APA Style Blog

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The Generic Reference: When?

by Jeff Hume-Pratuch

This post is part of an ongoing series about how references work. It began with an introduction to the generic APA Style reference and the author or “who” element. Upcoming posts will discuss “what” and “where,” as well as adding supplementary information in brackets and mixing and matching elements of example references.

How do you determine what to do with the date element of your reference list entry? For most references, it’s pretty straightforward: The date element is the year of publication, found on the copyright page (for books) or the first page of the article (for journals); put it in parentheses and follow with a period.

However, as we’ve seen in previous posts, the basic reference pattern can sometimes have a few unexpected twists.

Online Documents

Online material can be tricky to date properly. If the date is not apparent at the beginning of the document you’re citing, look at the end (e.g., APA Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations was finalized in 1990, so that’s the date to use).

But look out for a footer that says, “This page was last modified on [date].” This is not the date to use! It could be the date that the document was published, but it’s more likely to be the date it was put online or the date when the webmaster added code for a dancing Freud to the page.

Some sites place a copyright date for the website at the bottom of every page. Check a few pages on the site; if the identical statement appears on every page, it’s a site-wide footer, so that’s not the date you’re looking for either. (See "Zip, Zero, Zilch," below, for the best solution.)

Periodicals

Dates for magazines, newsletters, and newspapers should include “the year and the exact date of the publication (month or month and day),” according to the APA Publication Manual (6th ed., 6.28, p. 185). This means that the month should be given for monthlies, and the month and day for weeklies. If the periodical uses a season with the year, put the year, a comma, and the season in parentheses (2008, Early Spring).

Some journals seem to straddle the line between journal and magazine (e.g., Nature, Science, and The Lancet contain peer-reviewed scientific research but are published weekly). Which date format should you follow for articles from these publications? The determining factor is not
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whether they're called "journal" or "magazine" but how often they're published. In the case of these and other weeklies, use month, day, and year.

Unpublished Documents

An unpublished document is one that has not yet appeared in its final form. If the final version has been accepted by a publisher but has not yet been released, use “in press” as the date. If the document has been submitted but not accepted, or it is under review, give the year the work was produced. Do not list the journal name, but include the sentence "Manuscript submitted for publication" immediately after the title. If the document is still in draft form, use the year in which the draft you read was produced and include "Manuscript in preparation" as the final sentence (e.g., Example 59, pp. 211–212 of the Publication Manual).

The Double-Date Problem

If you are citing something that has been republished or reprinted, the entry in the reference list should use the date of the version you read. At the end, append the date of the original work or the source of the reprint (see Examples 21 and 26, pp. 203–204, for details on how to format the reference). In text, cite both dates: first the original version, then the version you read, separated by a slash (Freud, 1900/1953).

Sometimes publication of a multivolume work takes place over several years. In that case, use the span of years as the publication date both in the reference list and in text (Koch, 1953–1964).

The Odd Bunch

The sixth edition of the Publication Manual contains a new category for archival materials, such as letters, rare publications, manuscripts, photographs, cuneiform tablets, and apparatus (see 7.10, pp. 212–213). If they are dated, provide the date in parentheses (1935, February 4); if the date does not appear on the item but is known from other sources, put it in square brackets [1934]; if the date is not known but can be reliably estimated, use “ca.” (the abbreviation for circa) before the date in square brackets [ca. 2307 B.C.].

Zip, Zero, Zilch

What if, after reasonably exhaustive efforts, there’s no date to be found? Tell your readers that by entering “n.d.” (for “no date”) in parentheses where the date would otherwise go, and call it a day.

Posted by Jeff Hume-Pratuch at 10:20:02 AM in General APA Style, How-to, References, Style rules