Citing online references

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Background

Citation of journal references is a well established practice with a number of common formats and a plethora of lesser knowns. We are all quite used to seeing APA, Vancouver and other styles. Our reference managers are quite adept at reformatting such citations into the style required for a particular journal.

But things are not nearly so clear cut for other materials, in particular web pages and online materials. The Digital Object Identifier (doi) system has helped quite a bit in standardizing many references but they are by no means universal. Using a URL or URI (yes, I also get confused at the difference here) is quite helpful but there are a number of problems arising from this:

1. The URL may be dynamically generated by the underlying database - this is very common, and is known in some circles as the Deep Web.
2. The URL or web site may expire
3. The URL may be broken because the document has moved, the web site died etc.

When you can, this can be partially resolved by using Persistent URLs (PURLs) but many websites do not offer this capability.

On top of this, how to cite online resources is not standardized. Reference manager software applications each handle them in a unique manner. Journals also have quite varying requirements in their Instructions for Authors.

There are some websites that provide information on how to format such sources:
- https://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/cite-write/citation-style-guides/apa/websites
- http://www.lib.rmit.edu.au/easy-cite/
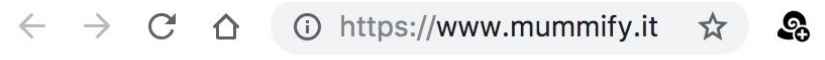
Citation Archival
To try to counter the ephemeral nature of such references, there are now some services which provide both a persistent identifier, and also store a copy of the web page, as seen at the time that you created your citation, in an archival storage system.

There is a very useful, albeit slightly complex, reference to these services at The Memento Project.

- http://webcitation.org -- **WebCite**, provided by the University of Toronto

- https://perma.cc/ -- Perma is a freemium service provided by Harvard's Library Innovation Lab
- http://mementoweb.org/about/ -- Memento, provided by the Los Alamos National Laboratory
- https://archive.org/web/ - the Internet Archive
- http://archive.is/ - Archive Today

Ironically, there is also mention of a service called Mummify (https://www.mummify.it) which has now itself departed this earth.

← → C ⌂ ⓘ https://www.mummify.it ☆ 🐾

This site can't be reached

www.mummify.it's server IP address could not be found.

DNS_PROBE_FINISHED_NXDOMAIN

We have tried all of these services and our current favorite is: **WebCite**

There are three main features of **WebCite** that are worth considering: (a) when you create a reference to an online source, it becomes permanent, not subject to the vagaries of some web site administrator; (b) the material that is referenced is archived so that even if the original dies, you can still see it as it was when it was referenced; (c) the citation format (because of these advantages) is starting to see acceptance as a standard for items that do not have a doi. For example, PLoS and JMIR require that you use WebCite for references that do not have a doi; (d) it has a handy bookmarklet which makes grabbing the citation into an easy single step.

Even if the journal expects a slightly different format for its citation, it is still worth considering the use of WebCite (for reasons a and b above), plus it is not hard to reformat from the WebCite standard style to that required by the journal.

Working an example

To illustrate how these various services work, we used the following web page:
http://www.rhymezone.com/r/rhyme.cgi?loc=ol_ue&typeofrhyme=wke&Word=ephemeral
- An example of Deep Web data, generated by a database query
- Also may turn out to be ephemeral because is a small site that may not persist

So, let's look at how they fared…

- https://archive.org/web/ - the Internet Archive captured as
  - https://web.archive.org/web/20190507164612/http://www.rhymezone.com/r/rhyme.cgi?loc=ol_ue&typeofrhyme=wke&Word=ephemeral
- Captured by Archive Today as http://archive.is/MahuK
  - Also creates a zip file which you can download
- Captured by WebCite as

http://www.webcitation.org/78CDaYHmu
If the archiving process has been successful, you can cite this work as follows:
AUTHORNAME. TITLE. SOURCE. .
URL:http://www.rhymezone.com/r/rhyme.cgi?loc=ol_ue&typeofrhyme=wke&Word=ephemeral. Accessed: 2019-05-07. **(Archived by WebCite® at [http://www.webcitation.org/78CDaYHmu)](http://www.webcitation.org/78CDaYHmu)**
Please note that the short ("opaque") form of the WebCite® URL should be used only *in addition* to citing the original URL in your bibliographic reference.
Alternatively, please use the "transparent" (but very long!) WebCite® URL:
http://www.webcitation.org/query?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.rhymezone.com%2Fr%2Frhyme.cgi%3Floc%3Dol_ue%26typeofrhyme%3Dwke%26Word%3Dephemeral&date=2019-05-07

WebCite can be quite slow as a service but does provide you with more help as to how to use the generated citation.

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Appendices

Working with Sente

Sidebar: If you use **Sente** as your reference manager, in order to try and make the workflow easier, I have tweaked Sente to support WebCite references. Steps:

1. Find the online page, site, or data item you wish to refer to. Make sure that the URL in the location bar is clean and accurate.
2. Go to WebCite at http://webcitation.org/archive.php
3. Copy the URL into the form, along with pertinent details such as date last accessed.
4. Submit the metadata to WebCite, generating the archive and a shortened URL.
5. Within Sente, create a new blank Reference, type = Web Page
6. Enter the long URL into the 'url' field in Sente.
7. Enter the shortened URL generated by WebCite into the 'citation id' field.
8. Enter today's date into the date accessed field.

9. Enter author name if you know it.

I have also formatted the Web Page reference type in Sente so that in the style 'JAMA 1', it is correctly formatted in the bibliography section. You will need to copy this format to other styles if you use them.