

Lingua Franca and Beyond

Formatting references – shall we revisit?

In this issue, Yateendra Joshi, ELS (D), is our contributor. Yateen has been copyediting research papers for more than 30 years and has been teaching researchers how to write, publish, and present scientific data for more than 15. He is a member of the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) Council, as well as of the editorial board of *Information Design Journal*. Information design

is of particular interest to Yateen, so no wonder that he brings reference structure and design to our attention. We are familiar with Vancouver referencing style and Harvard style; we know that we need to follow a journal's guidelines, but do we really think of the impact of reference structure on the message transferred? Do we really catch that where a year of publication is placed matters? Do we really consider typographic coding to be of help? These and other questions are considered by

SECTION EDITOR



Maria Koltowska-Haggström, MD PhD
maria.koltowska-haggstrom@
propermedicalwriting.com

Yateen and it is my pleasure to welcome him as our second EASE guest to the *Lingua Franca and Beyond* section.

Maria

Formatting of bibliographical references: Elements, sequencing, and typography

One are the days when librarians would photocopy abstracts of research papers, paste the abstracts on index cards, and arrange the cards in the desired sequence for easy retrieval: the issue of the journal itself – the source of the research paper in question – would be on display and eventually end up as part of a bound volume on library shelves. Researchers would retrieve the volume from the shelves if, after reading the abstract, they decided to read the full paper. Now we have search engines, electronic repositories, and the internet – all we need to do is to keep clicking. Nobody in their right minds would suggest that we go back to index cards. And yet, when it comes to listing the bibliographic details of the sources we consulted, under the heading “References”, we seem to be living in the Stone Age.

Yes, there are stray signs of change. For example, the most recent edition of the *AMA Style Manual* no longer recommends that the place of publication be included in a reference giving the bibliographic details of a book.¹ On the other hand, many journals now require that digital object identifiers (DOIs) be given for papers published in journals. But what I'd like to do in this article is to argue that we rethink the matter of how to present bibliographic references: what items to include in a typical entry or record or reference, in what

sequence to arrange them, and how to format them typographically. This leaves out punctuation – the marks used to separate the various items or elements or parts of a reference – because I have aired my grievance elsewhere, so to speak.²

The discussion that follows is based on the premise that such references lists are processed not by machines alone but are used by people – and not only to locate a particular source but *also to peruse the list as a whole*, just as they would scan a table of contents.

Should we present
John Arthur Brown
as Brown J A or
Brown, JA or
Brown, J. A. or
John, Arthur B. . . .?

The elements or parts of a bibliographic reference

The elements that make up a reference differ depending on the nature of the source, which may be a paper in a journal, a chapter from a multi-authored book, an entire book, a conference presentation, a web

page, and so on. Nearly all, however, have one or more authors and most carry the year of publication (although there's that n.d., for no date). A reference to a paper in a journal, for instance, gives the title of the paper, the name of the journal, usually the journal's volume number and sometimes an issue number, and the page numbers (the first and the last page on which the paper appears). A reference to a multi-authored book will carry the names of the book's editors as well; that to a conference will have the date,

Yateendra Joshi

yateendra.joshi@gmail.com

venue, a theme or title, and the organisers; that to a standard (ISO standard, for example) will have a number; that to a web page will have a URL; and so on.

Each of these elements is informative: the year tells us how recent or old the source is; the title of a paper, what the paper is about; the inclusive page numbers, its length (whether, for example, it is a 1-page note or a detailed treatment of the topic running to many pages).

However, there is one item that hardly has any value and yet takes up space, and ties us into knots when it comes to punctuation: the initials of authors. Do we really need that bit? How likely is it that the initials of authors are the only item that distinguishes one source from another in a reference? So long as we continue to insist on supplying the initials, we also need to agree on how to present them. Should we present John Arthur Brown as Brown J A or Brown, JA or Brown, J. A. or John, Arthur B. . . .? Another argument in favour of dropping the initials is that in the Harvard system of citations (the author-date system) the reference mirrors the citation more closely, because citations seldom carry initials (unless we have the same names in the same sequence with the same year).

Some details of referencing are aimed at saving space, which was certainly an important



consideration in print publications; in the digital world, it is not, and we should rethink the requirements of abbreviating journal titles. Full titles are not only more informative but also allow us to dispense with the mechanics of abbreviating (J or Jnl for Journal, to take a common example) and, yet another trivial point (pun intended), namely should it be Biol or Biol., for example.

The sequence of elements in a bibliographic reference

The sequence is more or less uniform across publishers except the year of publication: some publishers place it next to the names of authors; others move it closer to the name of the journal and especially its volume number. Given that the volume number of a serial (periodical) is a function of time, the second option seems logical. However, I argue in favour of placing the year after the names of authors because (a) it mirrors the citation in the name–date format; (b) it makes it easier to skim the list of references to note how current – or dated – they are; and (c) it shortens the procession of numbers that typically occurs at the end of a reference to a paper in a journal, comprising the volume number, the issue number where applicable, and the inclusive page numbers – a succession of digits that makes the sequence more prone to errors. For example, compare “Brown. 2020. Sequencing of references. *Imaginary Journal* 7:15–20” and “Brown. Sequencing of references. *Imaginary Journal*, 2020, 7: 15–20”.

The typography of elements in a bibliographic reference

Lastly, consider the look. After all, computers may scan, extract, parse, re-arrange ... but the literature is there to be read by people, and references are part of the literature. Some people even indulge in a quick scan of the list of references before they start reading the paper itself. And typographic coding helps readers: italics for journal titles and boldface for volume numbers once used to be standard, but the minimalist approach is increasingly doing away with that – a trend that we need to reconsider. I also have one other suggestion that may horrify some: use boldface for titles of articles, chapters, etc., which are the main source; the names of journals and of books, for example, are mere containers. This will facilitate a quick scan of reference lists to take in the scope or the topics of sources that have been used as support for statements or assertions made in the main text. Again, at least in the author–date style, the list of references is sorted alphabetically by the names of authors, making it easier if one is looking for a particular name or names. Placing the year immediately after the names makes it easier if one is looking for how current the references are; so why not introduce boldface for names of articles or chapters to make it easier to scan the list with that variable in mind? And if you are concerned that boldface will make a page look spotty, you can always tone the boldface down a bit (how about 60% black instead of 100%?).

As writers we strive to help readers; as editors, we strive to help both authors and readers. I hope these suggestions are a step in that direction. You may disagree with the details, but is it not time that we revisit our ideas of handling bibliographic references?

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

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2. Joshi Y. Restoring sanity into punctuation of references. *Sci Ed* 2021;44:46–7.

Author information

Yateendra Joshi, ELS (D), has been copyediting research papers for more than 30 years and has been teaching researchers how to write, publish, and present, for more than 15 years. Information design is of particular interest to Yateen, who is also a member of the editorial board of *Information Design Journal*.