of the sentence to which it pertains, *such as this. (Parkin, 2023)*

Despite the presence of guidelines in most institutions, there are often style inconsistencies and anomalies noted by examiners and moderators.

Reflective Observation:

During the COVID-19 lock down and closure of schools, some time was devoted to conducting a descriptive quantitative review of 165 UK University referencing guidelines. The list of UK Universities was compiled from the *Complete University Guide* (CUG, 2020) and Wikipedia (2020) *List of Universities in the United Kingdom*. A generic search of each University website was performed via Google and using the search term: *University of {Name} referencing guidelines*. Individual schools or divisions within each University were not searched.

Available guidelines were interrogated for their advocated referencing styles and any Harvard or Vancouver examples were scrutinised for author or number placing and spacing.

Of the 165 Universities at that time (2020-2021), 75% ($n=124$) had Harvard Guidelines readily available, 27% ($n=44$) had Vancouver, 25% ($n=42$) had both sets of guidelines available and 17% ($n=29$) had no guidelines at all retrievable from their websites. Based on this data, Harvard was the most frequently recommended of all referencing guidelines.

It is our observation that many of these University referencing guidelines are inconsistent with advice regarding reference placement, especially at the end of a sentence.

This example from The University of Sheffield (no date) shows that there is no commitment to whether the full stop should appear before or after the reference, in this example they give, the reference is preceded by ellipses only:

It can be assumed that pickpocketing...(Austin, 2009)

Other Universities are very clear that the full stop should appear *after* the reference, as shown in this example from Imperial College London (no date):

A recent study investigated the effectiveness of using Google Scholar to find medical research (Henderson, 2005).

Many Universities are also inconsistent within their guidelines as to number placement in Vancouver referencing and either fail to give examples of number placing, or give varying examples where numbers are either inside or outside of the full stop, as in the following examples:

Imperial College London (2022, p. 4):
Communication of science in the media has increasingly come under focus, particularly where reporting of facts and research is inaccurate (4,5). {Inside}

University of Birmingham (no date)
Vancouver uses numeric references in the text, either numbers in brackets (1) or superscript.¹ {Outside}

The University of Sheffield (2023, p.4)
"women have fewer heart attacks than men [...] similar death rates occur in women about 10 years later than in men".³ (p. 5) {Outside}

University of York (2016):

The results presented here have also been confirmed elsewhere⁴ . {Inside}

University of Leeds (no date):

“It was emphasised that citations in a text should be consistent! (1, p.24). {Inside}

In the following example from University of Oxford (2020), the numbers are superscript and there is no gap after the last letter. It is unclear from their guidelines where the number should be placed at the end of a sentence and whether they would advocate this to be *inside* or *outside* of the full stop:

This is how book¹, book chapter², and journal article³, and conference paper⁴, look in the citation style of the journal *Nature*.

It is our observation that many University guidelines fail to present examples of end of sentence number placing and that maybe this is because of lack of clarity or gold standard referencing practices and so they do not provide an example.

A very common method of number placing is depicted in this example from the University of Reading (2020):

In-text: It has been noted that the performance does not always match expectations. (5) In this example, the number appears *after* the full stop and with a space before the first parentheses. The space gives the visual impression of detachment from the original sentence and in some instances can look more attached to the subsequent sentence, as demonstrated in this example from Pears and Shield

(2016, p. 159) *Cite Them Right* 10th Edition:

More than 38,000 people are diagnosed with lung cancer every year in the UK. (1) Studies elsewhere have investigated links between occupation or socio-demographic status and cancer (2,3), but smoking is the biggest single cause of lung cancer in the UK. (1) Some researchers have analysed populations to establish incidences of tumours. (4) Tumours may spread from the lungs to elsewhere in the body. (5) Charities and self-help groups provide advice and moral support to victims. (1,6)

With such inconsistencies within guidelines, it is no wonder there are so many observed referencing mistakes or inconsistencies within student assignment work, especially for those students' novice to referencing. A further example of confusion, this time regarding the *full stop*, can be seen in a student post from 2014, in the website *Academia*:

Student: I was always taught to put the full stop inside the brackets, but a couple of Harvard in-line citations I'm seeing put the full stop outside, e.g., (Hyvönen, 2007; Joshi, 2001; Kaplan, 1984).

Is this correct? or should it be:

(Hyvönen, 2007; Joshi, 2001; Kaplan, 1984.)

In an email exchange in 2021, Dr Richard Pears, one of the authors of *Cite them Right*, recommended that if the number is outside of the parenthesis that it should be 'attached'

to the previous sentence and that the next print edition of their referencing guidebook would allude to this and make this change. The most current advice on the cite them right website is thus:

Some institutions prefer the footnote number to be inside the sentence punctuation, for example (1). Other institutions prefer the footnote number to be outside the punctuation, for example.(1) This is the format used in *Cite them right* (Cite them Right, no date).

In the absence of a single gold standard approach, the following tips may enable students to approach their referencing with accuracy and consistency, something they can often be marked down for:

Practical Referencing Top Tips:

- Ensure you know your institution and/or division-specific referencing preferences and where to access their guidelines.
- Do not assume the referencing style will be the same as any previous institutions you may have attended.
- When using referencing software, ensure the information is entered correctly.
- Do not assume referencing software will generate the reference in the correct format – it is only as good as the information the user puts in.
- Learn how to write the reference manually first, that way, when using referencing software, you'll instantly be able to spot mistakes.
- Practice makes perfect! Write out a

few references by hand and compare them to your referencing software generated list to identify where you are going right and wrong.

- Ask a critical friend to check your references over for you and offer to check theirs.
- Familiarise yourself with your University support services and book a 1-1 tutorial for support and guidance.
- Engage with training resources, workshops and other opportunities.
- If you approach your references like this from the start, it will soon become second nature and you will rely less on other mechanisms of support.

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