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TECHNOLOGY

Joy DuBose and Derek Marshall, Column Editors

COLUMN DESCRIPTION. The Technology column examines current and developing technology topics in libraries. The column's focus is creative uses of technology, introductions to new technologies, and critiques of current technologies, their uses, or their future. Readers interested in contributing ideas or writings to this column may contact column editor Joy Dubose.

Fast, free, and functional: An overview of freely-available online citation tools

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ABSTRACT

Freely-available citation tools are popular with students because of their speed and convenience. Some offer the ability to copy and paste a URL and some only allow for manual entry of citation elements. This article offers an overview of the current landscape of freely-available online citation tools and some of the positives and negatives of each. Almost all of the citations these tools create require some editing in order to comply with the style guidelines used in academic writing but they are generally a useful resource for students.

KEYWORDS

Citation generators;
citations; bibliographies;
bibliographic citations;
citation tools

Online citation generators are a tool that many students lean on as they build bibliographies for research papers or presentations. They require a relatively low learning curve while offering a much-needed shortcut to a process—formatting a Works Cited or References List—that many find stressful or tiresome. The citations these tools churn out are often rife with errors and require extra editing to adhere to the various citation style rules. Many require users to create a free account to unlock extra features or wade through short video advertisements before finalizing a citation.

This article offers an overview of the current landscape of online citation generator tools and a brief look at how accurate the tools are. Full bibliographic management tools like EndNote, RefWorks, Zotero, and Mendeley will not be covered. These long-established tools (some of which require an institutional or individual subscription) offer easy ways to save, store, and manage a lot of bibliographic citations for multiple research projects and are more appropriate for advanced users. For a good overview, see “Citation Management Tools: a Practical Guide for Librarians,” by Nancy A. Glassman (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). Though Glassman's title is now five years old with no update as of this writing, it is still useful for overviews of the more advanced

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tools. This article will only cover tools that can be used to generate one-off bibliographies without having to make an account and perhaps ones that librarians have not encountered before. Also covered will be longstanding freely-available Chegg citation tools like EasyBib, Citation Machine, and BibMe.

Method

Citations used to test out these various tools were taken directly from Miami University's subscription to the online MLA Handbook 9th edition, Appendix 2, "Citation Examples" and from subscription research databases. Citation data was manually entered for some tests and URLs for some items were used when available. Some of the tools covered let the user type in ISBNs, titles or DOI in order to generate citations. Data is pulled from open sources of information, like *CrossRef.org* or *WorldCat.org* in order to gather the right citation elements. Examples of those citations will be provided. The article is broken up into tools that only offer manual entry of citation elements and those that offer automatic generation of citations as well as manual entry.

Manual-entry only tools

These tools do not, as the category name implies, offer a way to automatically generate a citation by merely copying and pasting a website URL, ISBN, DOI (Digital Object Identifier), or item title. Manual entry assumes the user or student has the item being cited in front of them or on their screen and can find the bibliographic details to enter (or copy/paste) into a form. These tools are a good option for students relatively comfortable with the conventions of bibliographic citations. They tend to be freely offered from nonprofit entities so there is usually no advertising videos or distracting banner ads. As long as the user correctly types in the citation elements, these tools will usually generate accurate citations. The most prominent tools in this category are Citation Builder, created and run by librarians at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina; KnightCite, run by the Hekman Library at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cite Maker, run by the OSLIS (Oregon School Library Information System), a web portal run by the Oregon Association of School Libraries and the State Library of Oregon; Grammarly, the popular spelling and grammar plug-in; and NoodleTools Express.

Citation Builder [<https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/citationbuilder/>] offers options to cite books, chapters or essays from a book, websites, magazine articles, newspaper articles, and scholarly journal articles. It has the smallest number of possible citation items out of all of the tools tested. Styles offered include MLA 7th and 8th, APA 6th and 7th, Chicago (author-date), and CSE/CBE author-date (Council of Science/Biology Editors). It does not allow the user to compile a list of citations which can then be copied and pasted into a paper. Users will have to create each citation singly, copy and paste it to a word processing program, and then clear the fields to create another citation (Figure 1).

