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## Accuracy of references in a journal article

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### Abstract

References and citations provide a scientific basis for verifying evidence. They facilitate further reading, research and the validation of new information. The accuracy of references and citations, along with functional hyperlinks to their sources, is crucial for maintaining the integrity and credibility of academic work. Proper citation and referencing contribute to the reproducibility of research, which is essential for verifying findings, upholding academic integrity, and ensuring accountability for the information and statements provided by the author. This is fundamental to good scientific practice. Accurate referencing helps legitimize scientific evidence, enhances the credibility of authors, journals, and editors, and adds value to the overall quality of academic work.

### How to cite

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The accuracy of citations and references, along with functional hyperlinks to sources, is crucial for maintaining the integrity and credibility of academic work, particularly when publishing scientific journal articles. Authors must ensure that references are accurate and formatted according to the specific style required by the journal. Proper referencing contributes to the reproducibility of research, provides a basis for further verification, upholds academic integrity, and ensures accountability for the information and statements presented by the author. This is essential for good scientific practice, as it affects the legitimacy of science and the credibility of authors, journals, and editors.

The Vancouver style of citation and referencing is widely used in biomedical journals and is adopted by the NIH-NLM-PubMed. The National Library of Medicine (NLM) provides a detailed resource, [The NLM Style Guide for Authors, Editors, and Publishers](#), which offers comprehensive illustrations of referencing styles for journals, books, internet sources, and media. This guide serves as a valuable reference for cross-checking styles generated by reference management software.<sup>1</sup>

However, individual journals often modify the Vancouver style. These modifications may include variations in numbering style, the use of brackets or superscripts for in-text citations, and differences in listing authors (e.g., using "et al." after six authors, three authors, or listing all authors). Other variations include the use of full stops after page numbers, the presentation of page ranges (e.g., 321-328 vs. 321-8), and other stylistic preferences.<sup>2</sup>

Accurate and adequate referencing is essential to avoid accusations of plagiarism. Reading the full text of a source before citing it is a good practice, as it ensures that authors provide evidence-based statements and avoid

misrepresentation.<sup>2,3</sup> Editors and publishers often perform random checks to verify the accuracy and completeness of references and may return manuscripts to authors for necessary revisions. Peer reviewers may also identify inaccuracies or suggest additional relevant sources that should be cited.

Citations to published articles recognize and credit the original authors. However, copying references from another article without reading the original source can lead to inaccuracies, especially if the copied reference list itself contains errors. This practice can also artificially inflate citation metrics (known as the Matthew Effect), as a paper that has been cited once is more likely to be cited again.<sup>2-6</sup> Undue citations and references can falsely inflate a journal's impact factor (IF), which has broader implications for funding and policy decisions.<sup>6-8</sup>

Journals typically provide clear and detailed instructions to authors on how to format references, including citation styles and the use of hyperlinks. Authors should pay close attention to these guidelines. For example, the Journal of Chitwan Medical College (JCMC) offers [step-by-step guidance on hyperlinking references](#), following the uniform requirements outlined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). The [JCMC's revised author guidelines \(October 2024\)](#) provide detailed instructions on Vancouver citation and referencing styles, as well as how to hyperlink references. It can be summarised in 10-points, Figure 1.

Mistakes in citation and referencing are common. One of the most frequent errors is copying references from another article without verifying the original source. Manual cross-checking of in-text citations with the reference list (and vice versa) can help minimize errors. Copy-pasting and plagiarism are serious forms of

misconduct and must be avoided.<sup>9</sup> Ethical research writing and publication require giving proper credit to original authors by citing and referencing their work accurately.

Reference management software (RMS) such as Zotero and Mendeley can help organize references and minimize errors in citation and reference lists.<sup>10</sup> These tools also assist in storing literature, preparing reference lists, and formatting references to meet journal requirements. However, RMS may not account for specific modifications required by individual journals, so authors should manually clean, check, and hyperlink the final reference list.

A recent scoping review reported an overall error rate of 32.7% in references across various disciplines, with some reporting errors as high as 93.1%, including 22.5% major errors (listing posters as articles or citing 'ghost papers').<sup>11,12</sup> The ghost citations has doubled over the years, particularly in medicine disciplines, possibly due to delisted or discontinued journals.<sup>13</sup> More than 400 scientific papers indexed in Web of Science and Google Scholar have cited "phantom references" that never existed, highlighting issues of careless writing and inadequate quality control by journals.<sup>14</sup>

Referencing errors and phantom references can be minimized by hyperlinking all listed references in an article. Hyperlinks allow readers, reviewers, and editors to verify sources and access cited material with a single click. Many journals, including *JCMC* and *Journal of Patan Academy of Health Sciences (JPAHS)*, have adopted policies requiring authors to provide functional hyperlinks. These guidelines prioritize the use of DOIs, PubMed, Google Scholar, full-text links, and web links for non-journal references.<sup>2,15</sup> Three key considerations for URL links are stability, accessibility and functionality, Figure 2.

