

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

The term “common knowledge” is generally used to describe specific, undisputed, widely known facts. Examples include:

- The Lewis and Clark Expedition was commissioned in 1803.
- Jimmy Carter was the thirty-ninth President of the United States.
- New York’s two baseball teams are the Mets and the Yankees.

You don’t have to cite a piece of information that is “common knowledge,” but it’s sometimes hard to decide whether something falls into that category or not. How can you tell?

You can find it, undocumented, in five or more sources.

If you’re doing a research paper on the Journals of Lewis and Clark and five of your sources state, without citing, that the expedition to the Pacific was commissioned by President Jefferson in 1803, you’re free to do so too.

Your readers could easily find it in a general reference source.

You may not know which number each president was, and neither may your readers. Any of you, however, can easily look them up, so their order counts as common knowledge.

It’s a proverb or common saying.

“Too many cooks spoil the broth,” you might write, or “If something is worth doing, it’s worth doing well.” You don’t need to cite either statement. Nobody really knows who first said them, anyway, and the great majority of readers will recognize them.

You know that all your particular readers already have this information.

If you’re writing a literature paper for an English teacher, you probably don’t need to define a term like “Italian sonnet” or explain where you got that information. If you’re writing about the same sonnet for a history teacher, however, you should explain your terms and show where you’re getting those definitions from.

It’s a historical date, occurrence, or place.

Certainly, most references to dates, occurrences, and places are not hard to find, undocumented, in many general reference sources, and so don’t need to be cited. If, however, you’re mentioning an almost unknown place or event that someone went to a lot of trouble to find out and record, it’s only fair to give them credit for it--and citing your source will make your statement more believable.

It does not call for further support.

New York’s baseball teams are what they are: nobody has to do a study to make sure that their identification is correct. If, by contrast, you were to state that “children do best in two-parent families,” or “John Kerry lost the 2004 election because he was perceived to be out of touch with American voters,” those statements are **claims** and they need empirical support. By citing your source, you show that a written authority supports your claim.

NOT SURE IF SOMETHING IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE OR NOT? CITE THE SOURCE!

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