Citation Builder does an excellent job with standard sources like books and articles. Manually entering website citation elements requires editing after the fact as it defaults to a MM/DD/YYYY format for date of publication and date accessed. In MLA 9th edition, those elements are not required. This is a good tool for creating one or two citations.

Citation Builder

Choose what you want to cite: Choose the citation style:

digital

Contributor: First Name: MI: Last Name/Corp.: If there are more than 2 authors, the first name will be listed followed by "et al." You don't have to enter the rest of the authors.

Article Title:

Journal Title:

Volume Information

Volume: Issue:

Date Published: Year: Pages:

Database Title (optional):

DOI
ex: 10.12345/abc/defghi

Enter either the DOI (recommended) or the URL. If you enter both, the citation will default to DOI.

URL
ex: https://www.sample-website.com

Figure 1. Citation Builder's scholarly journal citation entry form.

KnightCite [<https://www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite/>] (named for the Calvin University mascot, the Knight) offers many options for citations beyond just books, scholarly articles, and newspaper articles. There are options for musical compositions, emails, published interviews, work in a series, sacred texts, encyclopedia articles, and dictionary entries to name a few. Users can create a free account to save and store citations and do not have to be affiliated with Calvin University. The saved citations in one's free KnightCite account can be edited or copied individually to a document, or the entire list can be exported in RTF (Rich Text Format) or Word (.DOC) format already in alphabetical order by author's name.

Citation styles offered include the up-to-date MLA 9th edition, APA 7th ed., and Chicago Style. Over 93 million citations have been generated with their tool as of this writing (Figure 2).

In the example above, the form also has options for URLs that are too long and an option to include a URL for the upper-level domain of the website, which adheres to the latest the MLA 9th edition guidelines.

Though the site design appears dated, KnightCite does an admirable job of creating accurate citations and has the added benefit of being up-to-date on MLA and APA Styles, unlike some of the other tools. Some quibbles were that the form for journal articles did not offer an option for articles in a journal with a season. When trying to cite a map found in a book, KnightCite did not place the author of the book in the

KnighCite now uses APA 7 and MLA 9.

Citation Styles
 MLA **APA** Chicago

Resource Types

- Book**
 - Basic Book
 - Encyclopedia
 - Dictionary
 - Preface/Foreword
 - Reference Work
 - Work in a Series
 - Republication
 - Sacred Text
- Anthology**
 - Author & Editor
 - Author & Translator
 - Organization & Editor
- Periodical**
 - Journal
 - Magazine
 - Newspaper
- Multimedia**
 - Art or Photograph
 - Cartoon
 - Advertisement
 - Map or Chart
 - Musical Composition
 - Sound Recording
 - Film or Video
- Communication**
 - Radio/TV Program
 - Lecture or Speech
 - Published Interview
 - Personal Interview
 - E-mail
- Online Only**
 - Entire Website
 - Web Page / Blog Post**

Citing a Web Page / Blog Post in MLA Format (Click for Help)

Number of Authors: 1

Author's Name:
 First: David M: Last: Cain

Does the website have a title? Yes

Web Site Title: Raptitude: Getting Better at Being Human

Number of Website Editors: 1

Website Editor's Name:
 First: M: Last:

Document's Title: 10 Things I Want to Communicate to the Human Spec

Publisher: sponsoring organization, e.g. PBS

Date Published or Modified: May 4 Year: 2023

Retrieval Information:
 Is the URL too long to cite? Yes

List the path of links one could take to find the page:
 *Place a Semicolon (;) between each path item

Include URL? Yes

Homepage: https://www.raptitude.com/
 *Homepage URL is typically the domain name of the URL (ex. http://www.calvin.edu/)

Was the resource found using a database? No

Include Date of Access? No (e.g. for a wiki, self-published work, or a webpage that is likely to change overtime)

Submit Reset

Figure 2. KnightCite form for entering bibliographic elements for a website.

correct place, nor did the input box have enough characters to accommodate a lengthy map title. Those quibbles aside, KnightCite does have some nicely thought-out features. The form options for journal articles dynamically change if the user indicates the item was found in a subscription database. When selecting that option, KnightCite then correctly puts both containers (the journal article and the database name) in italics, in accordance with MLA 9th edition guidelines.

