Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Review Article

Assessing Formatting Accuracy of APA Style References: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Objective – The objective of this scoping review is to synthesize the existing literature on the accuracy of formatting American Psychological Association (APA) Style references, with a focus on how accuracy has been defined and measured across studies. Specifically, the review aims to identify commonly reported formatting errors, evaluate the transparency and reproducibility of research methods, and assess whether standard assessment tools have been proposed or developed. Additionally, the review gathers the discipline and geographic location of study authors and examined how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are addressed in this body of research.

Methods – The review followed the JBI methodology for scoping reviews, with a registered protocol on the Open Science Framework. A comprehensive search strategy was executed in the following academic databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full-Text, Education Source Complete, LISTA, ProQuest Platform Search, and the Web of Science Core Collection. This was supplemented with Google and Google Scholar searches. Initial searches were conducted in May 2023 and updated in November 2024. Eligibility criteria included English-language studies that assessed APA Style formatting accuracy in reference list entries. Two independent reviewers conducted all phases of screening and data extraction, with discrepancies resolved through consensus or third-party adjudication. Citation searching was also employed, yielding additional studies. Data extracted included publication details, source types, accuracy measures, and identified biases.

Results – Out of the included 32 studies, most were authored by researchers in Library Science and published in North America between 2006 and 2024. APA Manual editions from the 3rd to the 7th were represented. Reference sources most often came from student papers (41%), followed by article reference lists and databases. The most frequently analyzed source types were journal articles and books. Fourteen studies evaluated automated tools that create references, including tools embedded in databases, citation managers, and AI tools such as ChatGPT. Seventeen types of errors were pre-identified and nine additional error types were noted from the included studies. However, error classification terminology varied widely across studies, limiting comparability. While some studies used comprehensive checklists to assess accuracy, only a few tools were accessible, and no standardized, widely accepted assessment method emerged. Formatting accuracy was quantified using 64 different types of metrics, with inconsistent use of normalized measures. Only one study explicitly addressed a DEI-related

issue—mis-formatting of names from non-Western cultures—highlighting an underexplored area of concern. Citation searching was notably effective in identifying studies not indexed in major databases.

Conclusion – This review reveals a fragmented research landscape regarding how formatting accuracy of APA references is measured and described. There is no consensus on assessment methodology, terminology, or reporting metrics, making it difficult to benchmark or compare results across studies. The findings underscore the need for standardized, source-specific tools to assess formatting accuracy and call attention to the role of librarians and educators in addressing this gap. Additionally, more attention must be paid to equity considerations, particularly related to name formatting conventions. Consistent terminology, inclusive practices, and evidence based tools are essential for advancing citation literacy and supporting academic integrity.

Introduction

Accuracy of citations is a critical component of scholarly communication, serving both ethical and practical purposes across academic disciplines. All facets of citation accuracy are important for demonstrating that the scholarly literature is supported by evidence. It allows readers to verify an author's claims and check the context the citation was used in, as well as assess how timely the source is. For academics, there is a responsibility to maintain accurate citations to reflect scholarly integrity and give credit to the original researchers. Citations provide credit, context, and allow readers to trust and verify where the references came from.

Among commonly used citation styles, the American Psychological Association (APA) style is widely adopted across the social sciences, education, and health sciences (APA, 2020). For students and researchers alike, adherence to APA guidelines reflects attention to detail, academic integrity, and scholarly credibility. However, research has consistently shown that references in student and published works are frequently flawed, particularly in formatting (Logan et al., 2023; Ury & Wyatt, 2009). These inconsistencies present challenges not only for authors but also for librarians, who are frequently tasked with providing instruction on proper citation practices and assessing citation accuracy.

Academic librarians play a central role in teaching information literacy skills, which increasingly includes training on citation management and the responsible use of citation tools (Childress, 2011; Dawe et al., 2021). As part of reference services, course-integrated instruction, and research consultations, librarians are often expected to provide citation support. This support has become more complex with the proliferation of digital tools that claim to generate references in APA style automatically, such as reference generators embedded in discovery layers, reference management software (e.g., Zotero, EndNote, Mendeley), and popular platforms like Google Scholar or citation features in word processors. While these tools are widely used by students and researchers, numerous studies have documented their frequent formatting inaccuracies, omissions, and inconsistencies (Gilmour & Cobus-Kuo, 2011; Kratochvíl, 2017; Speare, 2018).

A better understanding of the most frequent types of formatting errors as well as a taxonomy of error categories could help improve APA citation accuracy in academic writing. Likewise, using a standardized, validated assessment tool to measure APA style adherence—whether references are created manually or by software—would enhance instructional effectiveness, enable benchmarking, and support evidence based improvements to citation education (Oakleaf, 2011; Savage et al., 2017).

Standardized, evidence informed checklists or tools would not only support consistency in assessment but also facilitate cross-study comparisons, enable institutional benchmarking, and help educators and librarians identify persistent citation challenges. Although there have been efforts to design assessment tools for specific types of sources or situations (APA, 2025), no comprehensive, standardized tool exists.

The terms "reference" and "citation" are often used interchangeably in the literature and among academics. In the APA 7th edition publication manual, an in-text "citation" refers to the abbreviated information (usually the author and year of publication) placed within the body of the work to give credit to the source. A "reference," or "reference entry" refers to the more detailed information necessary for identifying and retrieving the work. References include the author, date, title and source, and are provided in a list at the end of a scholarly paper or chapter. This review is focused on what APA refers to as reference list entries.

Aims

This scoping review aims to map the current landscape of research related to the formatting accuracy of APA style references. Specifically, it examines how accuracy has been defined and measured across studies, what specific kinds of errors and broader error types are most frequently reported, and whether standardized assessment tools have been developed or proposed. In order to gauge the scope of interest in these issues across disciplines, the study also seeks to identify the disciplines and geographic regions of researchers conducting these analyses. Finally, in alignment with our institution's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), we deliberately examined whether concerns regarding bias have been raised in this context. By synthesizing the existing literature, this review provides a foundation for future work to support evidence based instruction and evaluation in library and educational settings.

We were guided by the following research questions:

- What various criteria have been used to assess the accuracy of APA style reference entries?
- Are the methods used in the included studies for assessing citation accuracy transparent and reproducible, and could a valid and comprehensive assessment tool be created based on the synthesis of this evidence?
- What geographic locations and disciplines are represented by the authors of this literature?
- What issues of bias or DEI (if any) are addressed?

Methods

This scoping review was conducted in accordance with the JBI methodology for scoping reviews (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). A protocol was registered in the Open Science Framework (OSF) in May 2023 (see Data Availability statement).

