Citing Electronic Sources, Part II: Internet-Only References

In the last issue of MedSurg Matters! (January/February 2009), our “APA Quick Takes” column focused on how authors should cite electronic sources that are also available in print form. We will now turn our attention to the proper way to reference material found online that is not available as a published hard copy, otherwise known as Internet-only sources.

As technology advances, more and more scholarly publications are listing Internet sources as reference material for key facts and statistics. Many journals and newsletters have converted to an Internet-only format, and authors need to be aware of how they should correctly identify where their information was retrieved for it to be considered credible by readers.

According to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th ed.) (or APA Manual for short), a properly cited electronic reference will guide the reader to the exact location of the information given. Because articles that are found strictly online may not have volume, issue, or page number information, the author should make every attempt to give as much detail as possible to assist the reader in finding the material online. This includes providing an exact URL or Web address to the specific article or page being cited, not merely listing an address to a home page or menu. For example:


The APA Manual suggests copying the direct link location and pasting it into the manuscript word processing document, rather than trying to transcribe the address manually. By doing this, the author can avoid typographical errors and ensure that readers will be able to retrieve the material cited.

Because the most important element of an Internet-only citation is the Web address, it is imperative for authors to check the accuracy of these addresses several times – while drafting the document, when making revisions, while preparing the final version for publication, and again when reviewing page proofs. If at any time throughout the publication process the electronic article has been moved, the address listed will need to be revised. If an electronic article is no longer available online at the time of publication, the author should strongly consider replacing it with another source or removing it altogether in order to strengthen the integrity of his/her article.

If an author’s name is included on an Internet document, be sure to give proper attribution, rather than listing the Web site owner/operator as the author. Also, be sure to break a URL after slashes, between words, or in other logical places. Do not allow your word processing program to automatically hyphenate words at the end of a line. For the reader, typing a forced hyphen into the Web address while trying to retrieve the article will only result in error. For example:


Most Internet-only sources contain a publication date; be sure to look carefully for it. Sometimes the date is found at the top of the page, and other times it may be at the bottom. You may also use the most current copyright date of the Web site itself, typically located on the footer of the site. If all else fails, you may use “n.d.” to signify that no date was found.

Your citations should also include the exact date on which you accessed the material (written out completely), and should appear in the following format:


Note the proper wording (“Retrieved [date], from...”) and comma usage. There is no period at the end of the URL.

Sources
The reference examples in this column were obtained from the following articles:


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