

Citing Material Found on the Web

Traditionally, the general standard for a citation's being adequate was that a reader could readily find the source document and the specific portion of that document that is cited—e.g., by showing page numbers in a book that is identified by author, title, publisher and date. In “pre-Web” times, this meant that someone could go to a comprehensive library and find the cited material, as well as read the context in which the cited material had been written. However, in our “Web era,” very often the “source document” is a website. Such a page could contain information unique to that site (text, diagrams, etc.) or could include content that in turn came from another source, such as another site, a book, a speech or a journal article.

Applying the traditional standard, a reader should be able to go to the website where you found the material and readily find the cited material on that website. If the material is original with respect to that website (as opposed to the website's citing the source from which they took it), the appropriate citation would be as shown in this example:

¹ Kasper, Jade. “Jobs humors ‘D’ crowd, talks iTunes 4.9, future products.” May 23, 2005. <http://www.appleinsider.com/article.php?id=1087> [accessed Dec. 7. 2006]

A citation is not adequate if the reader has to enter key words from the citation into Google and then see where Google says the cited material appears. For example, neither of the following citations (taken from an RSB team paper) is adequate:

⁸ “Apple head attacks record firms.” BBC News Online. September, 2005
The “one-step” path to the source of this article is <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4265434.stm>. However, the Google search found other sites with the article's title. For example, a Google search indicates that the article appears at http://go.webassistant.com/wa/cont_pub_view_item.lhtml?-Token.Id=21440&-Token.cld=100071&-Nothing. But that website cites the full news.bbc.co.uk link above as the “original location” of the article. Thus, the BBC site should be cited, not the go.webassistant.com site where you went first. Also, the author needs to be identified, if he or she was named on the BBC website (in this case, Steve Jobs). Finally, if available, the exact date should appear in the citation—Sept. 20, 2005, along with the date the site was accessed.

¹⁶ IFPI – The recording industry 2006 – Piracy Report – Protecting the creativity in music
The information is accurate (though the document name should be in quotes), but incomplete. It requires a Google search to find the site. This is a 24-page document, so the page number(s) from which the material was taken should be included. (The author of the article was not identified in the original document.) If not well-known (like NPR), the meaning of the acronym should be included: International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI). The date the document was written should also be shown. (In this case, it appeared on the last page of the article—January 2006.) The footnote should then have included the URL, http://www.fimi.it/documenti/Piracy_Report_2006.pdf, and the date that the site was accessed.

Not sure whether a citation is adequate? No one has ever been criticized for including too much in a citation; so err on the side of including excessive, rather than inadequate, information. (Also check the Harvard Business School “Citation Guide.”)