

Online citation tools, Part I:
RefWorks, Microsoft Word References, and database citation tools

By Kathryn Klages

Anyone who has pored over the minutiae of an MLA *Works Cited* or an APA *References* list would likely appreciate a tool that automatically does the work for you. Indeed, there are many tools that promise to relieve you of citation stresses. Perhaps you've heard of **RefWorks**, the online research management tool? Or you've encountered the **References** feature of Microsoft Office Word 2007? Maybe you've been tempted by the **Cite this** feature in an EBSCO, ProQuest, or other research database? These citation solutions sound great, don't they? Too bad they don't deliver citations with an acceptable level of accuracy.

Students and researchers everywhere are anxious to outsource their citations to automated tools because it takes a lot of time and focus to play by citation rules. Unfortunately, RefWorks, Microsoft References, and databases don't play by the rules. Especially not the new set of rules that both MLA and APA issued in 2009*.

The most important measurement of a citation tool is the **accuracy** of its output. After all, who cares about the cost of the tool, how easy it is to



Publication manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th ed.
(second printing October 2009)
REF BF76.7.P83 2010

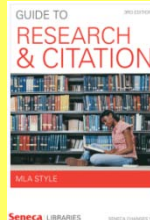


Seneca Libraries
Guide to Research & Citation: APA, 2nd ed.
(See insert with changes since the APA 6th edition)

Seneca Libraries APA Style Guide:
http://library.senecacollege.ca/Research_Help/Citing_Sources/apa_guide.html



Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed.
REF LB2369.G45 2009



Seneca Libraries
Guide to Research & Citation: MLA, 3rd ed.

Seneca Libraries MLA Style Guide:
http://library.senecacollege.ca/Research_Help/Citing_Sources/mla_guide.html

Seneca Libraries MLA Citation Tutorial:
<http://infoliteracy.senecac.on.ca/citation/mla>

navigate, or the endless features it boasts if it can't deliver an accurate list of references? The fact that RefWorks is extremely expensive, or that Microsoft References and database citation tools are freely included in their features, is irrelevant when one sees the plethora of MLA and APA errors that each of these tools turn out.

RefWorks is expensive because it has a lot of functions. In terms of references, it can grab information from websites and databases and transform the data into MLA, APA, and hundreds of other citations. Before you request that your library purchases RefWorks, know that RefWorks warns users that its citations need to be carefully reviewed and then edited to correct inevitable imperfections. Basically, you still need to know the trivial rules of a citation style because you're going to be manually changing RefWorks lists so that they meet the rules of your citation style. The amount of time it takes to first learn the RefWorks software, and then manually rework its citations using the rules of a citation style, probably has you second-guessing your request to the library.

Microsoft References and database citation tools are easier to use than RefWorks, and don't cost anything extra, but they still require users to know the rules of a citation style – because neither produces consistently accurate citations. Where these solutions are concerned, the phrase "you get what you pay for" rings true.

The rules of MLA and APA citation styles are plentiful and fastidious. It is difficult to know and abide by every tenet of formatting and style, parenthetical citations, and long lists of references. This is true for us humans and for the so-called automatic "solutions". The citation generators that we would love to adopt simply don't deliver acceptable results. Thus, in the battle of citations, the intellect of humankind triumphs over machines. Unfortunately, this is one battlefield that we would gladly surrender to technology. Alas, we must wait for worthier competitors to relieve us of our citation frustrations.

*MLA released the 7th edition of the *Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* in May 2009. APA released the 6th edition of the *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* in July 2009 (and was replaced with a second printing in October 2009).