



Has anybody else mentioned it?

Why should you cite your sources in an assignment? Partly it's to avoid plagiarizing other peoples' work – if your teachers find you have done this, you will probably get a failing grade. Partly it's to show that the sources that you have used are reliable. But partly it's to help people in the future who are interested in what you've written.

Let's say you have been set an assignment and your teacher has told that that "X is a very important person in that subject". What would you do? It makes sense to try to find something that X has written. But the only article your teacher knows about is five years old. Articles written by experts are sometimes later found to be wrong. Remember, experts used to believe that feeding children a high sugar diet will make them hyperactive – experts at US universities now say it doesn't. So progress may have made the information incorrect. Your teacher hasn't told you why this person is really important to the subject you are studying. What do you do now?

You could try using an electronic database to find an article by the same person that it is more recent. That would help you if there was another one listed in that database. But it isn't a perfect world and not all databases cover all articles in a subject area. The article may also not have been published in any magazine - information produced by academic experts often isn't. So just because you've not been able to find something in a database, doesn't mean nothing has been written.

There is a way to find out if the person's ideas are still considered correct, or if they have written anything recently. It's called a citation index.

A citation index is a way to find out who has based their work on what sources. There are details in it of all the sources that the author of a book or article has mentioned, in an article or book that he/she has written. So you will be able to find who X thinks is important.

That will help you find even older information. It doesn't help you find anything newer. Or does it? If the person that you were told about is so important in their field, wouldn't other people also have based their assignments on some of his/her conclusions?

A citation index works forwards too. In the entry for a particular article, the citation index also lists who has cited the article since it was written. You can use that list to find an article that was published recently. Let's say that X wrote the

original article 5 years ago. But if Y wrote an article last week, mentions X and says that his/her ideas are still correct, then you have your answer.

Once you've found a recent article by Y that says X is still important, you can also find out who thinks Y is important. After all, Y could be wrong as well...You can use a Citation Index to find this out too. Most citation indexes will also tell you how often a person has been mentioned by others. If Y has been mentioned 10 times in the last year, then Y will probably also be important (although you should still check a few of the articles to see whether the author is saying that Y is correct...).

There is an easy way to practice this. It's called Google Scholar (definitely not the same as Google, although you access it from the Google web site). Google Scholar is nicely arranged and easy to follow, so you can find who has written what, when and about whom. It mentions information that hasn't been published as well, so you will be able to practice finding articles that aren't in magazines. For instance, it mentions dissertations for post-graduate degrees - although you probably won't need one of these right now.

This all seems very complicated – and it is. Right now, you are learning a process. Once you have done it once or twice, it will be easy. Librarians get paid to understand this sort of process. So if you don't know what to do...

ASK THE LIBRARIAN.