

Correspondence

Citation styles of references: a weakness of academic publishing

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Most people familiar with academic publishing have, at some point, wondered why there are so many citation styles. Perhaps it makes sense to have some variation in styles. In the humanities or law, writing often lends itself to long, explanatory footnote or endnote citations. Meanwhile, the sciences generally prefer author-date citations within the text so that the reader may easily see the age of the reference in a rapidly developing field of study. It should also be noted that differences between these two primary citation types may have larger implications regarding how research is communicated.^{1,2} However, regardless of how much importance one attributes to the types of citations, it is difficult to justify the existence of more than a few standard generic styles. Even if we generously assume that popular journals with limited space might need highly abbreviated references, there is still no need for more than a dozen styles in total.

Yet, all of the most popular options of citation management software have several thousand citation styles available. Yes, several thousand styles, with most of them being only subtly unique. While citation management software can quickly change between styles, the process always involves some human effort—sometimes quite a lot of effort to ensure accurate referencing.³ One wonders why formatting citations should be so complex that dedicated software is needed at all. More specifically, considering that research is increasingly global and transdisciplinary, why has not there been a stronger push for standardization?

Citation style reform would clearly benefit both authors and editors by saving time and tedium. Yet, despite regular calls to stop wasting so much time that could be better spent on research,⁴⁻⁶ we find that the problem has only increased with the number of journals. Have editors imbued their journal's citation style with some non-existent significance or is it merely inattention? Regardless of the reason, the costs of non-productive effort on academic pedantry are real and significant when tallied across the global academic community. Given the sea changes academic publishing has embraced in this century, now seems like an opportune time for citation style reform.

Universal acceptance of a few generic citation styles could start with a joint effort by the most prominent academic editorial professional organizations (e.g., the European Association of Science Editors, Council of Science Editors, and International Society of Managing and Technical Editors) to outline a system of simplified citation styles and advocate for its adoption. The promise of saved time and money easily justifies the effort.

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