

Keeping It Legit: Properly Citing & Sourcing MSU Extension Materials

The public, our stakeholders, and our administrators expect that the materials we all produce for Michigan State University Extension will be sound, scholarly, and evidence based. The primary way for you to demonstrate the research base of your work is to draw on high-quality information sources and cite all of your sources appropriately. Doing so lends legitimacy and credibility to your work, demonstrates its scholarship, and protects you from accusations of plagiarism.

Note that this document is intended primarily for MSU Extension authors working on educational materials. Authors writing MSU Extension News articles should look to the *MSU Extension Article Writing Toolkit* for advice (<https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/msu-extension-article-writing>).

Identifying Reputable Information Sources

As you research and write MSU Extension bulletins, fact sheets, webpages, books, webinars, online classes, and other materials, you will undoubtedly learn from and draw on previously published works. To clearly establish the scholarly credentials of MSU Extension publications, choose your sources carefully. Many online resources in particular are inaccurate, out of date, or even stolen from their original, legitimate publishers. The sources you choose to draw on may also have copyright and financial issues (more on that later).

The main consideration when deciding whether to cite any source – online or not – is its author’s credibility. Author credit may go to an individual or – particularly online – to a government agency, a private company, or another type of organization.

The websites of federal government agencies and most research universities are generally considered high-quality sources for many types of information (particularly statistics). Most federal agencies don’t charge permissions or licensing fees for use of their materials. This is in fact why many lesser quality websites simply republish government statistics. (**Note:** Just because a website address ends in .edu doesn’t automatically make it a credible source. Many public schools and universities allow their students and employees to create websites on their servers with little to no quality control.)

If you’re looking at information on a commercial site or one whose credentials seem questionable, look for its reference citations and if possible, follow those citations to the original sources, which may be more trustworthy. (Remember, though, that you must actually read a source in order to cite it.)

Other high-quality information sources include:

- Relevant professional associations, societies, councils, and organizations (for example, the Entomological Society of America, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the Council of Science Editors, the National Geographic Society, the National Association of Parliamentarians)
- State and local government agencies
- MSU Extension, the national Cooperative Extension System, and other state Extension services
- Refereed journals and scientific and scholarly books

Sources to use with caution include:

- Nonprofit organizations – Many nonprofits are reputable, but watch out for any underlying agendas and biases.
- Commercial websites – Be careful to assess such sites’ bias and scientific validity.
- Aggregator websites – These interdisciplinary websites pull and republish bits of information from many sources and are not valid sources to cite in themselves. Aggregators often pull information from

government websites and professional associations, so it often makes sense to track back to and cite the originating websites instead.

Good sources also identify where they got their information. Materials that don't cite any sources are generally considered neither high quality nor valid. One exception to this is agencies that are publishing data they collected themselves (such as when the U.S. Department of Labor publishes national jobs statistics its researchers have collected).

Information to Collect About Your Sources

Once you've found a high-quality resource that you wish to cite, be sure to keep a record of its:

- Author
- Title
- Publication date
- Volume, issue, and page numbers (if applicable)
- Publisher
- Resource type (such as periodical [journals, magazines, newspapers], books, reference books, book chapters, reports, web pages, social media posts, presentations at meetings and conferences, reviews, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, court rulings, attorney general opinions, and laws)
- URL or DOI (for online resources)

Use software tools such as BibMe, Citation Wizards, EndNote, EndNote Web, Mendeley, Papers2, and Zotero – and even plain old spreadsheets. This can take a great deal of the drudgery out of tracking and citing research sources. Many publishers also include suggested citations for articles appearing in their peer-reviewed journals.

Copyright Considerations

MSU Statement on Copyright

Copyright is a form of protection provided by the laws of the United States (title 17, U.S. Code) to the authors of "original works of authorship," including literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, and certain other intellectual works. Civil and criminal remedies may be imposed for violations of an author's copyright interests. Michigan State University is committed to obeying copyright law.

– Michigan State University, IT Services, Learning Design and Technology (2015)

After you have found and documented your sources, you are ready to use them in your own materials. Generally though, you want to be using your own words, creativity, and ideas, and citing third-party materials primarily to back you up.

You can assume that almost all information that you find is copyrighted. It does not need to have a copyright statement or symbol on it, and it doesn't matter whether it is free to view on the web. In the U.S., everything is copyrighted from the moment it is fixed in tangible form, and, as a general rule, copyright in the United States for materials published since 1978 lasts for the life of the author plus 70 years.

