

What is Common Knowledge?

Some facts and ideas are so well known that it is unnecessary to cite their source. However, it can be difficult to determine what constitutes common knowledge, particularly as the way this idea is interpreted varies among disciplines and practices.

When deciding whether or not to cite what might appear to be common knowledge, you can make use of these three general guidelines:

- 1. If in doubt, cite.**
- 2. Always attribute *arguments*.**
- 3. Seek advice from your instructors for further clarification.**

Look to style guides, published articles, as well as librarians, writing consultants, and instructors in your field of study for discipline-specific citation advice.

Keep in mind, however, that providing a reference for common knowledge can be beneficial for your work in some instances – for example, citing foundational texts, controversial information, and argumentative claims.

Cite foundational texts

You may encounter certain texts so frequently in your research that they may seem to be taken as common knowledge. However, some of these may be considered foundational texts – those in which key theories, ideas, and methodological frameworks are first established within a given field – and citing these can help demonstrate that you are well-informed in an area and have relevant insights to contribute to the conversation. These foundational texts will be commonly cited and references to them are frequently customary and expected.

Similarly, frequently encountered key terms – ones that have been “coined” or invented by someone within a particular academic community – may also be considered foundational. You might want to reference the works in which such terms were coined in order to show that you’re familiar with their significance, history, and meaning.

Cite controversial information

Some information may seem to be factual and common knowledge because it appears frequently and is widely accepted. However, for some people, this same information may be considered controversial. When deciding whether to cite such information, consider whether the audience is certain or skeptical about the information's factuality.

For example, if you're wondering whether to cite sources that report the timing of the 9/11 terrorism events, think about whether your audience accepts or is skeptical of the common narrative. You should also consider the purpose for which you're writing:

- Is the purpose of your essay to gather evidence about what happened on 9/11? If so, your audience will want to know the source(s) of your information regarding the timing of events.
- Is the purpose of your essay to discuss the significance of the 9/11 attacks for American social policy? If so, your audience may not be interested in the source(s) of minor details, such as time and location of attacks or the number of fatalities.

Cite argumentative claims

When repeating a claim made by someone else, even a frequently encountered one, it is advisable to cite the text in which the claim has been argued. Argumentative claims represent the effort and intellectual contributions of their authors; the connection between claim and author should therefore be acknowledged through citation.