Citation Maker [<https://secondary.oslis.org/mla-secondary>] from the Oregon School Library Information System has been updated to the 9th edition of MLA Style and APA 7th edition. It presents a typical range of citation source types like book, newspaper article, video recording, personal interview and more but is more limited in number than other tools mentioned in that it does not offer a way to cite legal research (laws, court cases, statutes), conference papers, manuscripts, to name a few. One helpful feature when citing a book is that the tool prompts you to specify whether you are citing an entire book, a chapter, a poem, essay and so on (Figure 3).

Entering journal article information was relatively easy and the form dynamically changes if one indicates the item was retrieved from a library subscription database. Each time a citation is added, it is added to a list already in alphabetical order. Users can delete incorrect entries and do them over quite easily. Citation Maker did an excellent job at recreating citations for examples manually entered from the MLA Handbook, 9th edition.

NoodleTools Express [<https://my.noodletools.com/web2.0/express.html>] is another manual-entry only tool that does a decent job at creating citations. It is the free part of a research management suite of products marketed toward schools, colleges, and universities and includes tools for note taking, collaboration with others, tutoring, and

Author: (How to credit authors and contributors)

(List the person or group primarily responsible for creating the source. This is usually an author but may be an editor or an organization.)

How many?

Last: , First: Middle or Initial:

Title: (How to capitalize and punctuate titles)

I am citing a/an:

Contributors: (How to credit authors and contributors)

(Always credit any essential contributors if your research focuses on their contribution.)

Are there any contributors to your project?

Version (Edition, if there is one, including e-books):

(Ex: 2nd ed., Rev. ed., Expanded ed., Updated ed., King James Version, Audiobook ed., E-book ed.)
(For an e-book or audiobook that also has an edition statement, include both. Ex: 3rd ed., e-book ed.)

Figure 3. OSLIS Cite Maker Book entry form. The drop-down menu shows specific types of book content user may cite.

Citing **From**

Chapter or Section

Book

Contributors

First name Middle name Last name or group Suffix

* Title of book or multivolume work: Citing a reprint in an anthology?

Title of volume in multivolume set (if individually titled) Volume Total # volumes

Publisher Year

Publication city (if needed)

Edition

Series name Series number

Figure 4. NoodleTools Express manual entry form for book citation elements. It has an option to select Chapter or section for parts of books.

evaluating sources. It first prompts the user to select their style, and only MLA, APA, and Chicago are offered. Then the user must select what they are citing from a fairly extensive list of possible sources. As one types in citation elements, small yellow boxes helpfully pop-up if one is not capitalizing item titles or incorrectly using all capital letters. NoodleTools does not save citations in a temporary list as you go like many of the other tools discussed here. It is truly meant for saving one citation. NoodleTools offers

The screenshot displays the Grammarly.com citation tool interface. On the left, the 'Citation Information' section includes radio buttons for 'Citation Style' (APA, **MLA**, Chicago), a 'Source' dropdown menu set to 'Book', and a 'Contributor' section with fields for 'First Name' (Rozelle), 'Middle Initial', 'Last Name' (Lee), and 'Suffix'. Below this are options for 'Add Contributor', 'Full Citation', and 'In-text Citation'. The 'Full Citation' section contains fields for 'Title *' (Zombiescapes and Phantom Zones: Ecocriticism and the Liminal from Invisible Man to The Walking Dead), 'Publisher *' (U of Alabama P), and 'Year *' (2016). On the right, the 'MLA Full Citation Preview' box shows the resulting citation: 'Lee, Rozelle. *Zombiescapes and Phantom Zones: Ecocriticism and the Liminal from Invisible Man to The Walking Dead*. U of Alabama P, 2016.' with a 'Copy Citation' button below it.

Figure 5. Grammarly.com manual entry of a book item. The example shown was taken from the MLA handbook’s list of examples. Grammarly provide a preview of the citation output at right.

an “MLA Lite” option that allows you to save citations but requires one to create a free account (Figure 4).

