EZ Bibliographies

Do Web sites that format citations for students negate the need to teach them how to create a proper source list?

By JAMES M. LANG

ONE OF MY FAVORITE PARTS of writing a scholarly paper comes at the end: typing up and formatting the “Works Cited” list. I realize that admission may leave a strange impression of me. However, once you start working on the details of the Works Cited list, it means that you are done with all of the intellectually challenging parts of the task: the research, the ideas, the drafting and revising. Preparing a source list is the scholarly equivalent of wiping off your tools and putting them away after glazing a window.

It’s mostly mindless work; all you have to do is follow the directions in the MLA Style Manual. I can brew myself a cup of tea, throw some Wilco on the music player, and finish the task in an hour or two.

In the course of more than eight years of full-time teaching, I’ve discovered that most undergraduates don’t share the same zest for the final task of writing a research paper. No matter how often I emphasize the importance of providing the reader with an easy and reliable means of tracking down one’s sources, I find that few students do the detail work necessary to get their Works Cited list into the proper format.

Sometimes I get frustrated and tell students that, of all the skills they will learn in college, this one—taking a pool of information and putting it in some predetermined format—may be the one they will use most frequently in a job. After all, I say, when your boss asks you for the “TPS reports,” and wants them to look the way TPS reports have always looked, you have to get those TPS reports in the proper format. (Only a handful of students these days understand the reference to the classic cubicle comedy film Office Space, but everyone gets the idea.)

Last week in my English-composition class, as I was waving my arms and pontificating about the importance of a properly formatted list of sources, a student hastily raised her hand. My heart-stopping lectures on this topic normally elicit little student interest, so I paused immediately. “Yes?”

“Um...” the student said tentatively, as if she were unsure whether her comment was going to get her into trouble. “You know that EasyCite, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “EasyCite, right?”

“EasyCite is a Web site. It’s just type in the information about the source, and it formats it for you.”

Another student raised her hand. “Yeah, and the most current version of Microsoft Word does the same thing now.”

My first reaction? I wasn’t surprised. Of course, I thought to myself, EasyCite was one of those Web sites sitting out there in space, waiting for the Internet to happen in order to come to fruition. My second reaction was a little falling in my heart as I wondered whether I would ever again taste the quiet joys of formulating my own Works Cited list.

In that classroom moment, I had to think quickly about whether to devise a policy for my students on using such a Web site, but it was a very short minute. The point of a Works Cited list is not to create busy work and force students through a formatting obstacle course. The point is to ensure that writers and readers everywhere make the list the same way so that we can all find the information we need most easily. If EasyCite can help us achieve that goal, without much of the hassle, then we have no reason not to take advantage of it.

After class, I checked out both tools recommended by the students. I started with EasyBib.com, and found it to be exactly what the student had promised: a Web site that not only properly formats each entry of your Works Cited list but also allows you to export the entire list into a Microsoft Word document. It doesn’t commit many of the sins my students frequently commit when they create a source list on their own: putting the words “Works Cited” in bold, blue, or humongous letters; numbering the entries; mixing double and single spacing; tabbing the first line and not the second or third lines of an entry.

For the absolutely laziest students, you can even enter the ISBN number of a book into a field entitled “Auto-Cite,” and it will format everything for you. I put my most recent book in there and the citation came out perfectly.

Most students begin their research on the Internet now, so I thought I would check out whether EasyBib created a proper citation for a Web site as well. My students are writing an essay on affirmative action in college admissions, so I typed “affirmative action” into Google. Among other links I found a historical overview from the Web site of the National Organization for Women. I inserted information from the Web page into EasyBib and, lo and behold, out came the citation, once again in perfect format.

For comparison’s sake, I tried Microsoft Word’s version (you’ll find it under the “References” tab in the most recent version of Word), with much the same results. Everything formatted perfectly, in my choice of MLA, APA, Chicago, and a handful of other styles I had never even heard of. I found it harder to get Word to spit out the entire page of sources in the proper format, but students are better at that kind of thing than I am, so I’m guessing it’s equally possible.

I stepped back afterward to think about all of this. For many years now, high-school teachers and college faculty members have been drumming lessons about bibliographic formats into our students heads. With these new Web tools, can we stop covering this specialized skill? Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon your perspective, the answer is no. We may not have to spend as much time talking about where the period goes or what spacing to use in a properly formatted list, but the students will continue to need plenty of help in gathering the right information for the kinds of sources they use. After I recommended that my students go ahead and use EasyCite for their papers, I still had numerous questions from them about where to find the information they needed, and about sorting through situations in which they either did not have enough information or had too much.

When a book has been printed and republished numerous times, they wanted to know, which date should they enter? When multiple editions are listed for a publisher, which one is the correct one? What about books with two different publishers listed? One student had trouble picking out the name of the publisher from the
Moving On in Turbulent Times

After 18 years in campus development, a fund raiser tries out the consulting world

By MARK J. DROZDOWSKI

There have been a lot of ups and downs in my career in higher education. But I can't recall a time when the economy was as bad as it is now. The housing market is in free fall, banks are failing, and the stock market is in a tailspin. It's a challenging time for anyone in the business of raising money for universities.

But I'm not alone. Many colleagues in the field are finding themselves out of work and looking for new opportunities. Some are considering consulting firms that offer a chance to work with clients on a project-by-project basis. Others are exploring the idea of starting their own businesses. It's a time for adaptation and flexibility.

I've been in higher education for 28 years, and I've seen the industry go through many changes. But I've never seen anything like this. The economy is in a deep recession, and the universities are feeling the effects. It's a time for innovation and creativity.

Some experts are predicting not just a slowdown in growth but an absolute decline in giving to higher education. This could have significant implications for the future of higher education. It's a time for us to be creative and think outside the box.

But there are also opportunities. Many universities are finding new ways to engage with their alumni and other donors. They are using social media and other digital tools to communicate with their audiences. It's a time for us to be nimble and adaptable.

I'm optimistic that higher education will come out of this recession stronger and more resilient. It's a time for us to be innovative and think creatively. We're going to have to work harder than ever to raise money for our institutions. But it's a challenge we can rise to.

The Fund Raiser

Mass of confusing information she saw on the copyright and title pages.

Citing Web sites properly is even more challenging. The site I used to test these Web tools had a clearly identifiable author at the top of the page, as well as the date, but many don't. And what's the difference on EasyBib between the "site title" and the "institution," both of which are entry fields for a Web citation?

I'm guessing that students will continue to need guidance through the bibliographic process. Perhaps the job will be a little easier, though, thanks to EasyBib and Microsoft Word, and I would imagine, to the rival sites that already exist or are out there waiting to spring to life.

I will definitely recommend such sites from here on out, but I'll also make sure that we review in class how to gather the information students need to use those programs.

This shift in emphasis—from learning precise formatting details to gathering and evaluating information for some computer program to format—must be happening in the outside world as well. The hapless cuticle dwellers in Office Space would no doubt have discovered, by now, a program to format those TPS reports. So I don't think we are sacrificing anything important by turning over part of the responsibility for this task to technology.

All of which means that, unfortunately, I'm still going to have to wave my arms and pontificate in my freshmen-composition courses about the importance of properly formatted source lists. On the flip side, happily, I will still be able to save the quiet joys of mindless data entry when it comes time to compile the Works Cited lists for my own writing.


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