

citation styles for citing personal communications

Navigating the Nuances: Citation Styles for Citing Personal Communications

citation styles for citing personal communications can appear straightforward, but they often present unique challenges for researchers and writers. Unlike published works with established formats, personal communications, such as emails, phone calls, or interviews, require careful consideration to ensure proper attribution and to respect the privacy of individuals. This comprehensive guide will delve into the various citation styles commonly used, explaining their specific requirements for citing personal communications. We will explore the essential elements needed for accurate citations, discuss how to handle different types of personal exchanges, and offer practical advice for maintaining academic integrity. Understanding these nuances is crucial for avoiding plagiarism and for allowing your readers to trace your sources effectively.

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The Critical Role of Citing Personal Communications

Properly citing personal communications is an often-overlooked but vital aspect of academic and professional writing. It acknowledges the contribution of individuals who have provided information that is not publicly available. This act not only upholds academic honesty by giving credit where it is due but also lends credibility to your work by demonstrating that your findings are supported by direct engagement with experts or sources. Failing to cite personal communications can lead to accusations of plagiarism, misrepresentation of information, and a reduction in the overall trustworthiness of your research. Therefore, mastering the methods for citing these unique sources is paramount for any serious writer.

The primary purpose of citing any source, including personal communications, is to enable your readers to locate the original information. For published works, this is relatively straightforward. However, with personal communications, the "location" is an individual and a specific interaction. The citation must provide enough detail for the reader to understand who provided the information, when they provided it, and the context of that exchange. This transparency is fundamental to the scientific and scholarly process, allowing for verification and further investigation by others in the field.

Essential Components for Citing Personal Communications

Regardless of the specific citation style employed, certain core pieces of information are generally required when citing personal communications. These components ensure that the reader can identify the source of the information and understand its nature. While the exact format will vary, the underlying need for these details remains consistent across most academic disciplines and citation guides.

The fundamental elements typically include:

- The identity of the communicator: This is usually the full name of the individual.
- The nature of the communication: Clearly stating how the information was exchanged (e.g., email, phone conversation, interview).

- The date of the communication: Providing the specific date, and sometimes the time, of the exchange.
- The context or specific information shared: Briefly indicating what was discussed or the particular piece of information being cited.

APA Style for Citing Personal Communications

The American Psychological Association (APA) style is widely used in the social sciences, education, and nursing. APA has specific guidelines for citing personal communications that prioritize the unavailability of the information to the general reader.

Emails and Letters

According to APA 7th edition, personal emails and letters are generally not included in the reference list because they are considered inaccessible to the reader. Instead, they are cited parenthetically within the text. The citation should include the communicator's full name, the phrase "personal communication," and the date of the communication.

For example:

According to Dr. Jane Smith, the research methodology has been refined since the initial study (J. Smith, personal communication, April 15, 2023).

When the communicator is mentioned in the narrative, you only need to provide the date:

In a recent email, Dr. Jane Smith explained that the research methodology has been refined since the initial study (April 15, 2023).

Interviews (Personal, Phone, Video)

Similar to emails and letters, interviews that are not recorded or transcribed for public access are treated as personal communications in APA style. The citation within the text should include the interviewee's name, the descriptor "personal communication," and the date of the interview.

For instance:

The project manager elaborated on the logistical challenges faced during the initial phase of implementation (M. Lee, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

If the interview is recorded and made publicly available (e.g., a published interview with permission), it would be treated as a different source type and included in the reference list.

Social Media Direct Messages

Direct messages exchanged on social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook are also considered personal communications. They are not included in the reference list. The in-text citation should provide the sender's name (or username if more appropriate and identifiable), the description

"personal communication," and the date of the message.

Example:

A user on Twitter, known as @ResearchGuru, indicated a willingness to share preliminary findings (J. Chen, personal communication, June 10, 2023).

MLA Style for Citing Personal Communications

The Modern Language Association (MLA) style is predominantly used in the humanities, particularly in English and literature studies. MLA's approach to personal communications differs significantly from APA, often emphasizing the exclusion of such sources from the Works Cited page altogether.

In-Text Citations for Personal Communications

In MLA style, personal communications are generally cited parenthetically in the text only. The citation should include the name of the person who provided the information and the medium of communication (e.g., email, interview, phone call). The date is also crucial for context.

A typical MLA in-text citation might look like this:

The author noted that the inspiration for the novel came from a chance encounter (Thompson, interview, 14 May 2023).

For an email:

Her latest findings suggest a significant shift in public opinion (Chen, email to author, 20 June 2023).

Works Cited Entries (or Lack Thereof)

A key characteristic of MLA style for personal communications is that they are typically not listed in the Works Cited page. The rationale behind this is that the information is not readily verifiable by the reader. The in-text citation serves as the sole acknowledgment, assuming the reader can contact the cited individual if further clarification is needed and if ethically appropriate.

However, there can be exceptions. If the personal communication has been subsequently published or made widely accessible (e.g., a transcribed interview that is part of a published collection), then it would be treated as a published source and included in the Works Cited page accordingly.

