Interpreting a Citation

Modifying this Plan for Your Class

- This lesson plan includes a suggested dialogue to guide the session. Feel free to substitute with your own words.
- Additional suggestions and instructions are given in green text and under Key Points.

The image of a pair of pants and the PowerPoint slide of a citation may be substituted with something you consider more appropriate for your session.

Materials needed:
- A PowerPoint slide of a citation

Introduction:
Once you’ve figured out what terms to use in a database and you’ve run your search, you get a list of citations. Let’s spend a little time now figuring out what kind of information those citations give you and why they are in a particular format.

Form groups of 2. One person will be the messenger and the other the message receiver.

For messengers: On your computers open a web browser and go to [INSERT URL FOR AN PUBLICATION THAT IS RELEVANT TO THE COURSE OR RESEARCH TOPIC. ALTERNATIVELY, YOU CAN ASK STUDENTS TO LOCATE ANOTHER ARTICLE OF INTEREST TO THEM]. Imagine you are texting your partner with about an article that you saw on [INSERT TOPIC – e.g. Obama’s views on the environment] You want that person to be able to get online and find the article. Write the text message you would send and pass it to your partner.

For message receivers: Once you have the text message, get online and try to find the article. What happened when you tried to find it?

Write on the board some of the fields such as title, author, source, etc. that the students might have used to try to find the article.

Messenger: If needed, compose a second text message providing additional information to help your partner find the article. What information did you send? If that wasn’t enough what other hints could you send to help find the article?

Write out the article citation on the board (for other suggestions, go to end of this section):
Broder, J.M.
A Power meeting.
New York Times (NY), p.30

The whole point of a citation is a way to give someone the essential information they need to find the article you are mentioning to them. Citations from scholarly articles work the same way.
Open the Citation PowerPoint slide.

Here is a citation to a scholarly article. See if you can locate the article through the database OneSearch@IU (www.libraries.iub.edu/onesearch). You can enter the title or other information in the main search box, or click on Advanced Search for more options. (The instructor can circulate the room at this time, helping with individuals difficulties, and afterward address common challenges with the entire class. This may also be a time to explain interlibrary loans.)

As you can see, the citation gives me the information I need to fill out this form. It would also give me enough information to fill out an Interlibrary Loan request form if the library didn’t have the journal and I needed to get the article from another library.

But how can I tell what parts of the citation will give me the pages, volume number, etc.? That’s where style guides like APA, MLA, and others come in. The style guides set down rules for where the title of an article goes in a citation, where you’ll find the volume number, how to include the publisher of a book, and so on. So you follow a style guide in order to make it easier for the next person who is looking for the article you cited to find the information that he or she needs in your citation. [The instructor might also show students how to access the formatted article citation (in various styles) by clicking on “Cite” in OneSearch@IU.]

Key points to mention if they don’t come out in the discussion:

- Citations are a way to communicate the vital pieces of information that someone will need to find the item you are citing.

- Style guides are a way to make sure that people cite articles, chapters from books, etc. in a consistent way so that people looking at the citation will know where to find important pieces of information like page numbers, dates, etc.

Other possible articles to locate:

- Charles Vlek et al about conserving energy.
- Lucas W. Davis about “durable goods and residential demand for energy and water.”
- Moser on the effects of wind direction on the distribution of insect pest populations.
- Elizabeth Culotta wrote an article titled, “Did Humans Learn from Hobbits?”

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