

Bibliographical referencing: the sting in the tail

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Abstract

Bibliographical referencing is a technique which new undergraduate and other students returning to higher education can find difficult. This problem can recur throughout a student's career as they meet new types of material, but it still impacts on their overall assessment. Traditional handouts give guidance on the basics, but referencing generates plenty of enquiries to library desks. This project set out to offer a 24/7 online service to support students in their referencing and to aid library staff in dealing with referencing enquiries, by means of a decision-tree tool with search backup. The project was successful, widely adopted by academics at Portsmouth and is now a permanent service migrated to two minority referencing styles.

Keywords: bibliographic referencing; online support service; case study.

Rationale

The Library at the University of Portsmouth (UoP) has for some years been providing advice on referencing across the institution, either at enquiry desks or through subject/faculty librarians. In addition, annually updated short guides to Vancouver and Harvard (APA variant) were produced by the Library and distributed to new students in their thousands. This sufficed for a time but in the last three or four years the number of

referencing enquiries being fielded by library staff has increased tremendously in response to a number of trends common across UK Higher Education, mainly issues concerning the increased possibilities for intentional and unintentional plagiarism that the Web affords. Enquiries about referencing new (usually Web-based) sources of information which were not covered by the traditional referencing conventions – developed in a predominantly paper-based era – were also growing and staff were having to give ‘best guess’ solutions. Locally, new courses were much more concerned with electronic and visual media than more traditional courses and Law courses were being developed which had their own referencing conventions. The introduction of penalties for poor referencing meant that students were seeking advice from Library staff, from academic tutors and from the University’s Academic Skills Unit and there was a worry about consistency of advice.

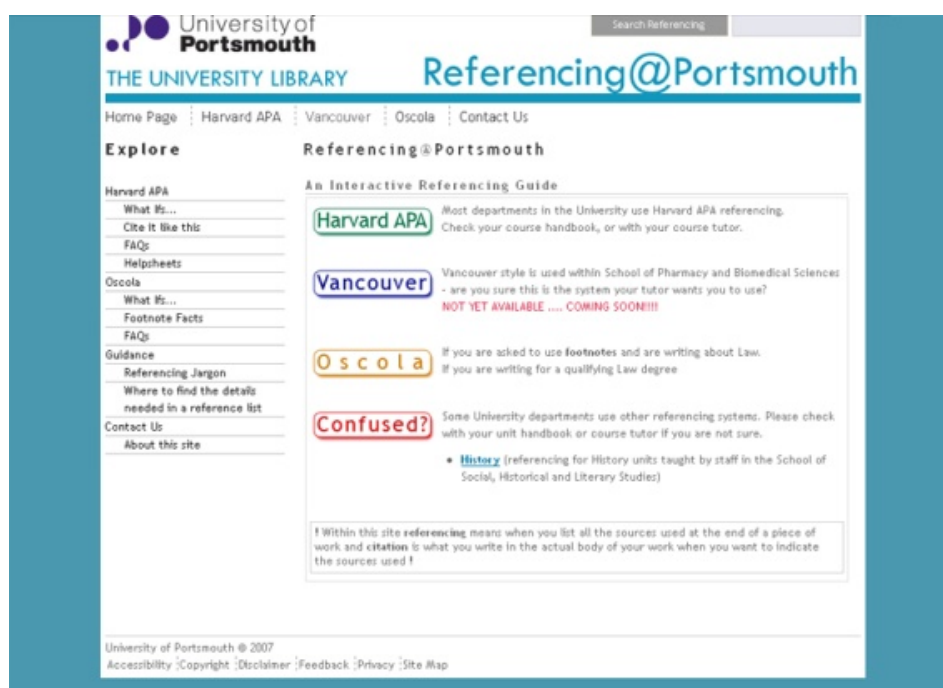
Our first response was to collect our replies to referencing queries as a way of saving staff time and ensuring consistency both of advice and interpretation of the conventions. Originally it was intended that these be mounted as FAQs on the Library website but it was soon realised that something more consistent, coherent and easily accessible was possible, so a group of interested people was convened and a bid for funding submitted and accepted by the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The core team comprised a technical support person and some librarians closely involved with subject support work. In addition in the early days there were some academics, a member of the Academic Skills unit and a librarian from a local FE college who acted as a reference group when advice was needed.

