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How to write “references” in scientific journal articles

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Editorial

Referencing is integral part of scientific research, writing and publication. The ‘why’ to reference is straight forward than ‘when’ and ‘how’. Referencing allows to trace the sources of accessible, documented evidence. It helps to expand and spread the web of knowledge, guiding readers, reviewers and editors to the original work for critical scrutiny and verification of the research questions, the methods used to obtain the results, and discussions to compare and contrast with the available literature. Copying other’s ideas and works without proper acknowledgements of source is a serious misconduct, the plagiarism. Evidence based medical science involves detail description of ideas, its origin and development; by whom, when, where, why, how etc. Referencing helps in advancing the knowledge base, either in agreement or counter agreement. Some of the important reasons to cite references include: i. to acknowledge others work, ii. to give credit to the original source of work, iii. to direct readers to the original source of the information, iv. add credibility to one’s own work.^{1,2}

The issue of ‘when’ to reference is not so straight forward. Referencing is needed ‘to acknowledge the source of a findings, theories, definitions, techniques, instruments, formulas, to recognise the contradictory or different findings, to support a point not universally accepted by readers, to support a conceptual point, to justify the use of a methods, techniques, or instruments (e.g. reliability, validity, or appropriateness), to support the importance or viability of a research topics, questions, or purpose of a study, source of tables, photos, statistics, and diagrams, and when paraphrasing other’s idea. The list can go on. The common knowledge shared in the public domain, undisputed facts freely and publicly circulating may not require citation, for example, sun rises from east, and other information freely shared by community and society. However, the complexity is that not everyone in a particular discipline or from different socio-culture background agree on what is common knowledge. Thus at times the simple logic is ‘cite if in doubt cite’.

The referencing should include original publications. The quality of citations are mainly the 'validity of sources' and 'errors in citation' style. There are many referencing styles, but can be broadly categorized in to two types: in-text author name (for e.g. American Psychological Association APA and Harvard style, used mostly in social science), and numerical citation (e.g. Vancouver style, common in scientific, medical journals). Vancouver style is popular because it is friendly to author, reviewer, editor and librarian. References are numbered in Arabic numerals (after full stop in superscript in consecutive order in which they appear in the text, tables, and graphs and are listed at the end of document as 'references'. The journal can have their modification of Vancouver style, mentioned in authors guideline and is a good practice to read the earlier publications in the journal in which one plan to submit.

The National Library of Medicine (NLM) has adopted the Vancouver style of referencing for its database and is available with examples and explanations in NLM's Citing Medicine, 2nd edition.³ The Vancouver referencing style has been adopted by majority of biomedical journals.⁴ The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, <http://www.icmje.org>) has recommendations in detail for conducting research, its reporting, editing and publication. Scientific research and writing is the building block of knowledge and events in the universe based on a cycle of 'research-writing-publication-research-writing-publication', Figure 1.

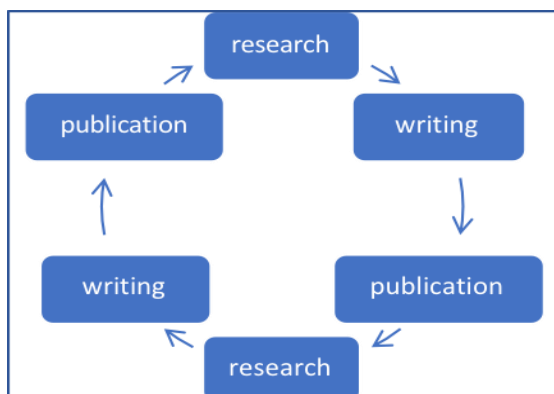


Figure 1. Cycle of research-writing-publication

Failure to 'cite' is cheating, which may be either intentional and unintentional.⁵ The accuracy of content cited must match the content in the reference. Citation based on title and abstract, without reading the original article for the details of design, and process of their findings may result in errors and it is irritating when one cannot find the information in cited reference.⁶ Authors, editors, reviewers should not use references to promote self-interests, and commit a misconduct of 'self-citation' which may become 'self-plagiarism'.

