



THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF FREE CITATION TOOLS

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Ask any group of college students during an information literacy session if they have used a free citation generator tool like EasyBib, BibMe, or Citation Machine and hands will shoot up into the air, sometimes enthusiastically. This reflects either the anxiety students feel about citing sources or the relative ease of use those tools purportedly offer. There is evidence that students prefer them to creating citations “from scratch.” A 2012 survey of more than 100,000 undergraduates by EDUCAUSE found that 80% of them used web-based citation tools (Dahlstrom 21). There is no reason to assume that the percentage has decreased since 2012.

Indeed, one of the purported benefits of the tools is the ability to generate automatically citations in APA, MLA, or Chicago Style by entering an ISBN number, article title, or book title. Usually, the tools also usually allow the user to enter bibliographic information manually in order to create citations, and sometimes can edit citations within the tool itself (instead of editing in a word processing program).

This article provides an overview of the current landscape of free

citation tools intended for “one-off” bibliographies or smaller research projects, and avoids the too-numerous citation generator tools that are part of a suite of services to college students that include so-called “essay mills” or “term paper mills.” Previous articles have examined more robust citation tools installed on the user’s computer, like EndNote, Zotero (Fronk), and RefWorks, or have compared those tools to the built-in citation tools available from database vendors (Homol). Homol also compared the accuracy of the citations created by those tools and found, not surprisingly, that none of them consistently generated error-free citations to electronic journal articles (556). The same holds true for most citation generator tools. To date, there is a dearth of articles on free citation generator tools, their use, and any analysis of their usage. In the course of my research, I did discover Citavi, a Windows-based downloadable reference manager available in both free and site-licensed versions. The free version will handle up to 100 references saved either to the cloud or to a local hard drive. Created by a software company in Switzerland, Citavi is similar to RefWorks and EndNote in sophistication, but is not easily available to Mac users.

The following are short summaries of some of the citation tools considered “freely available” (i.e., not requiring an individual subscription or institutional site license). I have divided the tools into those that only offer manual entry of citation elements, and those that offer both manual entry and auto-complete options. An appendix at the end of the article offers a quick rundown of each tool. I have spot-checked the tools for accuracy after entering citation elements manually and when using the auto-complete feature, by using examples of APA Style citations from the Purdue University OWL website at: <https://bit.ly/2uyze7X>

Manual Entry Only

Libraries, schools, and other educational institutions try to position themselves as the go-to guides for students trying to create citations by creating LibGuides and other online instructional materials. Calvin College (Michigan), North Carolina State University (NCSU), and the Oregon School Library Information System (OSLIS) have gone one step further by developing their own citation tools. NCSU’s Citation Builder only does books, chapters, or essays in books, magazine articles, news articles, scholarly articles, and websites. Users begin by selecting their source from a dropdown menu prefaced by “I want to cite a {Source type} in Citation Style (APA, MLA 6, MLA 7, Chicago Author-date, and CSE/CBE – Council of Science Editors/Council of Biology Editors).” It is a clean, easy-to-use interface.

KnightCite, from Calvin College in Michigan, (the Knight is the school’s mascot) offers current MLA, APA, and Chicago Style citations. What makes it different from the other manual entry tools here is the longer number of types of sources for which you can create citations, including maps, advertisements, sacred texts, cartoons, and more. Users can make a free account, which allows saving citations to the cloud, editing previously saved citations, sorting them alphabetically, and exporting items to an MS Word or RTF document.

OSLIS offers only APA and MLA Style output. Aside from the usual types of sources, you can also make citations for social media, video recordings, audio recordings, image or artwork or artifact, live performance or event, personal interview, and email message. The site walks you through the steps by making you select your citation style, then the type of item you are citing, and then provides data entry boxes that change depending on context. (If you select a newspaper article, the data entry boxes appear, offering title, city of publication, and so on.) OSLIS does not offer free account creation; once you close your browser window, your work is lost. Fortunately, users can sort their output alphabetically, then download citations into a Word document or upload to a Google document.