Copyrighted material is not free to use, even with citation. Writing your own material and citing copyrighted sources for facts, statistics, and information and quoting brief passages of copyrighted material are fine. Providing links to websites is always fine as well. It is not acceptable to:

- Take large or significant amounts of content from your sources without written permission from the copyright holder. (The definition of *significant* varies by type of work. It could be as little as a single line from a poem or song lyric.)
- Tell readers to follow links in your materials to an outside site and make copies of materials they find there. In such cases, the reader must seek permission from that site's copyright holder to make copies.

You may find materials whose copyright has expired or that were never copyrighted, that were considered in the public domain the moment they were published, or that were published under a Creative Commons or other license allowing reprinting or adaptation without seeking further permission. All such sources must be cited appropriately – failure to do so is plagiarism.

Materials that are free to use and copy without permission (but must still be cited!) include:

- Works published in the United States before 1924.
- Works created by federal employees and published by the U.S. government.
- Works for which the authors have designated a “Creative Commons Attribution Only” license (CC-BY, see <https://creativecommons.org/>) that allows reuse. But beware, some Creative Commons licenses do not allow derivatives (that is, adapting the licensed materials in your own work) or commercial use (such as selling works containing the licensed materials).
- Works that authors have donated to the public domain. These will be found on “public domain” specific websites and will be designated as such.

Citing Sources

In most cases, if you want to quote a brief passage from an outside source or from material you wrote for another purpose (sometimes referred to disparagingly as *self-plagiarism*) or to use larger portions of public domain or licensed material, just cite the source appropriately in the text and add it to your bibliography or list of references.

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)* explains when and to what level to cite sources:

Cite the work of those individuals whose ideas, theories, or research have directly influenced your work. They may provide key background information, support or dispute your thesis, or offer critical definitions and data. Citation of an article implies that you have personally read the cited work. In addition to crediting the ideas of others that you used to build your thesis, provide documentation for all facts and figures that are not common knowledge. (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 169)

Try to follow the rules for APA style. The most important thing is to supply your editor with all of the information as described in the section “Information to Collect About Your Sources.”

You can find examples of APA style references on websites such as:

- American Psychological Association Style Reference Examples: <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/references/examples>
- Michigan State University Libraries: <https://libguides.lib.msu.edu/c.php?g=96245&p=626239>
- Penn State University Libraries: <https://guides.libraries.psu.edu/apaquickguide/intext>
- Purdue OWL: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/in_text_citations_the_basics.html

Recent changes were made to the reference section of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* in the seventh edition. Read about those changes at <https://www.scribbr.com/apa-style/apa-seventh-edition-changes/>.

Seeking Permission to Reprint or Adapt

You may occasionally want to do more than simply quote a brief passage from third-party copyrighted materials. You may, for instance, want to reprint (include in your work with no changes and appropriate credit) or adapt (include in your work with changes and appropriate credit) some part of such a source. With few exceptions (listed earlier) you'll need to request permission to reprint or adapt the work from the copyright holder or a representative of the copyright holder. (This can be the author but is often the publisher or a third party.) It is not unusual for copyright holders to demand payment for granting permission.

When deciding whether you need to seek permission to reprint or adapt material, it is especially important to consider whether MSU Extension will be selling the material you're creating. Many copyright holders allow use of their material for noncommercial purposes only, which would mean you could only use it in materials distributed for free.

If you aren't sure whether you need to ask for permission, ask the MSU Libraries Office of Copyright (<https://lib.msu.edu/copyright/>) for advice. The MSU copyright librarian can't give legal advice but can help you decide whether you need to ask permission to use materials. You can reach the librarian at copyright@msu.edu.

Some copyright holders will deny or ignore requests for permission to use their material or will seek prohibitively high fees for such permission. This is one reason to carefully consider the likelihood of receiving (affordable) permission to use a particular source before wasting time basing your work on material that ultimately you won't be able to use.

In general, you can usually get permission to reprint or adapt all or part of one of the high-quality sources we mentioned earlier (those published by government, scholarly, or professional organizations), though you may have to pay a fee for the privilege. You'll probably have trouble getting permission to adapt or reprint material from commercial sources or aggregator websites, so the MSU copyright librarian recommends finding higher quality sources.