Search Strategy

A detailed search strategy was developed for the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database on the EBSCO platform with keywords and index terms for the concepts of citation accuracy and scholarly publishing. Once terms were finalized in the primary database, the search string was translated for the following additional databases: Academic Search Complete (EBSCO), Web of Science Core Collection (Clarivate, see Appendix A for indexes included), CINAHL Plus with Full Text

(EBSCO), Education Source (EBSCO), Business Source Complete (EBSCO), and several ProQuest databases (referred to as ProQuest Basic in Figure 1).

We intended to also search ProQuest's Dissertations & Theses Global (PQDT) database but an access issue led to inadvertent searching of an aggregate of ProQuest databases that our library subscribes to. This aggregate does include some dissertations but not the specific content in PQDT. The error was not caught until further along in the review process, so the decision was made to continue with the searches that were done. The list of ProQuest databases is included in Appendix B.

Additionally, we searched Google and Google Scholar and gathered the first 100 results from each. The Google searches retrieved very high numbers of search results which were impractical to screen exhaustively so we decided to use a stopping rule of the first 100 results as has been suggested by others (Godin et al., 2015; Stansfield et al., 2016). All initial searches were conducted in May 2023 and can be found in OSF (see Data Availability statement). An update of the search was conducted on November 8, 2024.

All search results were exported into EndNote bibliographic management software (Clarivate Analytics, PA, USA) and deduplicated using the Bramer method (Bramer et al., 2016). The remaining results were imported into Rayyan (https://rayyan.ai) for manual screening.

Eligibility Criteria

English language articles that assessed the accuracy of APA style formatting in reference entries were included. Given the linguistic proficiency of the reviewers and the lack of resources for translation services, we felt this criteria maintained our ability to execute the search and confidently synthesize the included articles. Studies that assessed multiple citation styles were included provided APA was one of the styles. Reports that did not include APA style or that did not specify citation styles were excluded. Studies that analyzed in-text citations only and no reference entries were excluded. Studies with either qualitative or quantitative results were included, but papers that contained opinions or commentaries only were excluded. No date limitations were used.

Screening

The deduplicated results were evenly divided into three groups for screening. Two independent reviewers were assigned to screen the titles and abstracts of each group of results. To improve interrater reliability, a training set of results was screened by all reviewers independently. The entire group met to compare all decisions, discuss inconsistencies, and come to a consensus on the training set. After the title and abstract screening, disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus amongst all reviewers. The included records were again divided into three groups and once again two independent reviewers assessed the full text of each study. Reasons for exclusion were recorded during the full-text phase of screening. Disagreements were again resolved through discussion and consensus amongst all reviewers.

Two rounds of citation searching, including both backward and forward citation searching, were conducted on the included studies. The first round of citation searching consisted of manually screening the reference lists of the included studies for backwards citation searching, and using Google Scholar's (https://scholar.google.com/) "Cited by" feature for forward citation searching on each included study. Citation Chaser (https://estech.shinyapps.io/citationchaser/) was used for both backward and forward

citation searching in the second round. The results were deduplicated, followed by full-text screening. Two independent reviewers assessed each result for inclusion/exclusion and came to a consensus after discussion if there was disagreement.

Data Extraction

A draft data extraction form was created and then revised as necessary during the process of pilot testing 12 articles by two extractors. In order to answer the main research question "what various criteria have been used to assess the accuracy of APA style reference entries?," the extraction form collected the number and types of reference entries assessed, specific types of errors noted, any broad error categories used, such as "major vs. minor" errors or "syntax" errors, the specific measurements used to quantify accuracy, such as "number of errors per citation." the edition of the APA manual used, and whether any rubrics or assessment tools were used to document accuracy. The data extraction form also included the authors' geographic locations and disciplines, and whether any issues of bias or DEI were addressed in the study, in order to answer those specific research questions. The question, "Are the methods used in the included studies for assessing citation accuracy transparent and reproducible, and could a valid and comprehensive assessment tool be created based on the synthesis of this evidence?," would be answered based on whether data for the other research questions were reported or not, and also if any rubrics or assessment tools were included for review. Additionally, data was collected on year of publication, whether an automatic reference generator was assessed, and if any other citation styles were assessed in addition to APA citation style.

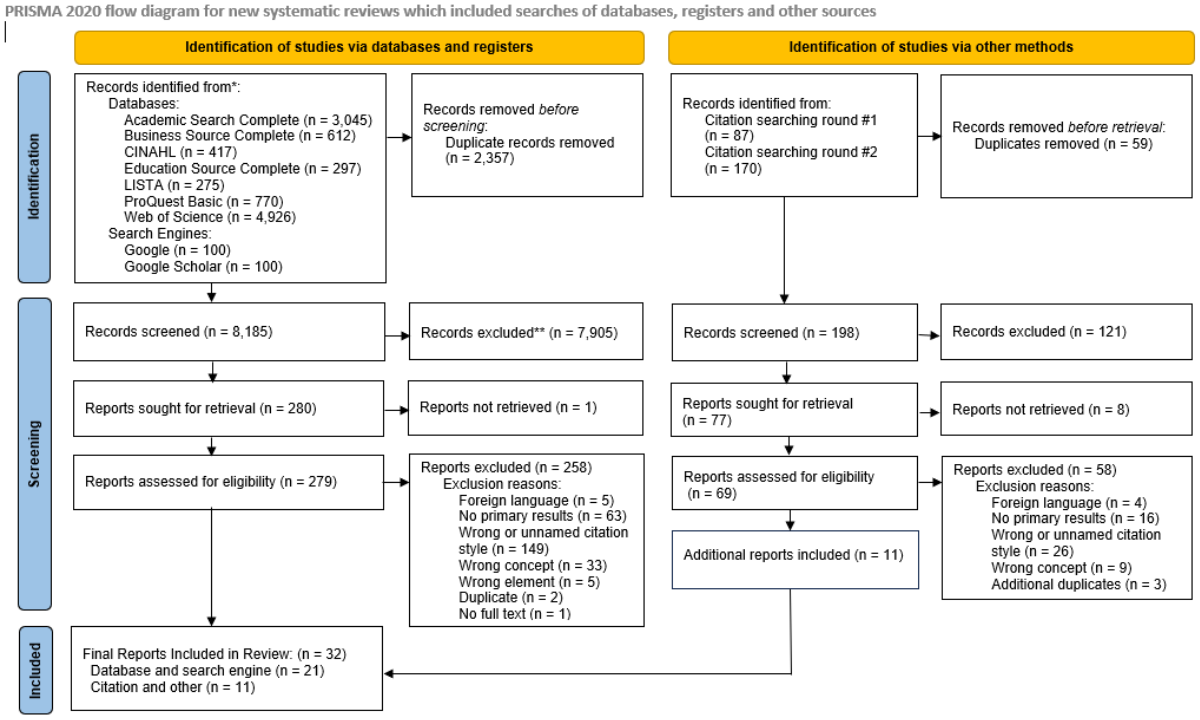
A guidance document was created with further instructions for each section of the data extraction form and provided to all reviewers.