NoodleTools Express is another accurate, easy-to-use citation tool that only offers manual entry of bibliographic citations elements. It is the stripped-down version of a citation tool that is part of NoodleTools’ “online research management platform” available as an institutional site license. The “Express” version offers Chicago, APA, and MLA Style citations (though it is not clear if the 8th edition of MLA is supported). Because there is no option to save a group of citations locally or to the cloud, to work on later, this tool works best for one-off bibliographies. It also offers a nice variety of citation types, including podcasts, radio programs, digital files, and many more. One downside is that if you are creating more than one

citation, you must copy and paste the citation into a word processor each time; Express does not save each successive citation as you do your work like ZoteroBib, mentioned below.

All four of these tools, Citation Builder, Knight Cite, OSLIS, and NoodleTools Express, generated accurate citations when inputting the citation elements manually (results were compared to examples on the Purdue Owl website). As long as the end user can correctly identify bibliographic citation elements and input them correctly, these are all excellent tools for creating accurate citations.

Manual Entry OR Auto-Complete Citation Tools

Other free citation tools offer both manual entry and purportedly an “auto-complete” feature. Usually, the latter function is intended either to get bibliographic data from an outside source for the purposes of citation formatting, or to create a website citation automatically by copying/pasting the URL.

The Chegg.com “family” of citation tools includes EasyBib, BibMe, Citation Machine, and Cite This For Me. These are perhaps the free citation tools with which students

are most familiar, and at one time all were run independently. A merger took place over several years, and began when the provider of EasyBib, Imagine Easy Solutions, Inc., acquired BibMe, Citation Machine, and Cite This For Me. In 2016, Chegg.com acquired Imagine Easy Solutions. Now, all four citation tools are branded with “A Chegg Service” next to the company logo. Chegg started out as a textbook rental company but has since gobbled up companies in the digital education industry (Sternlicht 1). Chegg now has a footprint in higher education support services like tutoring, writing help, finding scholarships, finding internships and assistance with choosing a college.

Because the same company owns all of the services, all have the same basic issues: copious advertisements, even videos that auto-play when trying to view your citations, and numerous errors in citation output (spacing, punctuation, and so on). However, all of these tools allow you to create a free account to store your citations in the cloud, and

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC CITATION
ELEMENTS AND INPUT
THEM CORRECTLY, THESE
ARE ALL EXCELLENT TOOLS
FOR CREATING ACCURATE
CITATIONS..**

provide the option to purchase a subscription for \$9.95 a month that offers more storage and other features. Notably, EasyBib offers only MLA Style citations for free, but charges the monthly fee to get other citation styles. The auto-fill option for articles from magazines or newspapers does not work well. I tried recent articles from the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* in Citation Machine, and the underlying search engine did not find the correct articles. Entering an ISBN or book title in all of the Chegg.com citation tools pulled the bibliographic data from the open version of WorldCat.org (or attempted to do so). Book title searches for items that have multiple editions or have been reprinted, require that the student discern which of the options presented is correct. For instance, the results for Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* generated a long list of matches, including essays of literary criticism, textbook versions, and adaptations. An ISBN search of a specific volume narrows the results greatly.

As long as students know how to edit citations from these tools after the fact, the Chegg citation tools are acceptable replacements for the manual entry type of citation tools. They helpfully present several steps or stages before the citation output is created, including a step where the end user can edit or add citation elements. This puts the onus on students to get their citations correct.

Citefast, another tool that offers both manual entry and auto-fill options, has notably less distracting advertisements than the other tools. A decent number of items can be cited: webpages, books, journals, lecture notes, blogs, web images, newspapers, and online videos, among others. Users can save bibliographies to the cloud by setting up a free account. Citefast offers the 7th and 8th edition of MLA StyleGuide and style guides for APA and Chicago as well. If you create citations in one style, you can switch them to another one with just a click. Free account creation also lets you store bibliographies online. Manual entry citations were accurate but the attempts at auto-fill suffered the same issues as the other tools. Book searches by title or ISBN pulled bibliographic data from WorldCat.org like the Chegg citation tools. Citefast is a decent option for those who find advertisements distracting and are willing to enter citation elements manually.