Grammarly—[<https://www.grammarly.com/citations>]

The popular spelling and grammar helper Grammarly has its own rudimentary citation tool. It offers manual-entry of citation elements and 13 different types of sources. The usual types of sources are included as options but there are also items like films, documentaries, Wikipedia, and textbooks. The default style is APA, but MLA and Chicago Style are also offered. It is not noted which editions of those styles are used. After entering citation elements in one style, flipping over to a different style erases what you have already done (Figure 5).

Automatic citation generator tools

The automatic generation tools let the user copy/paste a URL, DOI, ISBN, PMID (PubMed Identifier), or arXiv ID (used for open access “preprints” or postprints of scientific papers). These tools compare the unique number against an often unknown database (though some use CrossRef) to generate a list of matches from which the user must correctly select the item they are trying to cite. These tools do a decent job when using book titles or ISBNs. The user must still pick whether they are citing the hard-cover or paperback edition, the e-book, or the correct numerical edition. Most all of the automatic citation generators also have a manual entry option, though it is not often prominently displayed.

Searching for journal article titles can be hit-or-miss. Some very recent articles do not come up in search results, nor do articles published 50-60 years ago. There is little reason to think that users would create citations this way, especially if they use the built-in citation tools in subscription databases or even Google Scholar. When pasting the URL of a website, the tools generally require the user to add additional citation elements it could not find, like author, Publisher/Sponsor, date accessed, and more, before the citation is finalized. Most all of the tools alphabetize citations for you as you add each item and offer options to edit the citation afterwards. Tools in this category include Chegg's citation tools (EasyBib, Citation Machine and others); and Cite Fast, zoterobib.

Chegg's citation tools

EasyBib is one of the tools owned now by Chegg, the textbook rental company. It and Citation Machine (which is now included in the Purdue OWL website), BibMe.com, and CiteThis For Me, used to be standalone tools but as of around five years ago were bought out by Chegg. All of these tools have a nearly identical look and feel. Of the Chegg series of tools, only CiteThisForMe.com does not make the user watch a short video before completing a citation list.

BibMe.org lets one create one citation and but requires the user to watch a 15-s video about Chegg's plagiarism checker services before completing the second one. A nice feature of Chegg's tools is that they warn students of missing citation elements when using the automatic citing feature. Book search by title or ISBN is powered by open WorldCat, so there is some confidence in the origin of the bibliographic information.

If one can ignore the flashing advertisements, Citation Machine did an excellent job at this manual entry of a journal article in MLA Style. Notably, it correctly italicized a journal title while the same citation copied from the built-in tool in a subscription database did not. Below is Citation Machine MLA Style output from searching using journal article title:

Example of citation from Citation Machine

Shao, Yu, et al. "Identifying Multiple Influence Sources in Social Networks Based on Latent Space Mapping." *Information Sciences*, vol. 635, July 2023, pp. 375-397, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ins.2023.01.127>.

Here is the same citation in APA Style copied/pasted from an EBSCOhost database. The journal title, *Information Sciences*, should be italicized to conform to style guidelines.

Example of citation from EBSCOhost database

Shao, Yu, et al. "Identifying Multiple Influence Sources in Social Networks Based on Latent Space Mapping." *Information Sciences*, vol. 635, July 2023, pp. 375-97. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ins.2023.01.127>.

There are some annoying features of the various Chegg tools. When trying to switch to APA Style on EasyBib, the user is prompted to create a free account. When using Citation Machine, sometimes the user cannot even finalize the citation output because the requisite buttons are obscured by advertisements, though this may depend on the browser used and/or its display/view settings.