There were 17 options to select from on the data extraction form for the description of errors noted in each study. These 17 category options were based on our review of the literature prior to creating the data extraction form. Depending on how specifically errors were described in the included studies, an error could potentially fit into more than one category on our data extraction form. The data extraction form also included the options of "Other" and "Errors Not Specified." There was space on the data extraction form to describe the errors in the "Other" category.

Data was extracted from each included paper by two independent reviewers. Any discrepancies between the two reviewers' extracted data were resolved by a third reviewer or, when necessary, through additional discussion and consensus among all reviewers. Appendix C includes a table of extracted data from the included studies, and this table is also available in OSF (see Data Availability statement).

Results

The PRISMA diagram in Figure 1 visually depicts the search and screening process and provides the number of studies included and excluded during each phase of screening.



*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).
**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

Figure 1
PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

During the process of screening articles for inclusion, we identified three distinct ways that the term "accuracy" is used in the literature and applied to citation analysis.

1. Is the cited source appropriate and relevant to the research?
2. Do the elements of the reference match the original source?
3. Do the elements of the reference conform to the formatting guidelines of the selected style?

The intention of this scoping review was to assess the third type of accuracy, but without unique terminology, our search retrieved studies related to all three accuracy types and required significant time and effort excluding irrelevant studies. A shared vocabulary denoting the different types of citation analysis would promote clarity of intent in the future.

Thirty-two studies were ultimately included in the review. Most of the included studies were published between 2006-2024 (n=31). One included study was published much earlier, in 1987. The 3rd through the 7th editions of the APA Publication Manual were reported to be used for assessing reference formatting accuracy in the included studies. Six studies did not specify which edition of the publication manual was used.

The reference entries analyzed for accuracy originated from a variety of sources. Predominantly, in 41% (n=13) of the studies, the reference entries came from student papers or assignments. In the remaining studies, reference entries came from monographs (n=3), scholarly articles (n=3), unpublished manuscripts

(n=3), databases (n=3), theses/dissertations (n=2), and other sources (n=3). ChatGPT was used to generate the references in two studies. Giray (2024) reported that all the journal article references provided by ChatGPT were fabricated, links did not match existing websites, and references included in the study did not follow APA 7th guidelines. In the Roygayan (2024) study, ChatGPT-3.5 generated reference entries for ten non-existent journal articles that lacked proper italicization, ten web articles that linked to sources saying "page not found", and ten reference entries for real books with incorrect information.

There was a wide range in the number of references analyzed in the included studies, anywhere from two references (Stevens, 2016) to 1,432 (Yap, 2020). In nine of the 32 studies (28%), the number of references analyzed was not provided. The references assessed included many different types of sources. The most common types of reference sources assessed for accuracy were journal articles (n=26), books (n=20), and newspapers/magazines (n=8). Other sources assessed were websites, book chapters, conference proceedings, journal supplements, reference books, and reports. Studies varied in whether they focused on evaluating references of one particular source type, a few types of sources, or many. In seven studies, a single type of source was analyzed. In eight studies, two types of sources were analyzed. In nine studies, three or more types of sources were analyzed. In eight studies, the types of sources assessed were not specified.

Fourteen studies assessed the accuracy of automated referencing tools. Of those, five assessed a stand-alone tool (i.e., EasyBib), four assessed bibliographic management software (i.e., EndNote), three assessed the "cite" functions in scholarly databases, and two assessed large language models (ChatGPT).

Our included studies noted anywhere from zero to over 400 specific types of errors in reference list entries. Depending on how specifically the errors were described in the included studies, an error could fulfill more than one of the 17 categories on our data extraction form. For example, in the study by Onwuegbuzie and Hwang (2013), one of the 50 most common errors listed was described as "Title of journal article inappropriately capitalized" (p. 4). In extracting data from this study, this error would be categorized by our team as a "Journal Title" error and as a "Capitalization or Case" error. Figure 2 shows the number of our included studies that assessed each of the 17 error categories. The most common error type assessed in our review was Author (in 24 studies). At least half of our included studies assessed errors in the Date, Capitalization or Case, Volume and/or Issue Numbers, Italicization, DOI/URL or retrieval statement, and Punctuation. Fifteen studies included errors that could not be categorized within our 17 options and were therefore categorized as "Other." There was space on the data extraction form to describe the errors in the "Other" category and Figure 3 denotes this. Some of these errors were noted in just one study each, including Book Title, Editor, Database Information, Layout, Ampersand, and Genre.

