



What is Common Knowledge?

You will often hear your instructors say that you do not need to cite any pieces of information which are considered “common knowledge.” Generally, this term is taken to refer to information which the average reader would be familiar with and accept as reliable without having to do much further research. Unfortunately, there will not always be a consensus on who is the average reader, or what information ought to fall under this umbrella. As such, you must always be cautious when deciding whether a familiar piece of information requires citation.

So how do we determine if the information is considered common knowledge?

Well, you could ask yourself a few questions.

Who is my audience, and what are their areas of expertise?

Usually, what is considered common knowledge is dependent on the reader. Some pieces of information are used frequently in certain fields and rarely in others.

Another question you should ask is: Am I likely to be questioned on either the legitimacy or source of my information?

If you are using a piece of information which seems even remotely contentious, your audience will likely question you on its validity. In which case, you must ensure that they can verify what you have said by providing a citation. The same can be said for information which appears surprising or confusing.

As students, you should also ask, is my information discussed frequently in non-academic circles?

If the information that you are referring to would be as familiar to the clerk at your local grocery store as it would be to your professor, it is likely common knowledge. Common facts may be taught in primary school, topical in the news, or basic realities of life; so long as you can expect most people to know them, they are common. Do note, however, that not all information which is widely assumed is also correct.

Lastly, consider what is culturally-specific common knowledge.



If you grew up surrounded by a specific culture or language, you may possess a common knowledge that is understood by people who share those experiences, but not by those who don't. This is a good example of when it may be worth reaching out to your instructor or peers about whether your culturally-specific common knowledge is something that they share or are aware of, and whether they think more description is needed.

Should you ever find yourself in doubt when answering any of these questions, it would be best to simply provide a citation. While you may face serious penalties for failing to cite an important piece of information, you will almost never be penalized for over-citation.

In the last part of this video, let's go over some examples of common knowledge and what is not.

To reiterate, any information which is factual, non-controversial, and either widely known to most members of your community, or can easily be verified by them is likely considered common knowledge. For example:

Canada is part of North America and there is a maple leaf on the Canadian flag

Or 0 degrees Celsius is the temperature at which water begins to freeze.

If your work is solely intended for an audience with specialized knowledge on its subject matter, the bounds of what is considered common knowledge may be broader. In such a case, citations for standard principles, laws, or concepts would be redundant, as you could reasonably assume that your audience would understand what you were referring to. For instance:

Say's Law – or the Law of Markets – would be familiar to most economists

And Ohm's Law of Electricity would be familiar to most engineers

While it is not always easy to determine whether something *is* common knowledge, some types of information definitively *do not* fall under this umbrella. In general, if a piece of information is either not yet widely accepted, or refers to highly specific data which you could not reasonably expect your audience to remember, it is *not*



common knowledge. Accordingly, such information requires citation. Examples of this include:

- Information from datasets constructed by you or others
- Statistics obtained from institutions like Statistics Canada or the United Nation