



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: 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 Many online resources in particular are inaccurate, out of date, or even stolen from their original, legitimate publishers.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’ biases and scientific validity.
- Aggregator websites—These interdisciplinary websites pull and republish bits of information from many sources and are not themselves valid sources to cite. 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 periodicals [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 Online, Mendeley, Papers2, and Zotero—and even plain old spreadsheets—to organize your sources. These tools can take a great deal of the drudgery out of tracking and citing research sources.

Many publishers include suggested citations with the articles in their peer-reviewed journals. Note, though, that the formatting of the suggested citations may not match the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA; 7th edition, 2020), the style used for most MSU Extension educational material.

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)

Copyright Considerations

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 up your scholarship.

You should assume that almost all information that you find, in print and online, is copyrighted. The material does not need to have a copyright statement or symbol on it to be copyrighted, and whether it is free to view on the web makes no difference. In the U.S., everything is copyrighted from the moment it is fixed in tangible form, and the copyright term in the United States for materials published since 1978 generally lasts for the life of the author plus 70 years.

Copyrighted material is not free to use, even if you cite it properly. Writing your own material and citing copyrighted sources for facts, statistics, and information and quoting brief passages of copyrighted



material in your work are fine. Providing links to websites is always fine as well. However, 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 would need to check the outside site's terms of use or copyright page to find out whether they must seek permission from the site's copyright holder to make copies.

You may find materials whose copyright has expired, 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 1928 (as of 2023). Please check the Cornell University Library website at <https://guides.library.cornell.edu/copyright/publicdomain> (Hirtle, 2004–2023) for the current year's information.
- Works created by federal employees and published by the U.S. government.
- Works to which the authors have assigned a "Creative Commons" license. Often this material is called "open access," a growing trend especially in the scientific community. There are several types of Creative Commons licenses. The easiest to use are the "attribution only" licenses (CC-BY), which allow you to use the material as long as you cite it (<https://creativecommons.org/>). Some other Creative Commons licenses allow reuse only as long as the material you produce is free to the public as well, so you cannot use such materials in anything MSU Extension plans to sell. Some licenses do not allow derivatives (that is, adapting the licensed materials in your own work), so you would have to treat those as any other copyrighted work.

You can find Creative Commons licensed materials all over the web; for instance, if you do a search for "open access" material in any scholarly journal. Many websites also contain material that authors have assigned Creative Commons licenses to, such as Wikimedia Commons, Flickr, Bugwood.org, and other sharing sites. Read the information on each site to see which license has been applied and what you can do with the material. See the "A Note on Multimedia Permissions" section for tips on how to search for Creative Commons images using search engines.

- Works that authors have donated to the public domain. These will be found on "public domain" specific websites and will be designated as such. This is less common nowadays because authors who want to share their work tend to use Creative Commons licenses instead.

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. The works you cite provide key background information, support or dispute your thesis, or offer critical definitions and data. Cite only works that you have read and ideas that you have incorporated into your writing . . . In addition to crediting the ideas of others that you used to develop your thesis, provide documentation for all facts and figures that are not common knowledge. (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 253)



Do your best to follow the APA (7th ed., 2020) citation style, but perfection isn't mandatory. If you're not sure how to cite something, be sure to supply your editor with all the information about it that is listed in the "Information to Collect About Your Sources" section.

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/apa7th>
- 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

The reference section of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* changed significantly between the sixth and seventh editions. Streefkerk (2022) outlines the most significant changes (<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 will need to determine who the copyright holder is.

For regularly published materials, such as scholarly journals, magazines, and books, you will often find the publisher is the copyright holder. Many publishers contract with the Copyright Clearance Center, or CCC (<https://www.copyright.com/>), to manage permissions. Look up the title of the book or journal on the CCC website, then fill out their interactive form with information about how you would like to reprint,



adapt, or otherwise reuse the material. You will need to pay any permissions fees through the CCC website.

For other, less formally published works, such as websites, you will need to search the webpage for copyright holder information. (It may be on a page called “about us,” “terms of use,” or “copyright.”) Look for information about reuse or for an email address. 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 and the number of copies of the final product you think will be sold, downloaded, or otherwise distributed
- 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

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 works (audio, video, photographs, artwork) 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 is usually okay. However, online videos often disappear or are moved over time. Also, you need to be cautious about whether and what type of ad may be played before the video. YouTube, for example, restricts users to using their embeddable player because it forces ads to be played before it will play a video. If you are opposed to ads, you will not be able to view many of the videos available on YouTube. The service also does not allow users to download and store videos on a computer, or to insert videos into an electronic slide presentation, a web page, or any other document.

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.”)



You can also download and add photos from the MSU ANR Communications photo library (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/30579354@N07/>) or another website that offers royalty-free photos. (Again, be sure to check any such site's terms of use, copyright, photo credit, and fee information.) Common royalty-free photo sites include:

- Freemages (www.freeimages.com)
- Morguefile (www.morguefile.com)
- Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com/>)
- Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com/>)
- StockSnap (<https://stocksnap.io/>)
- Unsplash (<https://unsplash.com>)

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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 (<https://innovationcenter.msu.edu/tech-transfer-commercialization/>). (MSU Technologies is part of the MSU Innovation Center.) They handle 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 about the request. All requests for permission are unique and the steps for handling them may be unique, too.

Note that users do not need permission to reprint MSU Extension News articles because the articles contain news and information that the organization wants to share widely.

References & Resources

References

- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.).
- Hirtle, P. B. (2004–2023). *Copyright at Cornell Libraries: Copyright term and the public domain* [library guide]. Cornell University Library. <https://guides.library.cornell.edu/copyright/publicdomain>
- 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].
- Streefkerk, R. (2022). *APA 7th edition (2020). The 17 most notable changes*. Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.com/apa-style/apa-seventh-edition-changes/>

Resources

MSU Libraries Office of Copyright

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

For Copyright Advice:

Copyright Librarian, copyright@msu.edu

MSU Technologies

Phone: 517-355-2186

Email: msut@msu.edu

Web: <https://innovationcenter.msu.edu/tech-transfer-commercialization/>

- MSU Technologies is part of the MSU Innovation Center. From their website: “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.”



Acknowledgments

Authors: Patricia Adams and Rebecca McKee, Editors, MSU Extension; Susan Kendall, MSU Copyright Librarian

Thanks to: Amy Blair, former MSU Copyright Librarian, for her help with the content of the original 2015 version of this fact sheet.

This fact sheet was updated in 2023 and was produced for MSU Extension (www.extension.msu.edu) by the MSU Extension Educational Materials Team.

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