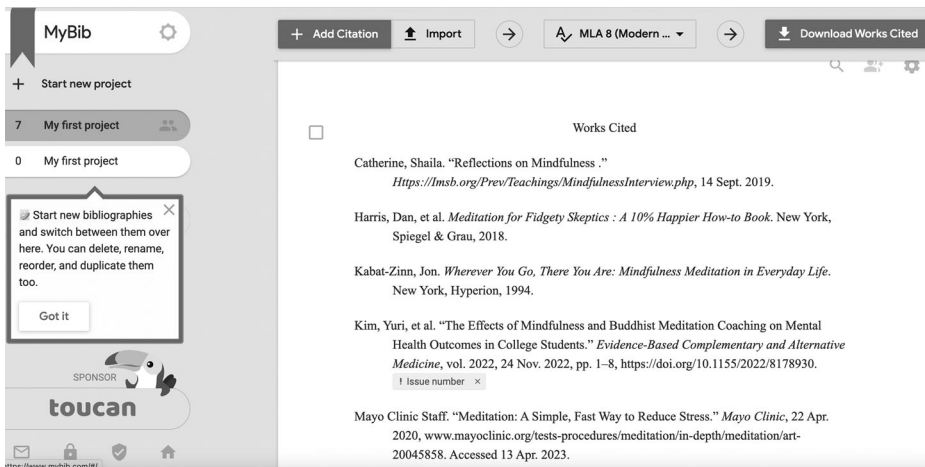


Figure 6. A list of citations generated in MyBib.com. Both manual entry of citation elements and automatic generation of citations using a URL or DOI were used. Citations were not edited. There are buttons to change citation style, download the list of citations, import citations, and create a new citation.

MyBib [MyBib.com]

A relative newcomer to the free citation generator lineup is MyBib.com, owned by toucan, a language-learning company. Users can create one-off bibliographies but to save citations they must create a free account. A Chrome extension is also available. Citation styles offered include MLA 8th, APA 7th, Chicago, as well as many journal-specific. It allows one to paste in URL's or manually enter citation information. Each citation created is put in a temporary page already sorted in alphabetical order. The user can copy and paste the citations, or download them in Word format, Google Drive, email, print, get a link to the citations [<https://www.mybib.com/b/qp3mRk>] or save them to Mendely, Zotero, and BibTex (Figure 6).

Some extra features in MyBib included labeling a New York Times article as credible when adding it to a bibliography; the ability to change the font and font size of a bibliography, adding annotations, and the ability to output a bibliography to a printer, email, Zotero, RefWorks, a Google Doc or Word Doc. It did a commendable job of creating correct MLA-style citations. One newer wrinkle in MLA Style that none of the tools get right is the abbreviation of university press titles with "UP." such as "Oxford UP".

Citefast [<https://www.citefast.com/>]

Citefast bills itself as a "fast and free citation generator." (Citefast, n.d.). It was built in 2008 by Alan Cole, a computer science student at an unstated university, according to their FAQ. It defaults to APA 6th edition, but also offers MLA 8th, and Chicago 16th ed. Webpage, book, and journal are the first options presented but it also offers newspaper articles, dissertations/theses, blog posts, interviews, web images and more. It offers free accounts to store your citations otherwise you lose your work when the browser

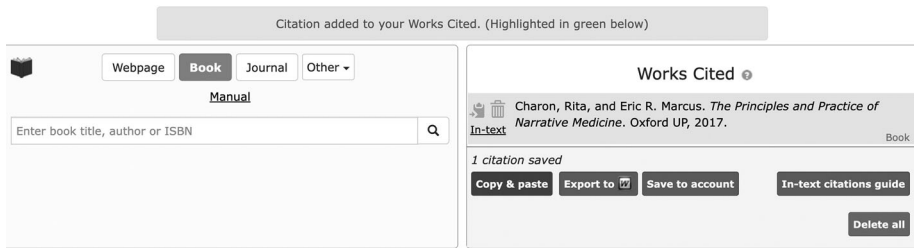


Figure 7. Screenshot of Citefast.com tool. The unedited citation on the right was created by typing in the title and selecting the best possible match. It is a book with three authors and so the author should be formatted as charon, rita, et al. in order to follow MLA style guidelines.

Works Cited

MLA 9th edition English Times New Roman 12



Figure 8. Scribbr.com citation in MLA style created by entering DOI. The author’s name is incorrect. It should be Chan, Evans. The screenshot also shows options in Scribbr to edit the citation, export it directly to Microsoft Word, or Copy to clipboard.

window is closed. Title searches for items pulls data from an unknown source and presents the user with possible matches. Like some of the Chegg tools, Citefast has distracting banner advertisements. As one builds a list of citations, they are automatically put in alphabetical order and can be copied/pasted into an existing document, or exported to a new MS Word document. A button labeled “In-text citations guide” shows the user the correct way to input in-text citations (Figure 7).