Chicago Style for Citing Personal Communications

The Chicago Manual of Style offers two primary systems: the Notes and Bibliography system (often used in humanities) and the Author-Date system (frequently used in social sciences). Both systems have methods for handling personal communications.

Notes and Bibliography System

In the Notes and Bibliography system, personal communications are cited in footnotes or endnotes. These notes provide detailed information about the communication, including the communicator's name, the nature of the communication, and the date. The information is generally not included in the bibliography.

A typical footnote might read:

1. Interview with Dr. Evelyn Reed, May 1, 2023. (Also a personal communication via email on May 5, 2023).

The note should be sufficiently detailed to identify the source clearly. Subsequent notes referring to the same communication can be shortened.

Author-Date System

Under the Chicago Author-Date system, personal communications are treated similarly to APA style in that they are cited parenthetically in the text and not included in the reference list. The parenthetical citation should include the communicator's name and the date.

Example:

The researcher confirmed the preliminary results in a phone call (Harrison, 2023).

If the communication was an email, it might be noted as:

The implications of the study were further clarified (Lee, email to author, April 20, 2023).

Other Citation Style Considerations

Beyond the major styles, several other factors and ethical considerations are vital when dealing with personal communications.

When to Cite Personal Communications

You should cite personal communications when the information gained is essential to your argument, cannot be found elsewhere, and is not common knowledge. This includes direct quotes, paraphrased ideas, or statistical data obtained directly from an individual.

Consider citing personal communications in the following scenarios:

- When quoting or paraphrasing an expert in a field who shared information not yet published.
- When referring to specific insights or opinions gained from an interview or conversation.
- When referencing data or information provided through direct personal contact that is crucial for your research.

Ethical Considerations and Permissions

Perhaps the most critical aspect of citing personal communications is obtaining permission from the individual you are quoting or referencing. Always ask for their consent before using their words or ideas, especially if the information is sensitive or not intended for public dissemination. Inform them how you plan to attribute the information.

Key ethical steps include:

- Always request explicit permission before citing or quoting.
- Be transparent about how their information will be used and attributed.
- Respect their decision if they decline permission.
- Consider anonymizing the source if requested and appropriate for your work, while still clearly indicating the nature of the communication.

Respecting the privacy and intellectual property of individuals is paramount. Even with permission, ensure your citation accurately reflects the context of the communication and does not misrepresent the individual's views.

Frequently Asked Questions About Citation Styles for Citing Personal Communications

Q: Why are personal communications often not included in the reference list or bibliography?

A: Personal communications are typically not included in reference lists or bibliographies because they are considered inaccessible to the general reader. Citation systems like APA and MLA prioritize sources that can be independently verified by the audience. Since an email, phone call, or private conversation cannot be accessed by your readers, it is cited directly in the text or in notes to acknowledge the source without implying it's a publicly available resource.

Q: What is the difference between citing a published interview and a personal interview in APA style?

A: In APA style, a personal interview that is not recorded or published is treated as personal communication and cited parenthetically in the text only. A published interview, such as one found in a newspaper, magazine, or online archive, is treated as a published work and will have a corresponding entry in the reference list.

Q: Do I need to get permission to cite a personal communication?

A: Yes, it is an essential ethical practice to obtain explicit permission from the individual before citing or quoting any personal communication. This ensures you respect their privacy and consent to have their words or ideas attributed to them in your work.

Q: How do I cite a social media direct message if I don't know the person's real name?

A: If you are citing a direct message from a social media platform and the person's real name is not known or used, you should use their username or online handle. Follow the specific citation style's guidelines for personal communications, including the username, the description "personal communication," and the date of the message.

Q: When should I consider anonymizing a personal communication?

A: You might consider anonymizing a personal communication if the individual requests it, if the information is sensitive and could potentially put the individual at risk, or if you are citing a source who spoke under the condition of anonymity. Always discuss this with the individual and follow ethical guidelines and your institution's policies.

Q: What if I received information via a group email thread? How should I cite that?

A: For a group email thread, you would typically cite the individual who sent the specific message you are referencing. If the information is shared generally across the thread and not attributable to one person, you may need to describe the communication as coming from the group or the context of the thread. Always check the specific requirements of your chosen citation style, as they may offer guidance on shared communications.

Q: Can I include personal communications in my thesis or dissertation reference list if my professor allows it?

A: While adherence to a specific style guide is crucial, some instructors or institutions may have specific policies regarding the inclusion of personal communications in theses or dissertations, especially if they are critical to the research. Always consult your advisor or the official guidelines for your academic program to confirm their expectations.

Q: What is the best practice if I'm unsure about how to cite a specific type of personal communication?

A: The best practice is to consult the official style manual for the citation style you are using. If the

manual does not provide clear guidance, look for reputable online resources from universities or the style guide's publisher, or ask your instructor or librarian for clarification. Consistency within your document is also key.

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