

APPENDIX B

“Common” Knowledge

Using recommended Web sites to find out what is common when a student isn't yet a member of an academic field can prove challenging. On the St. John's Web site, Miguel Roig states:

one must give credit to those whose ideas and facts we are using. One general exception to this principle occurs when the ideas we are discussing represent 'common knowledge'. If the material we are discussing is assumed to be known by the readership, then one need not cite its origin. Suppose you are an American student writing a paper on the history of the United States for a college course and in your paper, you mention the fact that George Washington was the first president of the United States and that the Declaration of Independence was signed in the year 1776. Must you provide a citation for that pair of facts? Most likely not, as these are facts commonly known by average American college and high school students. The general expectation is that 'everybody knows that'. However, suppose that in the same paper the student must identify the 23rd president and his running mate and the main platform under which they were running for office, plus the year they both assumed power. Should that be considered common knowledge? The answer is probably no. It is doubtful that the average American, would know those facts. (<http://facpub.stjohns.edu/~roigm/plagiarism/Plagiarism%20and%20common.html>)

Another site notes that:

Facts can be viewed as common knowledge if they are generally known and widely established. The term 'common knowledge' implies that the audience and the author have agreed on certain facts, so accepted common knowledge might vary depending on your audience. For example, dates referring to well-known events can be viewed as common knowledge. So, when referring to

December 7, 1941 as the date the Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor, you would not need to cite a source for your information—if Americans comprise your target audience. (<http://cai.ucdavis.edu/plagiarism.html>)

Given these examples, how are students who may know the twenty-third president of the United States, who are Civil War buffs, or who are just precocious determine whether they must cite: does it hang on whether they know the information or whether they believe their audience knows? Are they writing for a general audience, the teacher, or their classmates? For initiates into a discipline, it can seem as if nearly everything should be cited, especially because almost all sources that discuss common knowledge point out, “When in doubt, cite” (and are we safe in not citing this quotation?) This becomes even more interesting when faculty members acknowledge their students’ varied backgrounds. For example: “If you are writing a paper about western Canada and you refer to Edmonton and Calgary as the two major cities in Alberta, you would not have to cite a source. This is generally known” (<http://www.athabascau.ca/studserv/inhonesty.htm#comkno>).

While this Canadian Web site considers Canadian geography to be common knowledge, a student in a US classroom would have to cite this information. Yet, a Finnish student receives this advice:

stating that ‘Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States’ would not require a citation; even if most Americans could not tell you where Lincoln was in the numerical order (not to mention non-Americans, many of whom would not even know a person named Lincoln had been a President). Again, this is knowledge that is easily found, is not changeable, and thus can be assumed to be ‘common.’ (<http://www.uta.fi/FAST/PK6/REF/commknow.html>)

This appears to offer a good guideline for common knowledge—it “is easily found, is not changeable.” Yet, on the Internet, much information is repeated and is thus easily found

and authoritatively cited. How are students to know what is always common in another country but new to them? The key might be in audience: in what country or culture is the writer; what knowledge would most people have? But how can students always know this?

Determining whether or not to cite for a specific audience is especially problematic when definitions of common knowledge seem to depend not on some overarching agreed-upon set of terms but rather on the status of being the student:

Of course, in every professional field, experts consider some ideas ‘common knowledge,’ but remember that you’re not a professional (yet). In fact, you’re just learning about those concepts in the course you’re taking, so the material you are reading may not yet be ‘common knowledge’ to you. In order to decide if the material you want to use in your paper constitutes ‘common knowledge,’ you may find it helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I know this information before I took this course?
- Did this information/idea come from my own brain?

If you answer ‘no’ to either or both of these questions, then the information is not ‘common knowledge’ to you. In these cases, you need to cite your source(s) and indicate where you first learned this bit of what may be ‘common knowledge’ in the field.

(www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/plagiarism.html)

Such “guidance” actually contradicts the idea that there is “common knowledge”—something “everyone or the average person knows.” Instead, any knowledge must be quoted if the instructor thinks that the student couldn’t have known information prior to a course. This contributes to a deficit version of plagiarizing, one that sees knowledge as property students can’t own until they have gone through appropriate, approved processes (i.e., “my class”), and it puts students in the position of guessing what faculty members will think they don’t know. It also assumes that all students come to class as blank slates—the same blank slates. In trying to clarify this, students might find:

Common knowledge: facts that can be found in numerous places and are likely to be known by a lot of people.

Example: John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States in 1960.

This is generally known information. You do not need to document this fact.

However, you must document facts that are not generally known and ideas that interpret facts.

Example: According to the American Family Leave Coalition's new book, *Family Issues and Congress*, President Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation (6).

The idea that "Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation" is not a fact but an *interpretation*; consequently, you need to cite your source. (www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml#terms)

It is not unlikely that students would read that "Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation" in more than one source. However, if students are new to the discipline, how do they know that this statement is an interpretation when such conclusions might well be seen as fact—as common knowledge? This is especially possible if students read that, "Common knowledge is information that is widely available. If you saw the same fact repeated in most of your sources, and if your reader is likely to already know this fact, it is probably common knowledge" (<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/plagiarism.html>).

The University of Wisconsin, Madison's approach places the discussion on a useful track when it highlights a special section under common knowledge:

Field-specific common knowledge is 'common' only within a particular field or specialty. It may include facts, theories, or methods that are familiar to readers within that discipline. For instance, you may not need to cite a reference to Piaget's developmental stages in a paper for an education class or give a source for your description of a commonly used method in a biology report, but you must be

sure that this information is so widely known within that field that it will be shared by your readers. (http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html)

This also, though subtly, reminds students of their status in the academy, but it gives no hints as to how they should determine whether something is widely known in a field. Again, they may read an idea in several sources and conclude that it is common knowledge, only to be told that they have plagiarized an opinion. The University of Oregon's document attempts to remedy this problem:

Hairston and Ruszkiewicz (1993) define common knowledge as “facts, dates, events, information, and concepts that belong generally to an educated public. No individual owns the facts about history, physics, social behavior, geography, current events, popular culture, and so on.” (614)

Therefore, common knowledge does not need to be cited—the difficulty is knowing when something is, in fact, widely known. An added twist is that each discipline has its own common knowledge, for example, psychologists will be familiar with the work of Jean Piaget so you do not need to establish who he was. If you are not sure whether or not something is common knowledge, ask your instructor. (www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/plagiarism.html)

If faculty wish to help students become independent, responsible researchers/writers, they certainly will encourage such questions. However, realistically, how many students are going to ask their instructors about common knowledge every time they aren't sure? And how many lines of students or e-mailed questions can instructors accommodate?