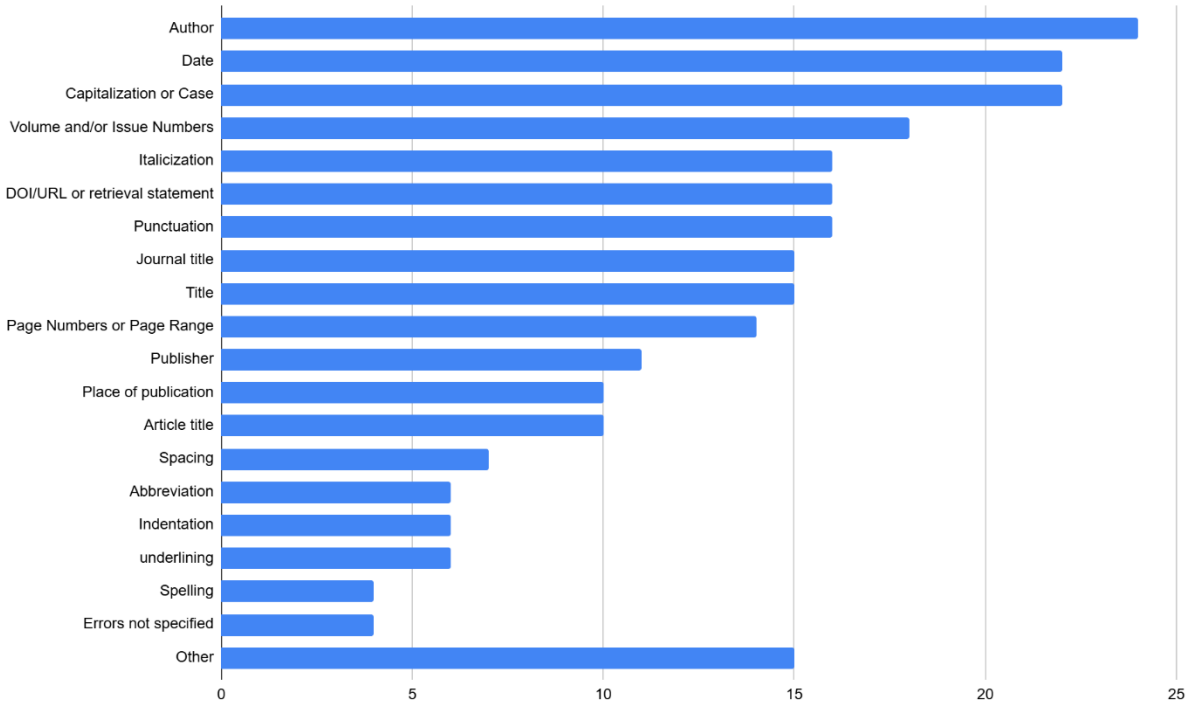


Figure 2
Number of studies noting each of 17 different error categories.

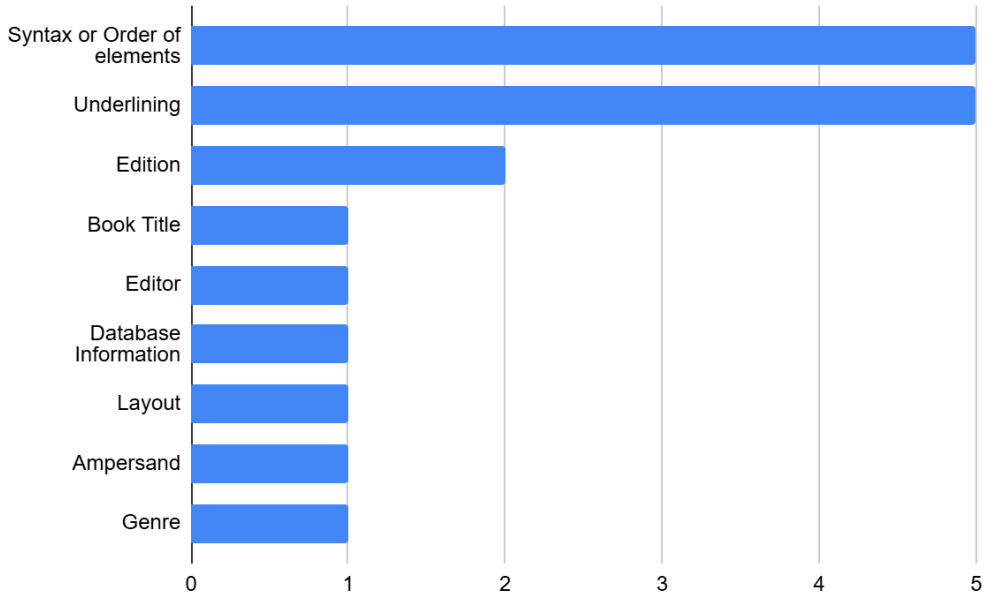


Figure 3
Specific errors described in the "Other" category.

The category "Error not specified" consisted of four studies which broadly examined APA reference entry formatting as part of larger assessments but did not note any specific reference errors (Fallahi et al., 2006; Franz & Spitzer, 2006; Hously Gaffney, 2015; Zafonte & Parks-Stamm, 2016). Two additional studies provided selected examples of errors only (Ernst & Michel, 2006; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Each of these included reference formatting as a criterion, often using scales or rubrics to rate performance, but none offered detailed error types or comprehensive lists of mistakes. In contrast, Onwuegbuzie and Hwang (2013) noted that there were 466 unique reference list errors in their study of unpublished manuscripts, though they included the top 50 errors only in their published paper.

In addition to specific errors, we looked for broader categories of errors described in the included literature. "Syntax" was a term used in 22% (n=7) of the studies, and "Major" versus "Minor" errors was used in 16% (n=5) of studies.

Sixty-four different types of measurements were utilized to report accuracy. The most used in 13 studies was "Total Number of Errors for all References." The second most common measurement seen was "Number of Error-free References" reported in nine studies. Measurements that could be used more readily to compare results across studies, such as "Total Number of Errors per Reference Entry", "Average Number of Errors per Reference Entry," and "Percentage of Errors for All Reference Entries" were used less often in eight, six, and six studies, respectively.

As shown above, the variety of approaches in the studies included in this review demonstrates that there is no standardized methodology for conducting reference formatting accuracy research. Some authors demonstrated consistency in their own methodological approaches across multiple studies. Van Ullen and Kessler, co-authors of four studies (2005; 2006; 2012; 2016), applied the same method for categorizing reference entry errors in each. Similarly, Onwuegbuzie employed a consistent approach across the three studies in which he was involved (2008; 2010; 2013). Helmiawan (2020) adopted the methodology used by Stevens (2016), while Ho (2022) based their error categories on methods drawn from several studies included in this review, specifically those by Chang (2013), Homol (2014), and Stevens (2016). One study (Ernst & Michel, 2006) referenced a methodological approach developed by a researcher not included in this review. The remaining 22 studies did not report using or adapting any previously established methods of reference entry collection or error categorization.

Seven studies reported utilizing tools created to assess reference entries, and four of those tools were accessible for our team to review, promoting transparency. Two of the four tools available were detailed checklists designed to assess the accuracy of a specific type of source—in this case journal articles. These included the 24-item *Full References Checklist* in Guinness et al. (2024) and Scheinfeld and Chung's (2024) 14-item *Screening Sheet*. In both, each item on the checklist was assessed as either correct or incorrect and accuracy was measured by the number of correct items compared to the total number of items assessed. These tools may be useful starting points for creating a comprehensive and standardized tool for measuring reference entry formatting accuracy. The third tool, used in Jiao et al. (2008), is an eight-item checklist for any type of source, though just five of the eight items assess the formatting of the reference list and the other three items assess the in-text citations. The final tool we reviewed was from Zafonte and Parks-Stamm (2016) and it broadly examined APA formatting but did not specify any particular reference errors. Three additional included studies mentioned using an accuracy assessment tool. In all three, either the tool was not included in the manuscript, or a link to the tool was broken. However, the authors' description of each tool indicated that accuracy was assessed broadly, and specific errors were not itemized, therefore obtaining these tools was unnecessary (Foreman & Kirchhoff, 1987; Franz & Spitzer, 2006; Housley Gaffney, 2015).

