Citing sources

Referencing your source material is an important part of historical research. By citing your sources carefully and clearly, you present to your readers the evidence upon which your research is based. This enhances its authority, by showing that your assertions and interpretations are constructed on a firm empirical foundation.

When citing sources, it's important to be consistent. This is partly for stylistic reasons. Just as you wouldn't change the font or size of your writing in the middle of a sentence, so you shouldn't change the format of your citations from one reference to another. Being consistent will also allow you to avoid mistakes or omissions, and make it easier for others to follow up your references.

Referencing is one of those areas where historians perhaps have it much harder than scholars from other disciplines. There is no other intellectual pursuit which uses such a wide variety of source material. How, for instance, do you reference a note scribbled on the back of an envelope in a county record office? Or how to cite the testimony of someone who has contributed to an oral history recording?

The most important thing to do is maintain good records when you do your research. If you are doing archival research, or reading books in a library, it's very important to keep detailed notes of citation information so that you can later produce effective references. As mentioned in another section of this guide, a second reason why this is worthwhile is so you can avoid consulting the same items multiple times.

How, then, do you go about formatting your references consistently? The first step is to identify which style of reference you wish to use. Some of the major systems include:

- Footnotes: full reference information is provided in numbered footnotes beneath the text.
- Endnotes: full reference information is provided at the end of the text

- Harvard system: limited information is placed in brackets. Users are then referred to a bibliography at the end of the text.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these systems. Harvard referencing is easy to use and does not require compnuter software that can insert footnotes. However, it can also produce text that is cluttered with many references. It is not good for items which do not have an author and date.

The advantage of footnotes is that they allow you to produce full citations in close proximity to the main body of your text. For this reason they are the most common format used in specialist history journals and books, since readers of these texts often want to check the references carefully. One downside is that footnotes can make your writing look too academic or specialist. Endnotes can be a good compromise, since they tidy away the citation information. However many readers find having to turn backwards and forwards in the book very annoying (this is also a problem with Harvard).

Achieving consistency

You can achieve consistency by ensuring that your references conform to a style guide. If you are writing for a particular publisher, it may be the case that they have their own style guide to which you must conform. It is worth contacting them to discuss this at an early activity.

If you're not sure about which style to use, then there are a number of commonly used systems that you can adopt. An advantage of using one of the major style guides is that they are updated regularly. The Chicago system, for instance, was recently updated to include guidelines on referencing ephemeral postings on social media websites such as Twitter.

You can find several style guides on the internet. Alternatively, some of the major citation style guides can be obtained in print format.

- Chicago Manual of Style, Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide, http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html
- *New Oxford Style Manual* (Oxford University Press, 2012 and previous editions)
- Charles Lipson, *Cite Right* (University of Chicago Press, 2011)