As the core team had extensive experience of the problems students were facing when trying to reference, they had a more practical and student-centred, rather than theoretical, approach. It was agreed that any online tool, to be successful, needed to have a familiar format so the design was based on online shopping websites. Although the site was designed with a decision tool to give direct answers to specific questions – ‘how do I reference an edited book?’ – the sequence of decisions to be made at each stage modelled the type of analytical thinking needed to develop referencing skills. The student is given choice and control at every stage and can explore different choices easily with no time pressure. The ability to move around the site easily uses the potential of the web in a way not possible with a more linear paper format.

The site explained

A hierarchical approach was adopted to encourage students to think analytically about what they were referencing, and correctly identify the type of material they are using; a failure to do so had prevented many from using the correct referencing style. The first choice is the referencing style:

Figure 1. Referencing@Portsmouth home page.



The selection tool adopted enables the student to make choices while other options are still visible, so they can easily backtrack, and it is an approach which they are likely to be familiar with from commercial sites. A guiding principle in the design was that the number of clicks should be minimized. The student has to first identify the medium (print, electronic, A/V, etc.), then identify the format (book, journal article, chapter in a book, etc.). If, for example, the student has chosen a whole book, there are other choices as to authorship, language, editors, etc. There must be a balance between coverage of most potential sources against the need to keep the range of options at each stage manageable. Thus, at the selection page (Figure 2) the remaining choices are made until there is no arrow pointing onwards, or until arriving at the fifth and final choice box. This done, the destination page (Figure 3) is only one click further away.

Figure 2. The selection tool.