Authors of the included studies were mainly from the disciplines of Library Science (n=16), Education (n=8), and Psychology (n=5). A smaller number of authors were from Nursing (n=2), Communications (n=2), Publishing (n=1), Sociology (n=1), English (n=1) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (n=1). The authors were mainly from North America (n=24). Seven studies were conducted by authors in Asia, and one study was conducted by authors in Africa. Several authors appear to have a sustained research interest in this topic, as evidenced by their repeated contributions to the literature. Notably, Jane Kessler and Mary Van Ullen, librarians at the University at Albany, authored four of the studies included in this review. Similarly, Anthony Onwuegbuzie, an educational researcher affiliated with Sam Houston State University, contributed to three of the studies examined.

The most common limitations or biases reported by study authors were small sample size and limited types of sources. Efforts by authors to minimize bias included "using multiple reviewers, coders or raters," "random selection of sources," and "anonymized sources." In half of the studies, no limitations or biases were mentioned.

One of the included studies (Ho, 2022) surfaced an accuracy issue related to DEI that may warrant further research. It is an issue that occurs when author names do not follow the structure that names typically follow in the Global West (i.e., first, middle, last). Malaysian names and Indian names were mentioned as examples (Ho, 2022).

An item of interest emerged from the results which wasn't directly related to one of our original research questions. We were not expecting the largest source of analyzed references to be from student papers and assignments. At 41% (n=13), this source was greater than the next three largest reference sources combined, including "article reference lists" (n=3), "monographs" (n=3), and "citations chosen from a database" (n=3), and so we decided to look at how the source of the references intersected with the research purpose of the particular study. To better understand the research purposes of the included studies, we completed a content analysis by classifying the different research questions of each study into seven non-exclusive categories, as shown in Figure 4, and found that only 25% (n=8) of the included studies primarily sought to classify and/or analyze types of reference errors. This analysis showed that most of the articles included in our study had a research purpose that was foregrounded in goals related to education (n=21), not in a general assessment of the professional literature.

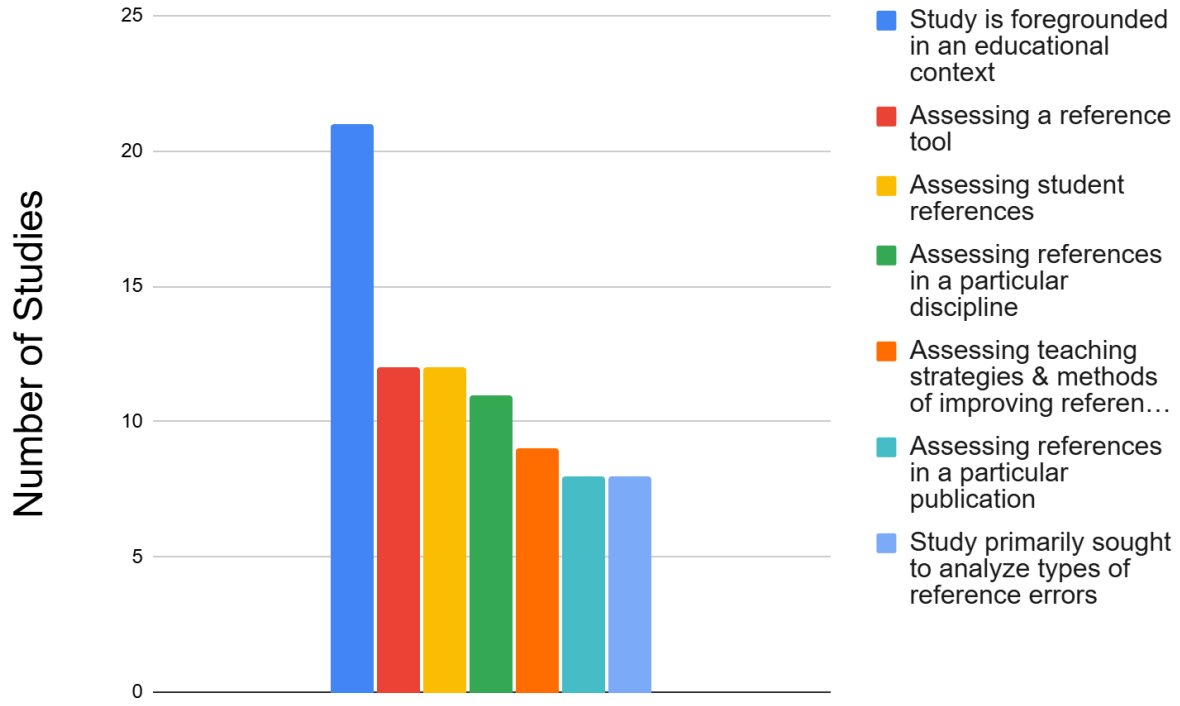


Figure 4
Main purpose(s) of included studies. This figure shows that reference accuracy studies in the review were undertaken for a variety of reasons. Categories are non-exclusive.

Discussion

During the screening process of this scoping review, we observed that the term "citation accuracy" was used to describe three distinct concepts. For our aims, the interest was in examining studies that measure the extent to which references follow the style guidelines of the APA publishing manual, and we included the 32 studies we found that met this definition. The two other types of citation accuracy studies we came across included those which assess whether references are appropriate and relevant to the paper, and those that determine if the elements of a reference entry are reported accurately (such as a reference entry that includes the wrong journal name). These types of citation accuracy studies, though equally important components of information literacy, were excluded from our review. There were no precise terms, either subject headings or keywords, that could be used in a search to parse these different types of citation "accuracy," and this resulted in an initial search that gathered an excessively broad set of results, increasing the screening burden. If specific terms were to be adopted for each of these types of citation accuracy, it could make future research on these topics more precise, easier to pinpoint in searches, and provide more clarity. We have suggested standard terminology in Table 1 and encourage its use in future publications.

Table 1
Suggested Terminology for Different Types of Citation "Accuracy" Analysis

Type of Citation Accuracy	**Suggested Terminology**
Is the cited source appropriate and relevant to the research?	Relevancy
Do the elements match the original source?	Verifiability
Do the elements conform to the formatting guidelines of the selected style?	Formatting Accuracy

Note. Only studies examining the third category, "formatting accuracy," were included in this review.