Academia and universities in Nepal and around the world requires medical school, especially the postgraduates degrees to write and publish in scientific journals. However, the skill and knowledge to do so is lacking, especially in reference writing, and there is need to introduce courses and trainings in their curriculum to develop the culture of research, writing and publication, rather than simply to fulfill the criteria to obtain academic degree or faculty position. Appropriate referencing, and need for more training is necessary for both students and faculties.^{5,7,8}

Rapid growth of science has led to proliferation of scientific journals contributing to medical literature. With various referencing styles, manually referencing is labor intensive. Referencing software have advanced overtime. Scientific writing is an essential component of medical curriculum, and understanding various referencing systems is necessary for effective use of these tools.^{9,10}

The references should be provided with standard identifier (PMID PubMed ID, DOI-digital object identifier), or other 'links' like 'GoogleScholar', Weblinks, etc. Accuracy of citations and references should be verified, ideally by electronic search. Retracted articles should not be cited except when the manuscript is on the topic of retraction itself.

The effectiveness of academic writing skill development program embedded in master's course is effective in reducing plagiarism.¹¹ A good citation and referencing practice by

following the rules of proper format style minimizes the referencing errors.^{12,13} Proper referencing demonstrates one has read and researched for precise ideas from traceable sources and the list of references have an effect on overall work for possible academic debate and follow up.¹⁴

There are several free reference management softwares available, few examples –

- Zotero (<https://www.zotero.org>)
- Mendeley (<https://www.mendeley.com>)
- EndNote (<https://endnote.com>) etc.

In summary

Vancouver style is popular in medical journals. In text it is numbered in Arabic numerals in sequence and listed in ‘references’. The journals can have modification of Vancouver style.

Some of the developing concept and useful tips for referencing include-

- In Vancouver style referencing, the author/s are traditionally listed as proposed by western culture- “family

space name full stop. However, as publication from Asian culture, especially Chinese (who write their name starting with family name first), now constitute significant proportion in the online literature, seems logical to write the authors name in full as it appears in their respective culture). Up to six authors, all are listed, in case of more than six , list first six and then use et al. Some journals have et al after three authors.

- Provide standard identifier of the manuscript, for example; digital object identifier (DOI), PMID (PubMed ID), PMCID (PMC ID), GoogleScholar, Weblink, etc.
- For style of referencing it’s easier to search on google scholar and find the citation style by clicking on < ” >, <https://scholar.google.com/>
- Journals and funding agencies are increasingly demanding to provide the Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID), <https://orcid.org/>

Some of the examples, from Citing Medicine, the eBook published by the U. S. National Library of Medicine, is useful for the details of referencing useful to authors, editors, publishers and librarians, Figure 2a-e.³

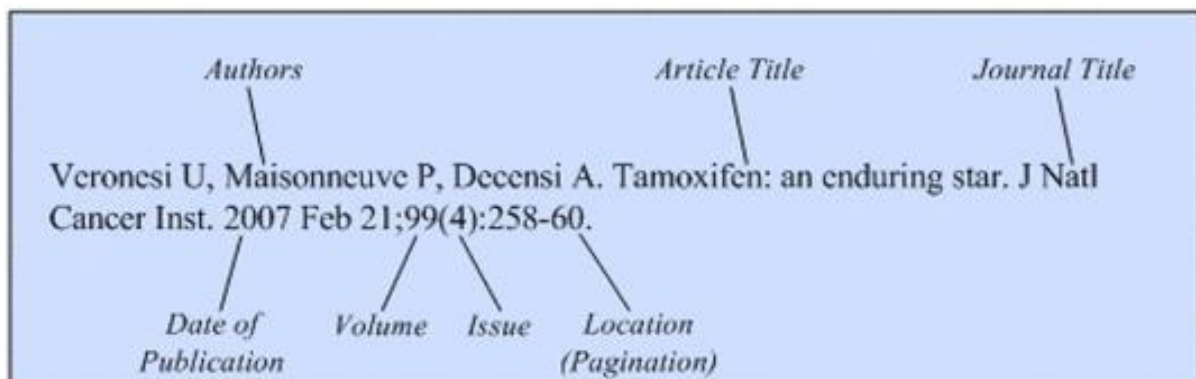


Figure 2a. The general format for a reference to a journal article in Vancouver style³