Scribbr [<https://www.scribbr.com/citation/generator/>]

Scribbr is an online writing, proofreading, editing platform based in Europe that also offers a citation generator tool. Styles offered include MLA 8th and 9th editions, APA 6th and 7th editions, Chicago Author-Date and Chicago Full notes and bibliography, Harvard Deakin, IEEE and some German-affiliated styles. Users can create a free account to save citations for longer than 30 days. Its default mode is for the user to enter an item by its title, URL, DOI, ISBN or keywords. The option to enter citation

Bibliography

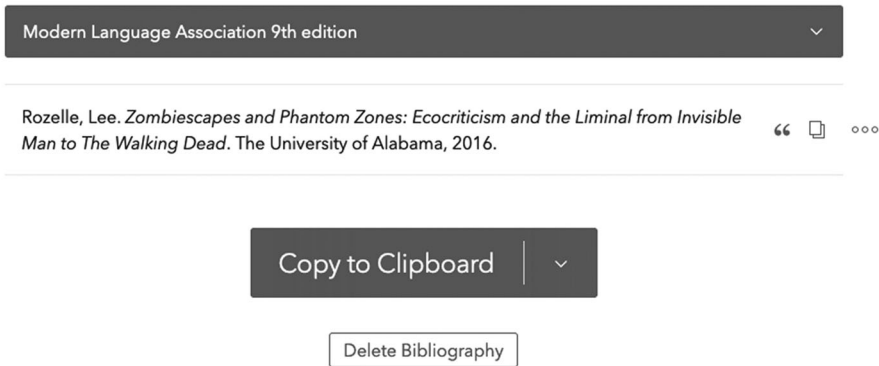


Figure 9. Zoterobib book citation generated by typing in the title and selecting it from a list. The only minor error is that the publisher should be formatted as “U of Alabama P” to align with both MLA 9th edition style rules. The title is correctly italicized.

elements manually is featured as a link below and to the right of the search box, making it difficult to notice. Over 30 kinds of items can be cited (Figure 8).

Zoterobib—<https://zib.org>

This is the author’s favorite of the free citation tools available. It is not advertising-supported and its clean interface is easy-to-use. It also generates fairly accurate citations. As its name implies, it is run by the same organization—the Corporation for Digital Scholarship—responsible for the creation and maintenance of the powerful Zotero tool. On the main landing page, the user is prompted to provide a URL, ISBN, DOI, PMID, ArXiv ID, or title in order to start generating citations, or one can use the manual entry option. As one builds a list of citations in your chosen style, one can edit each citation or create an in-text citation by inputting the page number of the quote or paraphrased section. It offers some unique source types including emails, instant messages, and datasets, preprints, standards, and forum posts.

Citation output can be downloaded as a list to RTF (Rich Text Format), in HTML format, downloaded to RIS or BibTex, or saved to full Zotero tool. Citation styles shown first are MLA 9th, APA 7th, Chicago 17th ed., Turabian 8th ed., plus over 10,000 other styles, many of them for specific academic journals (Figure 9).

Conclusion and recommendation

The freely-available citation generator tools offer a relatively easy way to make one-off bibliographies. The automatic generation of citations using ISBN, DOI and so on require the end user to check the output against style guidelines and manually correct

any formatting errors or incomplete information. Creating a free account with these tools can be a good way to store citations to use later when an assignment gets closer to its due date. The tools generally produce citations correctly though small details are sometimes incorrect, like the exact author's names and the exact publisher's name. Students will have to check with their instructor about how closely their citations should align with the required style. Students should also be aware of what version of the style guidelines are required. A citation in MLA 8th edition might be acceptable though the 9th edition is more current. Librarians working with students who are relying on citation tools can be assured that the output is generally good and that minor editing after-the-fact will result in a correctly formatted References or Works Cited list.

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- Oregon School Library Information System. (n.d.). *Citation maker*. <https://secondary.oslis.org/mla-secondary>
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