The TARCiS statement recommends citation searching for systematic search topics that are difficult to search for (Hirt et al., 2024). Citation searching turned out to be quite effective for this topic. Approximately one-third of our included studies (11 of 32) were identified through citation searching. A considerable portion of those (seven) were not indexed or abstracted in any of the databases we searched (Chang, 2013; Franz & Spitzer, 2006; Helmiawan, 2020; Ho, 2022; Housley Gaffney, 2015; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Zafonte & Parks-Stamm, 2016). This highlights the value of citation searching as a supplement to traditional database strategies for uncovering relevant but otherwise inaccessible literature.

What Various Criteria Have Been Used to Assess the Accuracy of APA Style Reference Entries?

Multiple editions of the APA Publication Manual were used in our included studies to assess formatting accuracy. As to be expected, the edition utilized was typically aligned with the study's publication date, given that each new edition introduces changes that influence how errors are evaluated. Consequently, any standardized tool developed to measure formatting accuracy must be tailored to the specific guidelines of a given edition.

There was considerable variation in the number of reference entries assessed across studies. This raises important methodological questions regarding the sample size necessary for accuracy studies to yield meaningful and generalizable results. For instance, can the evaluation of only two or three references provide a reliable measure of a student's formatting competency? Similarly, to what extent are findings valid when based on sample sizes of 30, 60, or even 120 database-generated references? Determining an appropriate sample size remains a critical issue for ensuring the rigor and credibility of research in this area.

Given that a substantial portion (44%) of our included studies evaluated automated reference generators, any tool developed should account for both manually created and automatically generated references to garner broad applicability. Our review included two studies that assessed ChatGPT, and inaccurate formatting of APA style citations was found in both. Although some types of errors produced by ChatGPT were what we would call issues with "verifiability," and have been well-documented in discussions of Large Language Model (LLM) hallucinations, the studies also included "formatting accuracy" errors, which is why they were included in this review. Therefore, the recent explosion in the availability of LLMs is unlikely to have solved the issue of inaccurately formatted references. Neither of the two LLM studies provides guidance for tool development since the methods and assessments used

were not detailed or transparent. The creation of standard assessment tools would assist researchers in evaluating artificial intelligence tools and other reference generators as new versions of technologies are introduced over time.

As discussed above, a significant challenge in evaluating reference accuracy across different studies has been the absence of a standardized vocabulary for describing and classifying errors. This was apparent not only in the description of specific errors, but also in naming broader types of errors. For example, "syntax" was a term used in 22% of the studies and generally indicated an incorrect order of required reference elements. However, even this more consistently applied term isn't standard; some authors, like Walters and Wilder (2023), described this issue as "order of the bibliographic elements" and categorized it more broadly as a "formatting error," while Foreman (1987) instead used "out of order." Similarly, the studies that grouped errors into categories described as "major" and "minor" also lacked consistency in their use of these labels. While "major" often implied errors hindering retrieval and "minor" referred to formatting issues, these definitions weren't uniformly applied across the five studies that used them. This overarching inconsistency highlights the substantial hurdles in standardizing mechanisms for reference accuracy. Perhaps because of this inconsistency, most studies did not attempt to classify errors into larger categories, but rather described specific error elements such as "article title" or "capitalization."

Are the Methods of the Included Studies Transparent and Reproducible and Could a Valid and Comprehensive Assessment Tool Be Created Based on the Synthesis of This Evidence?

Many of the methods in the included studies were not transparent and reproducible. Six studies did not specify which edition of the publication manual was used, nine studies did not provide the number of references analyzed, and eight studies did not specify the types of sources assessed. In four studies, specific reference errors were not noted at all, and in two other studies, only an example of a typical error was included. Of the seven studies that mentioned using a specific tool to assess accuracy, only four were accessible to review. Given these inconsistencies and gaps in methodological reporting, it is crucial that future research in this area prioritizes transparency and reproducibility. Clear documentation of procedural details, including the tools and sources used, will not only enhance the reliability of findings but also facilitate further replication and validation of results.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results nevertheless yielded valuable insights and constructive ideas. Developing a single tool to assess APA formatting accuracy would necessitate the inclusion of all potential formatting errors across all source types, and the feasibility of such a tool is questionable given the volume of possible errors. As noted, Onwuegbuzie and Hwang (2013) identified over 400 distinct errors. Including every possible error in a single assessment instrument would likely render it overly complex and impractical for routine use. Consequently, it is more plausible that effective formatting accuracy tools would need to be tailored to specific source types to balance thoroughness with usability. The journal article checklists created by APA (2025), Guinness et al. (2024), and Scheinfeld and Chung (2024) are good starting points. Synthesizing these three checklists, and including additional formatting errors identified in the studies included in this review, is the next logical step toward creating a standardized, comprehensive tool for journal article reference entries. Additional checklists would need to be designed for other source types. For comparing studies, the reporting of accuracy measurements such as "Total Number of Errors per Reference Entry," "Average Number of Errors per Reference Entry," or "Percentage of Errors for All Reference Entries" are preferred.

What Geographic Locations and Disciplines are Represented by the Authors of This Literature?

Our review revealed that the authors of the included studies were mainly in North America (n=24), with several studies being conducted by authors in Asia and one by authors in Africa. This research has been predominantly conducted over the past two decades by authors from the discipline of Library Science, underscoring that the research aligns closely with the professional responsibilities and interests of librarians.

What Issues of Bias or DEI (if any) Are Addressed?

Only one of our included studies mentioned a DEI-related issue with reference formatting. Ho (2022) notes that Malaysian names do not include a surname, a characteristic that led to citation formatting inaccuracies across all the automatic reference generators examined in their study. Ho further suggests that similar issues may arise when citing Indian names or other naming conventions that do not align with Western formats. To promote inclusivity and equity in scholarly communication, it is important for authors and researchers to be aware of these differences and approach citation practices with greater care. Additionally, Ho's study was identified through supplemental citation searching and was not indexed or abstracted in any of the databases we searched, underscoring the value of supplemental search strategies in capturing diverse perspectives and highlighting underexplored yet critical areas of research.

Limitations

We excluded articles that did not specifically address APA citation style; therefore, studies were excluded if they did not state which styles they assessed or if they did not assess APA style. Future reviews might benefit from including multiple styles, not only APA. Although tools to assess accuracy would be more practical if they were citation style-specific, the vocabulary describing different types of citation accuracy or broad categories of errors could be applicable across all citation styles. Future research may also be advised to include errors in the formatting of the reference page and errors in the formatting of the entire manuscript, including in-text citations. Our review focused on individual reference entries only, but it was interesting to note that a few of our included studies also assessed a broader range of formatting errors.