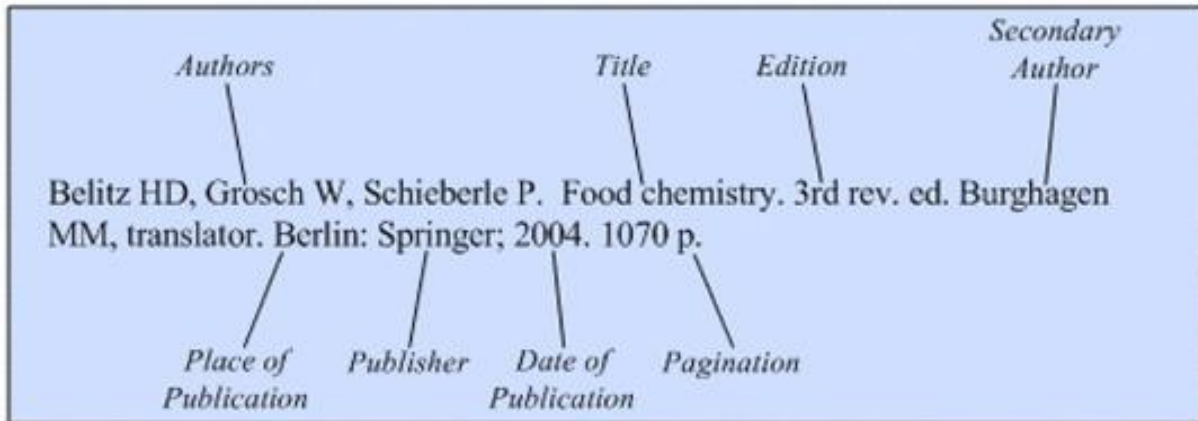


Figure 2b. The general format for a reference to a book in Vancouver style³

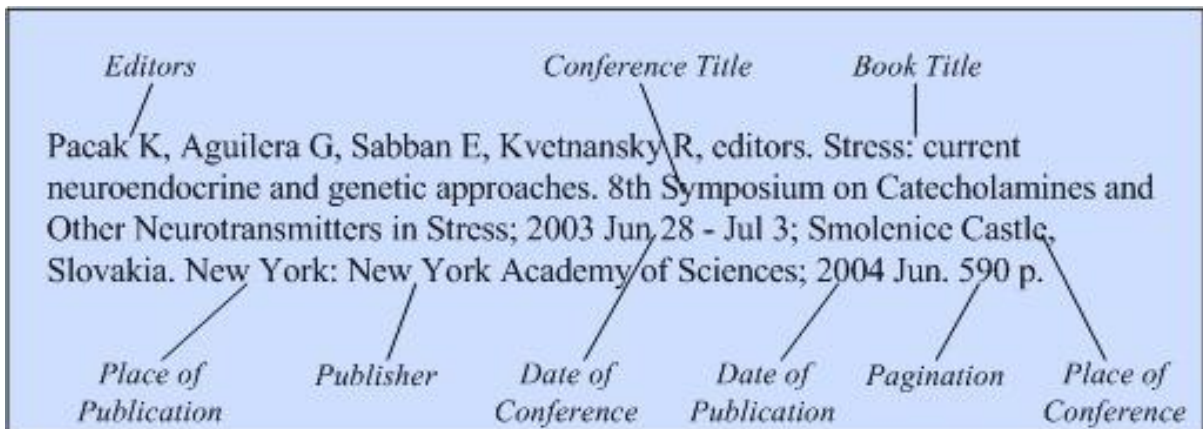


Figure 2c. The general format for a reference to a conference proceeding in Vancouver style³ (with a title for the book of proceedings as well as a conference title)

