Common Knowledge

What is common knowledge?

Common Knowledge refers to information that the average, educated reader would accept as reliable without having to look it up.

Examples include:

- **Information that most people know**, such as oxygen is a gas, the first president of the United States was George Washington, or that water freezes at 32 degrees.
- **Information shared by a cultural or national group**, such as the names of famous heroes or events in the nation’s history that are remembered and celebrated.
- **Knowledge shared by members of a certain field**, such as the fact that the necessary condition for diffraction of radiation of wavelength from a crystalline solid is given by Bragg’s law.

However, what may be common knowledge in one culture, nation, academic discipline or peer group may not be common knowledge to another.

How can I determine if my information is common knowledge?

To help determine whether information is common knowledge, consider the following questions:

- Who is my audience?
- What can I assume they already know?
- Will I be asked where I obtained my information?

Some examples:

- A description of the symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome would need to be cited for a composition in a general writing class, but probably would not need a citation for an audience of graduate students in psychology.
- A reference to the practice of fair value accounting would be understood by a group of economists, but would need citation to an audience of non-experts.
- A statement reporting that 24% of children under the age of 18 live in households headed by single mothers would need to be cited. This information that would not be known to the average reader, who would want to know where the figure was obtained.
What is not common knowledge?

There are many pieces of information that are not considered common knowledge. Here are a few examples:

- Datasets, whether generated by your or others.
- Statistics obtained from sources such as the US Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- References to studies done by others
- Reference to specific dates, numbers, or facts the reader would not know unless they had done the research

Examples of statements that need citation. Each refers to work done by others, statistics, or specific information that would not be known by the average reader:

Researchers have found that dispersants utilized to clean up spills can lead to lung damage when airborne particles of these dispersants combine with crude oil and are inhaled.


A recent study done by scholars at the Brookings Institute found that the number of people living in poverty in America grew by 12.3 million between 2000 and 2010, so that by the end of 2010, 15% of the population was living under the poverty line.


The energy of mixing per site for a binary polymer blend with differing degrees of polymerization can be described through the Flory-Huggins equation.


*Note: this equation is specific to the thermodynamics of macromolecular structures and would not be considered common knowledge to many scientists or engineers. For these reasons, they need to be cited.*

*Adapted from the MIT Student Handbook*