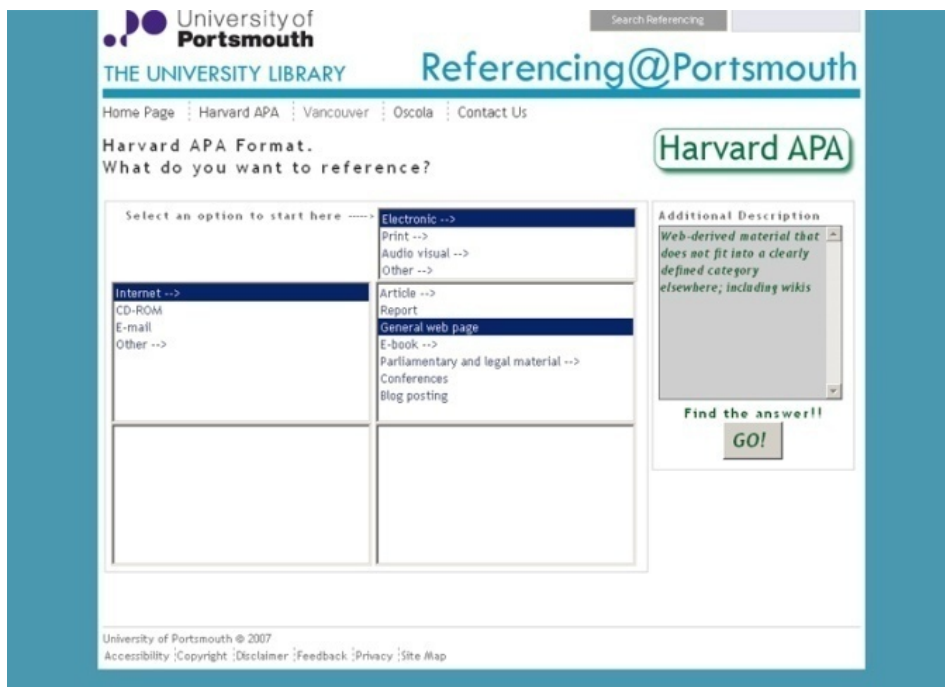
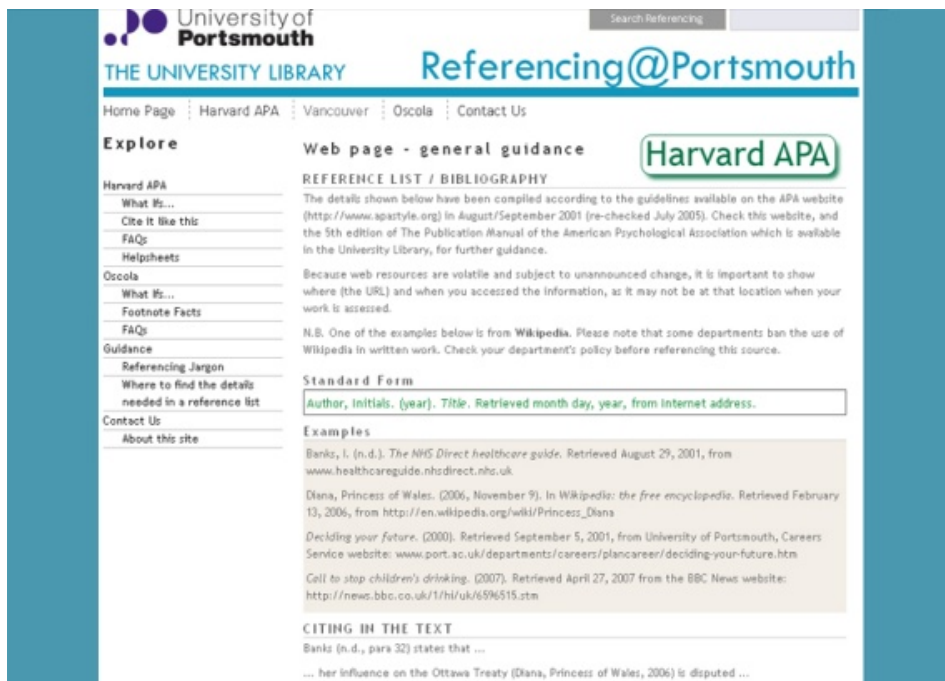


Figure 3. A typical destination page.



A proprietary search tool was incorporated for those situations where the selection tool was less helpful, or for students who prefer that approach. It was important to have it available on the open web, so that students could access the site whether they were working at home or in the university. Harvard APA style was covered initially, but a site revision has accommodated two other referencing styles: Vancouver for students of pharmacy and biomedical sciences, and OSCOLA for law students. Common issues for each style are covered in FAQ, What If, and Cite It in the text pages linked directly from the home page.

Testing for accessibility is an on-going process, and though the site seems to meet most criteria, a few remaining issues are being investigated.

Promotion of Referencing@Portsmouth

A variety of approaches has been used to promote the site within UoP. Academic staff have been targeted via presentations at internal UoP conferences, as well as via discussion of the site at internal academic committees and other meetings. Subject librarians demonstrate the site to students as part of subject-specific information literacy sessions, with some also providing quick overviews during 10 minute "guest" slots at the beginning or end of normal lectures. Enquiry desk staff show students how to use the site if students come to the desk with a referencing query. Links to R@P are included on our Library website, the Skills@Portsmouth study skills site, the University's VLE and the Library's Facebook page. Post-it notes and pens containing the R@P web address have proved extremely popular with students and staff alike.

Once we saw how popular R@P was becoming at Portsmouth, we thought it important to share what we had developed with other librarians as answering referencing queries is a common activity. In 2007 presentations were made to the COFHE spring meeting held at Portsmouth and to local NHS Librarians, a conference paper about R@P was presented at LILAC (Librarians Information Literacy Annual Conference), whilst a poster about it was presented at Umbrella (the largest annual gathering of UK librarians from all sectors). In July 2008 a presentation was given at the British Business School Librarians' Conference. These presentations have in turn led to more interest in the site with several other universities requesting permission to use it.