The use of unverifiable sources has been reported in up to 38% of residents in Canadian and American residency programs.<sup>16</sup> A recent study found that 10% of paediatric anaesthesia fellowship applications included unverifiable publications, with the type of medical school (public vs. private) being the only significant factor associated with publication misrepresentation.<sup>17</sup>

Common citation errors include missing or incorrect entries, such as author names, article titles, journal titles, publication years, volume or issue numbers, and page numbers. Authors must be aware of stylistic modifications and typographical errors. Thorough revision and formatting of manuscripts before submission are essential. Journals provide guidelines for citation and referencing and have mechanisms to verify accuracy.<sup>18,19</sup>

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in writing and publication has raised concerns about plagiarism, academic dishonesty, and privacy. Analysis of ChatGPT, for example, revealed limitations in contextual knowledge, information bias, and advanced cognitive abilities.<sup>20</sup> In a comparative study of large language models, DeepSeek (the least costly) outperformed Gemini, GPT, and Llama, except for Claude (the costliest).<sup>21-23</sup> Despite limitations, the adoption of AI in research, writing, and publication is growing rapidly.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, the accuracy of citations, references and hyperlinks is the responsibility of the authors. Proper referencing requires adherence to journal-specific formats for in-text citations and reference lists. All stakeholders—authors, readers, reviewers, and editors—must collaborate to ensure professionalism in research, writing, and publication. By following best practices, the academic community can uphold the accuracy and reliability of science.

**Ten points to consider for in-text citation and reference list with hyperlinks as per journal guideline, e.g. Author guidelines JCMC revised Oct 2024**

1. **Numbering and order:**  
References should be numbered consecutively in the order they appear in the text, tables, or figures.
2. **In-text citations:**
  - Cite references in the text, tables, and legends using Arabic numerals in superscript.
  - Place citation numbers after commas and periods but before colons and semicolons when they appear at the end of a sentence.
3. **Abstracts and unpublished work:**
  - Avoid referencing abstracts unless they are the only available source.
  - For papers accepted but not yet published, use the designation “in press” or “forthcoming”. Authors must obtain written permission to cite such papers and verify their acceptance for publication. Include the journal name and, if possible, the year and volume.
4. **Retracted articles:**
  - Avoid citing retracted articles.
5. **Author names and cultural considerations:**
  - Most Western citation systems format author names as “surname, initial(s)”. However, contributors from Asian countries (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) often write their surname first, followed by their given name in daily life. This order is reversed in Western scientific publication systems.
  - To respect cultural practices, provide the full name of authors as it appears in their respective society/culture in the author by-line below the manuscript title. Do not modify the name order to conform to Western conventions.
6. **Reference format:**
  - References should include:
    - Authors' surnames and initials.
    - Article title.
    - Journal name.
    - Year, volume, and inclusive page numbers.
7. **Number of authors:**
  - For references with up to six authors, list all authors' last names and initials.
  - For seven or more authors, list the first six authors followed by “et al.”.
8. **Author responsibility:**
  - Authors are responsible for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of their references and citations.
9. **Hyperlinks for verifiable sources:**
  - Provide functional hyperlinks for verifiable sources in the following order of preference:
    - DOI
    - PubMed
    - Google Scholar
    - Full Text (PDF, HTML, or scanned documents)
  - Do not use other link formats. Insert one space before and after the slash as a separator between hyperlinks, [Adding and hyperlinking URL, DOI, etc. to reference list](#), e.g.
    1. Shah JN, Maharjan SB, Paudyal S. Routine use of antibiotic prophylaxis in low-risk laparoscopic cholecystectomy is unnecessary: a randomized clinical trial. *Asian Journal of Surgery*. 2012 Oct 1;35(4):136-9. [[DOI](#) / [PubMed](#) / [Google Scholar](#) / [Full Text](#)]
    2. Jacso P. The impact of Eugene Garfield through the prism of Web of Science. 2010. [[Link](#)]
10. **Be cautious while using automatic referencing tools:**
  - Do not use the automatic referencing, footnotes, headers, or footers features of reference management software during submission.
  - Remove links to software auto-formatting, clean references manually according to the journal's style, and provide functional hyperlinks.

**Figure 1. Ten-points accurate in-text citation, referencing, and functional hyperlinks** (modified from: Journal of Chitwan Medical College JCMC, <https://jcmc.com.np/jcmc/index.php/jcmc/index>)

### Three key considerations for providing URL links

- 1. Stability:**  
Use stable URLs, such as DOIs (Digital Object Identifiers). A DOI (e.g., <https://www.doi.org/>) is a permanent, unique identifier assigned to each article. It is the most reliable form of digital identification and is less likely to break or change over time.
- 2. Accessibility:**  
Ensure that linked sources are accessible to all readers. Prefer open-access sources whenever possible to guarantee that readers can access the material without restrictions.
- 3. Functionality:**  
Before submitting the article, test all hyperlinks to confirm they are functional. Authors should click on each link to verify that it directs to the correct source. Broken or incorrect links undermine the credibility of the work.

**Figure 2. Three considerations while providing 'Links' to the URL for the references**

### Conclusion

Reference is the basis for verification of the scientific evidence, localise the source of information, and give due credit to the researcher. Accuracy of citations and references with functional hyperlinks to the source is crucial for maintaining the integrity and credibility of science. Accurate citation and referencing help for legitimacy and the credibility of authors, journals, and editors.

### Author contribution

Concept and design: ALL; Literature review: JNS, JS; Review: All; Final approval and accountability: All.

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