The fact that our search was limited to English-language results may have prevented us from gathering additional studies with DEI issues. Institutions that emphasize the importance of DEI should consider making resources available to faculty researchers who require translation services.

Finally, five included studies were retrieved as part of the inadvertent search of an aggregate of ProQuest databases, rather than the PQDT database. All five studies were duplicates of other database search results, therefore the error did not result in any additional included articles. We did not determine, however, whether including the PQDT database would have resulted in any additional included studies, and this is a limitation of our review.

Conclusion

This scoping review reveals a fragmented and inconsistent research landscape concerning the formatting accuracy of APA style references. The body of literature on this topic is characterized by a lack of consensus on fundamental aspects of assessment, including methodology, error classification terminology, and reporting metrics. A key methodological challenge highlighted by this review is the

considerable variation in the number of reference entries assessed across studies, which ranged from as few as two to over 1,400. Determining an appropriate sample size remains a critical issue for ensuring the rigor and credibility of research in this area. Measures that could be readily used to compare results, such as the "Average Number of Errors per Reference Entry," were used far less often than simple totals, limiting the potential for cross-study synthesis. Without standardized reporting, the collective value of this body of research is diminished, hindering efforts to identify persistent challenges or track improvements over time.

A central finding of this review is the absence of a standardized, widely accepted tool for assessing APA formatting accuracy. While some studies utilized checklists, these were often inaccessible or designed for a narrow range of source types. The feasibility of a single, comprehensive tool to assess all source types is questionable; therefore, developing and validating source-specific assessment tools appears to be a more practical and necessary next step. The need for such tools is further underscored by the increasing prevalence of automated reference generators and generative AI, which, as studies show, continue to produce formatting errors and require rigorous evaluation.

Furthermore, this review highlights critical gaps in the literature concerning issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Only one included study explicitly addressed a DEI-related issue, noting the mis-formatting of non-Western names by automatic reference generators. This finding, uncovered through citation searching, points to an underexplored area of citation practices and suggests that perspectives from other geographic locations are underrepresented.

To advance research and practice in this area, this review puts forth several recommendations. First, we advocate for the adoption of consistent terminology to distinguish between different types of citation analysis—specifically "formatting accuracy," "verifiability," and "relevancy"—to enhance clarity and precision. Second, future research must prioritize the development of evidence based, source-specific assessment tools that promote comparable reporting metrics. Given that most included studies were authored by librarians and analyzed student work, it is clear that librarians and educators are essential stakeholders in this effort. Finally, there is a need for deeper consideration of equity-related challenges in citation practices to ensure they are inclusive and responsible. Future scholarship should move beyond simply documenting errors toward creating the evidence based tools necessary to promote more accurate, inclusive, and ethically responsible citation practices.

Author Contributions

Laurel Scheinfeld: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing **Sunny Chung:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing **Christine Fena:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing **Clara Tran:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing **Chris Kretz:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing **Myra R. Reisman:** Investigation

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Appendix A
Indexes Included in Our Institution's Web of Science Core Collection

- Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED) – 1900-present
- Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) – 1956-present
- Arts & Humanities Citation Index (AHCI) – 1975-present
- Conference Proceedings Citation Index - Science (CPCI-S) – 1911-present
- Conference Proceedings Citation Index - Social Science & Humanities (CPCI-SSH) – 1911-present
- Book Citation Index - Science (BKCI-S) – 2005-present
- Book Citation Index - Social Sciences & Humanities (BKCI-SSH) - 2005-present
- Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) – 2020-present
- Current Chemical Reactions (CCR-EXPANDED) – 1985-present
- Index Chemicus (IC) – 1993-present

Appendix B
List of ProQuest Databases Included in the Aggregated Search

- Academic Video Online
- American Periodicals Full Text Included
- Coronavirus Research Database Full Text Included
- Digital National Security Archive Full Text Included
- Dissertations & Theses @ SUNY Stony Brook Full Text Included
- Ebook Central Full Text Included
- Education Research Index (1966 - current)
- Ethnic Newswatch Collection
- GenderWatch Collection
- GeoRef (1693-current)
- Literature Online
- Newsday (1985-current)
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-2015)
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-2016)
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2021)
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-2008)
- ProQuest Recent Newspapers: The New York Times (2008-current)
- Publicly Available Content Database
- U.S. Major Dailies (1980-current)

Appendix C
Table of 32 Included Studies

Note: References marked with an asterisk (*) are included studies found solely through citation searching.

Author Year Journal	Title	Location	Discipline	Source of References analyzed for accuracy	Number of references analyzed for accuracy	APA Edition	Citation Generator (if applicable)	Broad category of errors	DEI issues
Chang, 2013 LOEX Conference Proceedings	Cite it right: Critical assessment of open source web-based citation generators	United States	Library Science	Samples from reference manual(s)	18	6th	Citation Machine; EasyBib; BibMe; KnightCite; NCSU Citation Builder; NoodleBib; UNC Citation Builder; SourceAid	Syntax errors	None
Edewor & Omosor, 2010 Library Philosophy & Practice	Analysis of bibliographic references by textbook authors in Nigerian polytechnics	Nigeria	Library Science	Monograph(s)	Not specified	5th	None	None	None
Ernst & Michel, 2006 Teaching of Psychology	Deviations from APA style in textbook sample manuscripts	United States	Psychology	Monograph(s)	Not specified	3rd, 4th & 5th	None	None	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Fallahi et al., 2006 Teaching of Psychology	R2 A Program for Improving Undergraduate Psychology Students' Basic Writing Skills	United States	Psychology	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	Not specified	5th	None	None	None
Foreman & Kirchhoff, 1987 Research in Nursing & Health	Accuracy of references in nursing journals	United States	Nursing	Article reference list(s)	112	3rd	None	Major and/or Minor Errors, alphabetic or numeric	None
Franz & Spitzer, 2006 Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning	R2 Different Approaches to Teaching the Mechanics of American Psychological Association Style	United States	Psychology	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	Not specified	5th	None	None	None
Gilmour &	Reference	United	Library	Citations	54	6th	CiteULike,	None	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Cobus-Kuo, 2011 Issues in Science & Technology Librarianship	management software: A comparative analysis of four products	states	Science	chosen from a database			Mendeley, RefWorks, Zotero		
Giray, 2024 Internet Reference Services Quarterly	ChatGPT references unveiled: Distinguishing the reliable from the fake	Philippines	Education, Communications	Large Language Model queries	30	7th	ChatGPT	None	None
Greer & McCann, 2018 Communications in Information Literacy	Everything online is a website: Information format confusion in student citation behaviors	United States	Library Science	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	315	6th	None	None	None
Guinness et al., 2024	An online sequential	United States	Psychology	fictional journal	39	7th	None	None	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Behavioral Interventions	training package to teach citation formatting: Within and across participant analyses			article information					
Helmiawan, 2018 Baca: Jurnal Dokumentasi Dan	Reference error in book manuscript from Lipi: How good our scientists are in composing references	Indonesia	Publishing	Unpublished manuscripts	161	Not specified	None	Syntax errors	None
Ho, 2022 Voice of Academia	Free online citation	Malaysia	English	Student paper(s) or assignment(	18	7th	Zotero Bib, CiteMaker and Cite This For Me	None	As Malay author