Use of the site

Feedback told us that the site was proving popular and site statistics indicate just how much use of the site has grown during the time it has been available e.g. almost a five-fold increase in use if January 2007 is compared with January 2008. Meanwhile total site access has grown from 78,607 for September 2006-June 2007, to 157,410 for September 2007-April 2008.

	2007	2008
October	3706	10829
November	7938	25809
December	6146	20900
January	7761	35562
February	5030	12018
March	9915	18353
April	16153	20744

For each academic year, peaks in use correspond with assignment hand-in dates. Meanwhile student and staff comments obtained via a survey in spring 2007, show just how useful R@P has become across campus and beyond:

- Very useful, found it invaluable when stuck on how to reference (Politics Yr 1);
- Very comprehensive and easy to use! (Criminal Justice Distance Learner);
- It is a great help. I have recommended it to my fellow students when they have referencing problems (Part-time Education student);
- I use it to check odd references and also during tutorials...I think it is brilliant, easy to use, simple and clear (European Studies lecturer);
- I advise students to have this link open in a second window whilst they are working on their essays (Public Administration lecturer).

One student even told us that the only thing missing from the site was the essay itself!

Information literacy aspects

The project has given subject librarians and enquiry desk staff a different approach to their work with students on referencing, 'working smarter' rather than harder. From comments of the staff who support academic skills, this has been a general benefit across the University. Instead of creating ad hoc replies to difficult student queries, staff are able to take a planned, strategic approach, which provides agreed answers to problems, with new sources in line with each referencing style's basic philosophy. Routine e-mail queries can be answered with a brief message and web reference rather than creating complex parallel examples or giving lengthy explanations of punctuation, capitalisation, etc. Personal enquires can be handled with reference to the website: there is something to show the student and they see how to use the site for themselves.

The site appears to appeal across the entire range of our diverse student body. It is much appreciated by distance learners, as it is available 24/7. The fact that it provides simple entry points to the information makes it particularly accessible for users who have English as a second language. In addition the menu option approach fits well with a focussed, just-in-time approach to referencing, whilst the surrounding supporting material offers more discursive explanation, so the tool can be said to appeal to a variety of learning styles.

Anecdotally we have evidence that personal enquiries have decreased and are now confined to students checking that they have grasped the principles of the style they are using. Statistically we can see that areas where we are still developing our coverage (OSCOLA and Vancouver) generate more individual e-mails. Often these individual queries generate examples and solutions which are later fed into the main site. Law in APA provides an example of how the site can help students with tricky sources. The APA style manual deals only with US law, but our students are referencing mainly UK and international law. Therefore all the APA style guidance has to be devised in accordance with general APA principles. The law librarian has drawn on the expertise of lecturers in our Institute of Criminal Justice Studies for APA referencing, and of law lecturers, and from national experts on OSCOLA referencing.

Teaching of referencing has been modified. Instead of concentrating on the nitty-gritty of word order and punctuation, more emphasis can be placed on the underlying principles,

such as traceability, recoverability and consistency. Key information literacy concepts for evaluating materials can be stressed: for example, if the student has no clear idea of authorship, the source may be less credible. Students can be encouraged to evaluate the relative merits of a reference to a blog, a government website, or an actual Act of Parliament, and the whole idea of references appropriate to their discipline and purpose can be discussed with them at greater length because the mechanics of the system are clearly laid out in the examples.

The one major problem which remains to be solved is the process of agreeing and disseminating style-appropriate policy across the University. With new sources we need to provide timely guidance which is not usually best sourced via the formal University committee structure. Our initial Authority Group was slow to respond to requests for opinions, so now we have adopted the policy of providing best available guidance after informal e-mail consultation with appropriate individuals, but including the alert that 'This source is not covered by the APA style manual. Check with your lecturer before using this suggestion which is based on APA style.' A similar system will be adopted for our OSCOLA pages.