WorksCited4U is similar to the Chegg citation tools, as it has both manual entry and auto-complete options—and a lot of distracting advertisements. Created by four U.S. college students, its only advantage is that users can create free accounts to store citations. Trying to insert magazine article citation elements manually was frustrating; the wrong data entry boxes were offered. The auto-complete option rarely identified the correct magazine articles or books by entering the title. Furthermore, many of the citation types I created had incorrect punctuation. Alas, the About Us page proclaims, “Say goodbye to those formatting and punctuation woes for good!” One of the citation types offered is a “dissertation abstract” [sic]. As of this writing, the company blog has not been updated since 2016 and the company’s Twitter account has been suspended, so it is unclear how much longer WorksCited4U will be around. As usual, WorksCited4U is recommended only if the user is willing to edit citations after the fact.

An excellent option in the free citation tool environment is ZoteroBib, a web-based version of the popular, downloadable Zotero citation software. ZoteroBib does not allow free account creation in order to store or save citations, but each citation created is saved on

screen until the user is ready to copy/paste into another program. To that end, users can export their work to another browser tab, or to RTF, BibTex, RIS, or to the full Zotero application. It does auto-save to the browser history, and a free browser extension for Chrome, Firefox and Safari allows saving items with a click. ZoteroBib is one of the few free tools of its kind that does not have copious, distracting advertisements. It offers all of the major citation styles, plus over 9,000 other styles. Students can auto-generate citations using ISBN, DOI (Digital Object Identifier), PMID (used in the PubMed database), arXiv ID number (used for electronic pre-prints of scientific papers) and even by title. This latter option, typing in the title of an item, seems to work only for more recently published items. Older items generate a list of “close” matches. It is not clear how ZoteroBib attempts to find citations based on a title entry, but its manual entry does an excellent job of correctly formatting citation elements. Entering citation elements into ZoteroBib from an example on the Purdue University OWL website generated a citation spot-on with the example.

Summary/Recommendations:

Some excellent options exist for students wanting to make a quick bibliography if they have been trained to identify bibliographic citation elements, and can correctly enter them into an entry web form. However, manual entry of citation elements does not guarantee correct citation format. There can still be issues with capitalization, punctuation, and spacing, even IF the citation elements are entered correctly. Users need to edit their citations by comparing the output to the official style pages or the Purdue University OWL. When recommending a citation generator tool to students, first determine if they are doing a quick bibliography or a longer, more involved research project. For larger projects, it may be worth their time to learn to use the freely available Zotero or Citavi, or any available site-licensed bibliographic management tool (RefWorks, EndNote, EndNoteWeb, or NoodleTools) in order to organize and manage their citations. Be sure that the free citation tool offers the citation style they are required to use, and that it has the required version of the citation style. For example, some of the tools reviewed here offer the 8th edition of MLA, but not the 7th.

It is worth mentioning that many of the free citation tools above (including the Chegg.com “family” of tools and ZoteroBib) allow users to paste in an URL to generate citations to websites. All of them do a less-than-stellar job, due to the nature of websites and the inherent difficulty the tools have of discerning the bibliographic information of web documents. In my testing, the citation output requires a lot of editing, and addition of citation elements that were skipped (like authors or organizations). One might even question whether students should be using these tools to do website citations. Nonetheless, students have many options for creating their citations, whether for quick bibliographies or larger research projects. It behooves all librarians to be familiar with the tools available.

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LINKS TO CITATION TOOLS:

- Citavi - <https://www.citavi.com/en>
 NCSU Citation Builder - <https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/citationbuilder/>
 KnightCite - <https://www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite/>
 OSLIS - <https://secondary.oslis.org/cite-sources>
 NoodleTools Express - <http://my.noodletools.com/noodlebib/express.php>

APPENDIX

	Account Creation? ⁱ	Advertising Supported	Manual Entry?	Auto-complete?	3 major citation styles? ⁱⁱ	Export options?
BibMe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Word, Google Doc, others
Citation Machine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Word, Google Doc, others
Citefast	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Word, copy/paste to clipboard
CiteThisFor Me	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Word, Google Doc, others
EasyBib	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	MLA only ⁱⁱⁱ	Word, Google Doc, others
KnightCite	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Word, RTF
NCSU Citation Builder	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Copy/paste from browser
NoodleTools Express	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Copy/paste from browser
OSLIS	No	No	Yes	No	APA and MLA only	Word, Google Doc

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