

## What is Common Knowledge?

By Marilyn K. Simon and Jim Goes

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Common knowledge is a bit ephemeral. Generally, it is considered information that the *average*, educated reader would likely accept as reliable without a thorough search or exhaustive research. Common knowledge is presumed to be shared by members of a specific *community* — an institution, a geographical region, a particular race, ethnic group, religion, industry, academic discipline, professional association, or other such classification.

Regardless of how *common* certain knowledge is considered, if an exact quotation or close paraphrasing of this knowledge is taken from a published source, then the statement must be credited to the original author and source to avoid plagiarism.

If there is any doubt about whether or not to cite a source, the formal nature of academic writing itself expects that the source be cited. It is preferable to err by assuming information is *not* commonly known than to make a false assumption that information is commonly known. The lack of a necessary citation may leave the reader with an impression that an author is sloppy with their scholarship or even plagiarizing a source. In short, when in doubt, cite the source.

As students start to create their proposal and literature reviews, they are often concerned and somewhat confused, about which statements need citing and which statements are considered common knowledge. The following little activity prepared by a group of our colleagues could help you determine the difference.

Take this quick quiz and check out the answers that follow.

*Which of the following statements would be considered common knowledge and does not require a citation?*

- a. A teacher's salary provides a relatively lower standard of living in the United States compared to teachers in Western European countries.
- b. Vision-impaired people have sharper hearing than fully sighted people.
- c. Small businesses (those with fewer than 100 workers) employ more Americans than businesses with more than 100 employees.
- d. The lifespan of Americans is longer than it was 100 years ago.
- e. Research shows that students who use personal computers tend to write better papers than students who write with longhand.

#### ANSWERS EXPLAINED

- a. A teacher's salary provides a relatively lower standard of living in the United States compared to teachers in Western European countries. **Not common knowledge. One would need to refer to specific data that compares salaries and standards of living on the two continents. A citation is needed.**
- b. Vision-impaired people have sharper hearing than fully sighted people. **While this is arguably conventional wisdom, research supporting it would be useful to demonstrate that the statement is not merely a myth or an unfounded assumption about sighted and unsighted people. A citation is recommended.**

- c. Small businesses (those with fewer than 100 workers) employ more Americans than businesses with more than 100 employees. **Not common knowledge and a debatable assertion. A citation is needed.**
- d. The lifespan of Americans is longer than it was 100 years ago. **Common knowledge. Still, the sentence should be followed up with specific data that reveals how much longer, which will require a citation.**
- e. Research shows that students who use personal computers tend to write better papers than students who write with longhand. **This may be true, but the author would have to cite several studies to support this assertion.**

For further information check out:

[http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai\\_common%20knowledge.html](http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai_common%20knowledge.html)

<http://www.uta.fi/FAST/PK6/REF/commknow.html>