

Why are there so many Different Citation Styles?

Different citation styles have developed over time to address the specific needs of different disciplines. Here are some of the most common reasons different disciplines use the four main style guides:

Modern Language Association (MLA): This style is widely used in the humanities, since the style is well-suited to literature and archival sources. The humanities emphasize the author of a work, so the citation style cites the author's name in the text, where it is easily identifiable.

American Psychological Association (APA): This style is widely used in the social sciences, since the style is well-suited to quantitative studies and analysis. The social sciences emphasize both the author and the date of a work, so the citation style includes both in the text.

Chicago Manual of Style: This style is actually 2 separate styles, one with footnotes or endnotes, and one with the author-date system. Chicago is intended to meet the needs of most disciplines

Notes and Bibliography: Widely used in humanities, and particularly history, since it easily accommodates a wide variety of sources, including more esoteric sources. Additionally, historians put a great deal of emphasis on the source of information, so it is beneficial to cite the full source on the same page where it is referenced in the text.

Author-Date: Typically used in the sciences, this style is best suited for scholarly articles and books. The citations are formatted similarly to those used in the Notes & Bibliography version of Chicago, with modifications suited to the needs of the sciences (see APA above).

Turabian: This style is actually a modification of the Chicago Manual of Style, intended for use with student work. As with Chicago, it includes both a notes-bibliography and an author-date style.

How they're similar:

- MLA, APA, and both Chicago and Turabian Author-Date all utilize brief in-text citations in conjunction with a list of expanded citation information. In all four styles, the in-text citation typically, but not always, appears in parentheses.
- APA and Chicago and Turabian Author-Date all require reference to the date a source was published in the in-text citation.
- All of the major citation styles require a bibliographic list of citation information. Depending on the style guide used, this may be called "Works Cited," "References," or "Bibliography."

Why can't we just have one citation style?

We continue to use different citation styles for two main reasons: disciplinary differences and tradition. Researchers in different disciplines cite different types of resources, and different disciplines place higher value on different criteria. Over time, organizations like the American Psychological Association created style guides that were meant to help standardize the format of citations within their discipline, focused on the types of works most often used in their field. The oldest of these style guides have been in use for decades, and been adopted by researchers in similar disciplines. This means that there are large communities of researchers who have traditionally used one citation style for many years, and they are reluctant to adopt a new style that may not be well-suited to their citation needs.