

## WRITING GUIDE | Documentation basics: *What is "general knowledge"?*

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You know that you must cite source material thoroughly and accurately. But you may have heard that you don't have to cite "general knowledge" (sometimes called "common knowledge").

So what is "general knowledge"?

### Facts: May not need to be cited ("general knowledge")

Information that is literally factual in terms of history or demographics and that is not obscure—important names, dates, events, etc.—**does not have to be cited.**

#### Examples: Do NOT need to be cited:

- Billy the Kid was shot by Pat Garrett at Fort Sumner in 1881
- Fort Sumner is in De Baca County, New Mexico
  - Fort Sumner was used as a training base during World War II.

### Interpretation of facts: Must be cited (not general knowledge!)

Material from a source that interprets or comments on facts or historical events **must be cited.**

#### Examples: MUST be cited:

- the **idea** that Billy the Kid was a scapegoat when he was arrested for the murder of Sheriff Brady during the Lincoln County War
- the **comment** that Pat Garrett's shot that killed Billy the Kid was lucky—that Garrett fired in fear

### Rules of thumb

#### The Purdue OWL says,

"Generally speaking, you can regard something as common knowledge if you find the same information undocumented in at least five credible sources."

#### The library at Cal State San Marcos says,

*"quantity:* the fact can be found in numerous places ... *ubiquity:* it is likely to be known by a lot of people...and whether the information can be easily found in a general reference source."

#### SVC Writing Center says,

General knowledge is that information that you can reasonably expect to find in any general source on the subject.

Of course, for this definition to be helpful, you have to have a sense of what a general source might cover on the subject. To find out, you'll have to check some general sources. These would be, typically, general encyclopedia entries, for example.

**Remember: If in doubt... cite!**

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