

When is a citation just a frustration?

Librarians must stand up for the patron

by Claudia Rebaza

Who hasn't had individuals come to the reference desk with incomplete citations? When faculty members are trying to track down citations a colleague listed in his or her work, though, it begs the question, why would a scholarly author fail to give sufficient information for someone else to find the material in question? Does the author not realize that this is why citations exist?

Since no self-respecting cataloger or indexer would put out a record that lacked sufficient information for the item to be found, this problem was puzzling to me. Yet every day students, faculty, and even librarians are confused by citations they see. Many library skills/information literacy courses have to teach students to recognize the pertinent parts of a citation. Why? Four reasons are variance, poor style construction, a lack of information, and poor instruction in citation usage.

Variance among styles and poorly created styles often do not make obvious what you are looking at. Many librarians don't seem to think much about this because citation reading is a daily part of the job. But the faces or questions of our clientele make it obvious we've forgotten how confusing it can be. If an individual has to use three or four online or print indexes, he or she is likely to be looking at three different citation formats. Is there really a good reason for so many different types of citation style?

Then there's lack of information. Although one can argue that abbreviating journal names

and author names in print indexes saves paper and thus money, there is no excuse for these abbreviations to continue in online databases. After having to learn how to search and use the software, who then wants to use a book to spell out abbreviations before cross-checking sources in a catalog? In assignments where students must find all works a certain author has written, I must explain that a variety of abbreviations will have to be checked. Jane Smith may be listed as J. Smith, Jane Smith, Jane (unknown middle initial) Smith or J (initial) Smith. Of course, Jonathan Smith, Jeremy Smith, Jennifer Smith, Jason Smith, etc. may also be listed as J. Smith. Happy hunting!

Surely I am not the only librarian to have fielded calls from faculty members or students wanting to make sure they have the correct abbreviation for a particular journal (which, down the line, another librarian will probably be deciphering at the reader's end). The absurdity of this seems to lead authors to be less than scrupulous about their abbreviations. Confusion later results when the abbreviation used doesn't match the one in sources, such as *Gale's Periodical Title Abbreviations*, or we're not sure if the article needed is in the journal from the Netherlands, Great Britain, or the United States. I have no doubt we've incurred extra ILL costs for material that wasn't actually what the requestor intended.

You would expect that the people most responsible for maintaining the use of cita-

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tion styles are faculty (many of whom also set guidelines as editors). Some of them teach students to create bibliographies or require them as assignments. Yet citations are obviously a problem for many faculty, as well. I am responsible for maintaining an online faculty bibliography for my institution. It astounds me how many omissions (coauthors, page numbers, issue references) there are in submitted material. The citations, although obviously meant to be in the same style, may not be consistent over a mere six to eight citations. One faculty member was so fond of abbreviations, he abbreviated the name of his book, as well.

Although as librarians we have no control over what individual faculty choose to do, or what professional associations want to promote, it does seem to me we should

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Finally, a "technical support log" details contact with the company regarding a unit or part, including phone calls made or items returned and the company response and repair. This may seem like a lot of unnecessary detail, but the usefulness of such information cannot be overemphasized, particularly in terms of warranty agreements, obtaining parts, etc.

Assessing fees

We decided from the start that damaged laptops would be treated like other library materials and established a fine/fee structure accordingly. However, we also recognized early on that damage was not always the fault of a specific individual, but often accrued from user to user. For example, from the logs we would be aware that the network plug had a slight crack for Users #1-14. We would also know that it finally broke while being used by User #15 and that it was subsequently replaced. If User #16 then returns the laptop and the network plug is broken, we would know that User #16 is responsible. Although we have had charges disputed, the actual damaged piece combined with the detailed record provided by the assistants' log soon remove any doubt as to what happened and when.

Summary

Although maintaining detailed logs may seem to be a very staff- and time-intensive task, the importance of doing so cannot be overem-

phasized. Whether it's to handle a complaint about a fine that's been assessed, verify warranty eligibility, or determine which machines have had what problems, the logs have more than proved their usefulness. On several occasions, the focus on detail has also enabled the staff to spot problems that might not have been spotted or reported as quickly (e.g., network problems, touchpad driver error).

Equally important is the support staff. Although no previous computer experience is required to be selected to work at checking in a laptop, persistent attention to detail is a must. Without it, the whole procedure falls apart. Training staff to look for specific items, as well as recognize the unusual and how to record/describe it, is essential.

Looking ahead, we're anticipating that many of our existing problems will decrease considerably as incoming students will be given the option of purchasing their own preconfigured laptop computers. However, we also anticipate that this will create its own unique set of challenges. But, given what we've experienced so far, we're confident that we'll be able to effectively meet those challenges when they arise.

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Notes

1. For a summary of the (dis)advantages of circulating laptop computers, see our article: "Notebook Computers: To buy or not?" *American Libraries*, September 1997: 84. ■