

SEZ WHO??

A commentary on research and references as they apply to Original Articles

by Diane Dare

Research is defined as the study or investigation of a topic outside your own experience and knowledge, its purpose being to discover or verify information presented in an article. A reference is a mention or citation of the source of information or specific details such as facts, statistics, quotations, etc. that support and lend authenticity to an article.

When is research needed? When your article is more than opinion or based on your own experience. If you say a certain mineral is hard, that's opinion. But if you say it has a hardness of 6.5 on the Mohs scale, how do you know this? Writing "I use cerium oxide to polish..." is personal experience. But if you write "Cerium oxide is recommended for polishing ..." - WHO recommends it? Research to include lesser-known or unusual details shows effort was made to create an 'original' article. However, do not sacrifice accuracy for originality. Stating quartz has a hardness of 13 may be original, but it is not accurate (and would lose contest points.)

When do you need references? Anytime you give specific facts. If you found a source that DID say quartz has a hardness of 13, your readers (and the judges) need to know that source! Facts that are widely available need not be documented, but information that is not well known or commonly accepted must be. Your reference list gives publication information for sources you cited and/or consulted.

Just because something has been published or is on the Internet does not make it true or accurate. Is the source reliable? Anyone can establish a website and present theories, rumors, hearsay, wild speculation or even lies as fact. Newspaper 'corrections/clarifications' are often buried while magazine ones may appear several months later. Even books may have an 'Errata' page. Use more than one source to confirm information.

When you mention a source in your article, be sure to fully credit it in your reference list. To which book or article are you referring if you say "In June Zeitner's book..." or "As Bob Jones wrote..."? They did write more than one!

The publication date of your source is important. Some classic works never lose their usefulness but be alert for out-of-date information in such sources. From a ten-year-old field guide, the physical properties of a mineral would still be helpful but a collecting site may now be a shopping mall. What is the 'current' issue of a magazine? In September my mailman delivered magazines with issue months ranging from August to November. You may have used a March issue while doing research in April, written the article in May, and it was published in June (and a contest judge is reading it the following February!). Give the month and year of any magazine reference.

Plagiarism is presenting another person's words or ideas as if they are your own. It is theft. Changing someone else's words from present tense to past tense or substituting a few synonyms does not make an article 'original.' As an Articles judge, I check

reference lists for copyright violations and to verify information. One author had cited several sources, none of which were in my home library, so I used a different one - and found he had copied word-for-word from that one! Then there was the junior author who found an article on a website, printed it out and submitted it as her own work - her 'work' was faithfully copying it onto another piece of paper.

The "three R's" for an original article - research, write, and credit references. Sez who? Me, Diane Dare.

(References: Not needed as this is personal opinion and/or experience.)