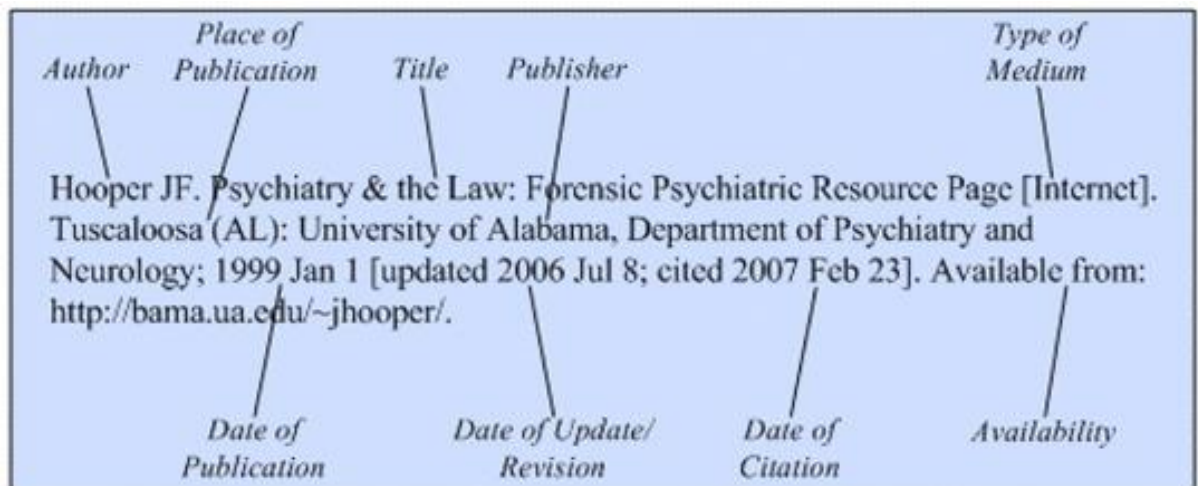


Figure 2d. The general format for a reference to a homepage, internet in Vancouver style³

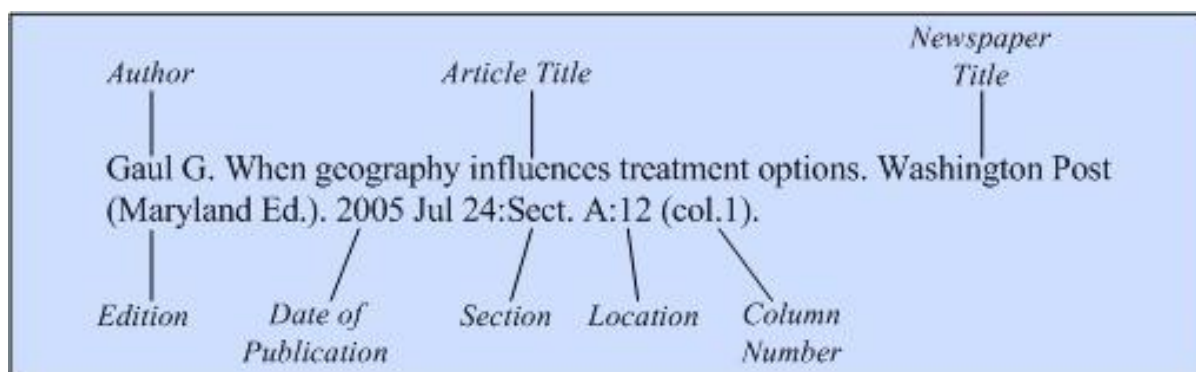


Figure 2e. The general format for a reference to a newspaper article in Vancouver style³

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