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When to Use a Formal Citation

The phrase **common knowledge** refers to known facts. The standard size of a basketball court, the date of George Washington's birthday, the number of miles to the moon, the date of Elvis Presley's alleged death--these are known facts. Even if you have to look them up, you would find the same facts in any standard reference source. Because it is in the public domain, common knowledge is also often called *public domain knowledge*; in either case, it doesn't have to be documented.

Some hitches with common knowledge:

Hitch 1: In every field of study, there is a body of common knowledge held by experts in the field, but not so commonly known to outsiders. You may not recognize this common knowledge until you have been researching and working in the field for awhile. When in doubt, document.

Hitch 2: Sometimes you will need to use quite a bit of common knowledge at once. For instance, you might need to write a thumbnail sketch of Abraham Lincoln or Gloria Steinem; or summarize the carbon cycle; or give a short history of the New York Yankees. You will be able to get the same information from many sources, but you should pick one to use as your authority. When dealing with information this common, it is virtually impossible not to repeat exact wording or to paraphrase, and you should document your source in one note that will cover the whole paragraph.

Hitch 3: Be careful not to confuse facts with interpretation. Say a cocker spaniel named Sadie wins Best Dog at the National Kennel Association Dog Show. That's a fact, and also public domain knowledge. It does not follow, however, that cocker spaniels are the best dogs in the world. Anyone who thinks so is holding a personal opinion based on personal predilection, and therefore MUST be quoted and documented.

Using statistics:

Statistics are not facts. Statistics are based on such variables as size and scope of study, purpose of researchers, and methods used; the "fact" is only a fact within the specific study. All statistics MUST be documented.

Using paraphrase:

You are *paraphrasing* (1) when you use almost the same words as your source, perhaps just changing a few for grace and/or clarity; (2) when you summarize someone else's information in briefer form; and (3) when you borrow someone else's idea or methodology and put it in your own words. Paraphrases are a legitimate part of the research process, but they MUST be documented.

Using quotes:

You are *quoting directly* when you use someone else's direct words. You MUST quote accurately. Misquoting is a truly egregious error; it won't make you many friends, and further, it will make you look like a real slob. Whether you use only a few words or a few hundred words, you MUST quote accurately, document your source, and give credit where due.