The 6th edition of the APA Publication Manual was released in the UK during the late summer 2009, after our printed guidance had gone to press. We decided to leave the website pointing to the 5th edition for the academic year 2009-10, as academics would probably not have seen, let alone taken on board, the implications of the revisions in the new edition. There is thus more time for consultation, consistency for students, while we have the new edition to hand to cope with material not covered in the 5th edition.

Maintenance and sustainability

Maintaining the information pages is much the same as creating them. To make this an easy task for librarians not used to web page creation, our web designer created a template in Dreamweaver (Javascript and Perl were used to make the dynamic links). For a standard information page the editor only has to fill in predetermined fields. They can therefore concentrate on the punctuation and layout of the referencing style. Updating a page is only a question of opening the off-line copy of the page, making the necessary changes, and uploading it to the web server when it is complete. A small change can be

made and go live in a couple of minutes. Even the hierarchy of the selection tool can be easily and swiftly edited by anyone who has grasped the underlying rationale. The template gives the student user a consistent layout, whatever type of source they are considering.

The first pages to be created focussed on the information sources which had been covered in the booklet which we still offer to students on the Harvard APA style. When these were in place it was possible to make the site live – we couldn't offer less in an active site than we were offering as a printed booklet or a PDF download. The site has been developed by adding pages on other information sources, partly by trawling the APA style manual, partly by responding to suggestions from academic colleagues, and partly in responses to questions raised by students. The 'Contact us' feature which enables students to post queries to one of the project team, allows us to support them individually by e-mail, but it also alerts us to sources which we have not covered but which students are using. It prompts thinking about how the pages might be clearer, but we also use the site's pages to answer queries, so as to encourage effective use of the site.

From the beginning there was a recognition that the site had to be sustainable through changes of personnel. This meant using standard software products to build pages, etc., but also creation of shared documentation detailing all the processes involved in creating and maintaining the pages of the website. Though there are lead-librarians for each of the referencing styles offered (we have now branched out from APA to OSCOLA and Vancouver, which are used by minorities in the University), deputies are or will be allocated to provide back up during leave or other absence.

Project to service: the future

Recently the service has been enhanced both by a new look which is in line with the revamped Library website but also with the addition of the sections covering Vancouver and OSCOLA. This means that from October 2008 all major conventions in use at UoP have been covered. The service is reasonably well embedded within the institution and it was gratifying that a recent review of the University Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy mentions the service.

There are other referencing solutions appearing all the time, such as the facility within Word 2007 to create a bibliography but none of them deal with those new and unusual types of information source. R@P was built using commonly available software and our own staff to create a customised solution to a problem. It requires minimal upkeep and has been put together relatively cheaply but has already significantly reduced staff time in answering referencing queries. As one student wrote:

WOW that website is so helpful! THANKS.

The site is available at: <http://referencing.port.ac.uk>. This is a revised and extended version of an article which appeared in Sconul Focus issue 47.

Author details

Roisin Gwyer was Referencing@Portsmouth project leader in her role as Associate University Librarian (Academic Services). She is now University Librarian.

Anne Worden is Faculty Librarian for Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Portsmouth. She has extensive experience of teaching referencing skills to both undergraduates and postgraduates and of helping to resolve individual referencing queries. She has compiled printed referencing guides and FAQs which contributed to Referencing@Portsmouth and has promoted Referencing@Portsmouth at external conferences.

Linda Jones is Law and Criminology Librarian, University of Portsmouth, and as such deals with students using both Harvard APA and OSCOLA referencing. She has written all the OSCOLA pages on the website in line with Portsmouth Law School guidance with advice from Sandra Meredith, Teaching and Learning Officer, Faculty of Law, Oxford University and Cathy Jackson, Senior Consultant Information Literacy and Subject Librarian Law, Cardiff University. She also handles all OSCOLA enquiries received.

James Matthews is floor manager for social sciences at the University of Portsmouth Library. He has extensive front-line experience of working with students and their

referencing problems. He compiled most of the APA pages on the website and is responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the site and handling the e-mail enquiries to the site.