Author Year Journal	Title	Location	Discipline	Source of References analyzed for accuracy	Number of references analyzed for accuracy	APA Edition	Citation Generator (if applicable)	Broad category of errors	DEI issues
	generators: which should undergraduates use with confidence?			s)					s do not have a surname, their names should be given in full. Similarly, Indian names should also be completely cited.
Homol, 2014 The Journal of Academic Librarianship	Web-based citation management tools: Comparing the accuracy of their electronic journal citations	United States	Library Science	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	47	6th	Zotero, EndNote Basic, RefWorks, EDS	Formatting Errors	None
Housley Gaffney, 2015 Journal of	Revising and reflecting:	United States	Communications	Student paper(s) or assignment(	Not specified	6th	None	None	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness	How assessment of APA style evolved over two assessment cycles in an undergraduate communication program			s)					
Jiao et al., 2008 Information Processing & Management	The relationship between citation errors and library anxiety: An empirical study of doctoral students in education	United States	Library Science	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	138	5th	Endnote, RefWorks, Noodlebib	None	None
Kessler & Van Ullen, 2005 The Journal Of Academic	Citation generators: Generatin	United States	Library Science	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	100	5th	NoodleBib and EasyBib, EndNote	Syntax errors	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Librarianship	g bibliographies for the next generation								
Kessler & Van Ullen, 2006 Public Services Quarterly	Citation help in databases: Helpful or harmful?	United States	Library Science	Citations chosen from a database	92	5th	EBSCO Academic Search Premier; Gale InfoTrac OneFile; Xreferplus; ScienceDirect; Sociological Abstracts via CSA; Wilson Education Full Text; and LexisNexis Academic	Syntax errors	None
Kousar, 2023 Journal of Indian Library Association	Reference accuracy in Indian library and information science theses	India	Library Science	Theses/Dissertation reference list(s)	915	Not specified	None	Major and/or Minor Errors, Formatting Errors, Bibliographic errors	None
Laing & James, 2023 Journal of Academic Librarianship	Ebsco and Summon discovery generator tools:	Canada	Library Science	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	60	7th	EBSCO Discovery Service and Summon	None	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
	How accurate are they?								
Onwuegbuzie & Hwang, 2013 International Journal of Education	Reference list errors in manuscripts submitted to a journal for review for publication	United States	Education	Unpublished manuscripts	Not specified	5th	None	None	None
Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010 Research in the Schools	Evidence-based guidelines for avoiding the most prevalent and serious apa error in journal article submissions-the citation error	United States	Education	Unpublished manuscripts	Not specified	5th	None	None	None
Rogayan, 2024 Internet Reference Services	"ChatGPT Assists Me in My Reference	Philippines	Education	Randomly chosen	3	7th	ChatGPT	None	None

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Quarterly	List:" Exploring the Chatbot's Potential as Citation Formatting Tool								
Scheinfeld & Chung, 2024 Journal of the Medical Library Association	Medline citation tool accuracy: An analysis in two platforms	United States	Library Science	Article reference list(s)	60	7th	PubMed, Ovid Medline	None	None
Shanmugam, 2009 Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science	Citation practices amongst trainee teachers as reflected in their project papers	Malaysia	Education	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	Not specified	Not specified	None	Major and/or Minor Errors	No
Speck & St. Pierre Schneider, 2013 Nurse	Effectiveness of a reference accuracy strategy	United States	Nursing	Article reference list(s)	303	6th	None	Major and/or Minor Errors, Style	No

Author Year Journal	Title	Location	Discipline	Source of References analyzed for accuracy	Number of references analyzed for accuracy	APA Edition	Citation Generator (if applicable)	Broad category of errors	DEI issues
Educator	for peer-reviewed journal articles							errors	
Stevens, 2016 Journal of Academic Librarianship	Citation generators, OWL, and the persistence of error-ridden references: An assessment for learning approach to citation errors	United States	Library Science	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	2	6th	None	Syntax errors	No
Van Note Chism & Weerakoon, 2012 Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning	APA, Meet Google: Graduate students' approaches to learning citation style	United States	Education	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	108	Not specified	None	None	No
Van Ullen & Kessler, 2016 Reference Services Review	Citation apps for mobile devices	United States	Library Science	Monograph(s)	100	6th	Citations2go, CiteThis, EasyBib, iCite, iSource, QuickCite, and RefMe	syntax errors	No

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
Van Ullen & Kessler, 2012 Public Services Quarterly	Citation help in databases: The more things change, the more they stay the same	United States	Library Science	Citations chosen from a database	45	5th	EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Credo, CSA Sociological Abstracts, Wilson Education Full Text, Article First, Proquest Criminal Justice Periodicals Index, Scopus, Project MUSE	syntax errors	No
Walters & Wilder, 2023 Scientific Reports	Fabrication and errors in the bibliographic citations generated by ChatGPT	United States	Library Science	Papers generated by Chat GPT	636	Not specified	None	substantive errors vs formatting errors	No
Yap, 2020 Library Philosophy and Practice	Common referencing errors committed by graduate students	Kazakhstan	Library Science	Theses/Dissertation reference list(s)	1432	6th	None	None	No

Author Year Journal	**Title**	**Location**	**Discipline**	**Source of References analyzed for accuracy**	**Number of references analyzed for accuracy**	**APA Edition**	**Citation Generator (if applicable)**	**Broad category of errors**	**DEI issues**
	in education								
Zafonte & Parks-Stamm, 2016 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology	Effective instruction in APA style in blended and face-to-face classrooms	United States	Psychology & Education	Student paper(s) or assignment(s)	Not specified	Not specified	None	Major, Significant or Minor formatting errors	No