The complete guide to referencing and avoiding plagiarism

A book review of Neville, C. (2016) *The complete guide to referencing and avoiding plagiarism.* **3rd edn. London: Open University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0-33-526202-1.**

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Colin Neville's third edition of *The complete guide to referencing and avoiding plagiarism* sees this useful and popular text extensively re-written and updated. Aimed at UK-based university students and staff alike, the essential structure of the book remains familiar to those who have made use of earlier editions (first published in 2007, with the second edition published in 2010). Neville makes extensive use of quizzes, quotes from students and academics, and presents concrete examples to bring the more abstract ideas to life, and these elements remain in this update. There are, however, some key differences with the previous incarnation.

The excellent early chapters providing the contextual background to referencing and citation practices have been retained and enhanced (for example, there are now nine good reasons to reference rather than six). The chapter on the 'what and when of referencing' has been split into two distinct chapters, one dealing with the 'what', the other with the 'when'. The content of these chapters has been largely reorganised and incorporates more visual representations of some of the key concepts, but otherwise remains fairly similar in content and tone.

Perhaps most significant are the addition of two entirely new chapters on: referencing and writing; and referencing in the digital world. The latter chapter is a short but useful addition, bringing in discussions of reference management software, text matching software (such as Turnitin), and how to evaluate and reference a website. These discussions are prefaced with a concise snapshot of how much has changed in recent years in terms of the digital

scholarly environment. The coverage of these quite wide-ranging areas is somewhat brief, and the fact that they are brought together under the 'digital world' banner makes the content feel just a little tacked-on. One would expect that any future editions would find the content of this particular chapter integrated into other parts of the text as the seeming novelty of the 'digital' fades.

The new chapter on referencing and writing is far more extensive and, certainly from my own perspective as a learning developer in higher education, far more significant. This addition has been integrated into the text to follow logically on from the chapter on plagiarism, which itself has been extensively revised, and the two can be seen to work together rather well.

Rather than commencing with a discussion of the various aspects of plagiarism as in the 2010 edition, the chapter on plagiarism now begins with a number of quizzes and case studies to test the reader's initial understanding of this rather contested and complex term; indeed, there is a new emphasis on the problematic nature of plagiarism as a concept, and although he doesn't put in quite the same terms, Neville highlights how the imperative to share, to borrow, to adapt (the proliferation of knowledge), works against the imperatives of ownership and acknowledgment (the containment of knowledge). Neville does well to present a more nuanced account of plagiarism in higher education than in the previous edition. Significantly, there is less of an emphasis here on international students as being particularly prone to plagiarism, viewing the 'cultural' issues involved more broadly to potentially apply to anyone new to UK higher education.

The new chapter on writing and referencing takes up where the discussion of 'avoiding plagiarism' in the previous chapter leaves off. This is a most welcome development, as plagiarism is now framed in the context of academic writing rather than a somewhat isolated phenomenon, and approaches to writing are more clearly presented as an appropriate means to address issues of both plagiarism and 'bad academic practice'. The chapter moves from a discussion of the practicalities of integrating citations into a text to a more in-depth discussion of academic writing, bringing in such topics as critical analysis and the idea of 'voice' in writing. Much of the content of this chapter was present in the previous edition, but was buried in a chapter in the middle of the book and consequently perhaps didn't clearly connect to the broader issues around academic practice; the new edition corrects the structural flaw. For me, this approaches the problem from the right

direction, emphasising how the development of writing practices can improve academic practice overall, as opposed to presenting 'plagiarism' as a pernicious problem in need of some kind of remedy. In the previous edition, this emphasis of the importance of writing practices was alluded to (for example, in the section in the plagiarism chapter on 'patchwork writing'), but the new chapter in the latest edition presents a far more thorough account.

The second and third sections of the text remain largely unchanged from their equivalent sections in the previous edition, although updated and revised throughout. Part two presents a detailed account of referencing styles. Neville's introduction to this section makes much of the proliferation and variety of styles, pointing out that students can find this confusing. One issue I have with Neville here is his recommendation that students put pressure on university managers to reduce the number of referencing styles they have to deal with (Ch.8, p.102). The proliferation of styles may well confuse the student, but is it the place of senior management to impose rules on the number of styles a university may employ? If we view the various referencing styles as concrete expressions of disciplinary discourse, then I wonder how such directives from university managers would go down with academic staff. Earlier in the text Neville writes: 'each referencing style… has its own standardised 'language': a way of presenting information and way of communicating with others in an academic community' (Ch 2, p.21). I have an issue with the use of the term 'standardised' here. I would characterise referencing styles as being more conventional and fluid than standardised, a term which implies that there is a 'correct' form that has been agreed to and codified somewhere. Clearly, in spite of numerous localised attempts at such codification, this is not the case; indeed, the very proliferation of localised 'versions' of the common referencing genres (name-date; numerical-footnote; sequential numbering) belies any attempt at a more universal standardisation. This tells us something about referencing, insofar as it represents a localised form of discipline affiliation which resists interference from without (notably, from institutions); it also tells us much about some disciplines, where the insistence on one particular variation is rigidly enforced by academics within that discipline (you know who you are).

Part three of the book is mostly given over to providing examples of references. No such listing could possibly be exhaustive, and Neville has clearly focused on what he has established are the most common genre of styles (that is, 'Harvard' and the numerical systems). The types of sources listed are as up to date as they probably could hope to be

– the presence here of Twitter and BuzzFeed aside, we can always find some new format to cite (wither Instagram?). Some may object that these social media are not particularly 'academic' sources anyway; but then neither, perhaps, is 'street art/graffiti' at first blush, but its presence here will satisfy those in art, design, media studies, semiotics and sociology. To that extent, Neville has made a good fist of selecting which sources to provide examples for, and the examples themselves are clearly presented. His treatment of (UK) government publications, long the bane of students of the social sciences, is particularly clear and concise.

A more serious objection is the utility of this section. If localised rules prevail (as acknowledged in chapter 8), what is the role of Neville's extensive (if not quite exhaustive) listing of sources – nearly a third of the entire book? One can envisage a student assiduously using Neville's text to reference an essay or report, only to be pulled up by their marker for some diacritical infraction of the locally prescribed referencing system. Perhaps Neville could have acknowledged such a possibility and offered a caveat to the student in his introduction to this section? In spite of this particular shortcoming, one can also envisage this section being utilised fruitfully by academic staff and librarians keen to update their own, local referencing guides; or being consulted by librarians seeking to answer that tricky 'How do I reference…' question.

A further minor criticism of the text overall is that the proliferation of numbered lists, section headings, subheadings and tables make the text somewhat difficult to navigate at times, although perhaps that is a criticism most likely to be made by a reviewer than the general reader.

Neville's revisions and structural reorganisation of the text represent a laudable improvement on the previous edition, which itself represented probably the most comprehensive and accessible discussion available on referencing and citation practices in UK higher education.

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