If the MSU Libraries Office of Copyright staff have advised you to seek permission from the copyright holder for the material you'd like to reprint or adapt, you have two choices for doing so:

- Contact the copyright holder directly and request the permission you need. Your request letter should include:
 - Your name, job title, and contact information
 - That the request is being made on behalf of MSU Extension, which is part of Michigan State University
 - The title, author, and publication date of the material you want to reprint or adapt
 - The specific part or page numbers of the work you want to reprint or adapt
 - The title of your work (if it's a tentative or working title, say so)
 - Who your audience is (for example, 4-H volunteers, Master Gardeners, adult attendees at a nutrition workshop, young people ages 5 to 9, classroom teachers, agriculture producers, local planning commission members)
 - Whether the work will be printed or published online or both
 - Whether the work will be offered for free or sold
 - The projected lifespan of the work
 - Examples of the work that will include the requested material, if possible (for example, a slide or handout)
 - A request for the specific language you should use to cite the material

- Ask the MSU Libraries Office of Copyright (<https://lib.msu.edu/copyright/resources/>) for their help in seeking permission. (Note that their services are free, but you or your MSU Extension institute or unit must pay any permissions fees imposed by the copyright holder.) The libraries' permissions specialist helps members of the MSU community with permissions requests. The email address is copyrightpermissions@lib.msu.edu.

Keep all correspondence regarding permissions involving you and the copyright holder during the permissions process. If the copyright holders request it, send them a copy of the finalized product that contains their material. If the copyright holders ask for payment, consult with your institute communications manager or institute director to determine next steps.

Obtaining permissions can take weeks or months, so it's a good idea to start the permissions process as soon as you decide you'd like to reprint or adapt third-party materials in your work.

A Note on Multimedia Permissions

Multimedia (audio, video, photographs, artwork) works can be especially difficult or expensive (or both) to obtain permission to reuse or adapt. For example, websites such as YouTube don't allow users to download audio or video, so you'll need to either link to the source or use YouTube's embeddable player.

Providing links to videos are usually okay. However, videos often disappear over time. Also, you need to be cautious if an ad is played before the video. In addition, you cannot download a video to your computer, store it, and put it in your document in that way.

If you do a simple web search for images to use in your work, most of the results will be illegal or prohibitively expensive to reuse. Instead, type your search term followed by "public domain images" or "creative commons images" into a search engine such as Google or DuckDuckGo. Left click on one of the resulting images that you're interested in using, and check its copyright and licensing information. Be sure to follow any rules that are given for crediting the image's photographer or copyright holder.

(Note: Google allows users to further refine image search results by clicking on "Tools" near the top of the results page, then on "Usage rights," and filtering for a specific type of license, such as "labeled for reuse with modification" or "labeled for noncommercial reuse.")

Licensing MSU Extension-Produced Materials

Occasionally someone from outside of MSU or MSU Extension requests permission to reprint or adapt materials produced by MSU Extension. If you receive such a request, first notify your MSU Extension institute or unit director so they know about the request. Then contact MSU Technologies (technologies.msu.edu), which handles the licensing of intellectual property produced by MSU. (Intellectual property involves first-party materials – in other words, something you've created yourself.) The people at MSU Technologies will give you advice on next steps regarding this request. All requests for permission are unique and steps may be different for each.

Note that MSU Extension News articles do not require permission to be reprinted because they are considered news.

References & Resources

References

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed., pp. 169–192). Washington, DC: Author.

Michigan State University, IT Services, Learning Design and Technology. (2015). MSU statement on copyright (para 1). *Copyright, Fair Use, Ownership and MSU Support* [web page]. Retrieved from learndat.tech.msu.edu/teach/copyright-fair-use-ownership

Resources

MSU Libraries Office of Copyright

<https://lib.msu.edu/copyright/>

For Copyright Advice:

Copyright Librarian, copyright@msu.edu

For Copyright Permissions Requests:

Permissions Specialist, copyrightpermissions@lib.msu.edu

MSU Technologies

Phone: 517-355-2186

Email: msut@msu.edu

Web: technologies.msu.edu

- From their website: “MSU Technologies is Michigan State University’s technology transfer and commercialization office. We facilitate the commercial development and public use of technologies and copyrightable materials developed by MSU faculty and staff. Our goal is to move MSU’s technologies from the lab to the marketplace to improve lives and communities locally, regionally, and around the world.”

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