

Commentary

How to (Better) Cite Aristotle in APA Format?

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In this article, we expose what seems to be a deficiency in the APA7 citation system in relation to the works of classical authors who have canonical numbering, such as Aristotle or Plato, and we propose a citation format compatible with APA7 that dispenses with bibliographically irrelevant information and at the same time allows locating the cited text with absolute precision.

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Introduction

It is increasingly common in bibliographic citation style manuals to incorporate new information formats. Today, in an academic text, we can cite not only written works (books and journals) but also audiovisual documents, web pages, and even posts from social networks such as X, Instagram, or TikTok. While new kinds of information take their place in bibliographic citation systems, however, some formats that have been consolidated for decades —or even centuries— have entered a certain crisis, as a result, perhaps, of our increasing distance from tradition.

When we think of books, we tend to think short-sightedly. We usually work with books that have been published over the last few decades and which are easily accessible and citable. There may have been several editions, or several types of editions (critical, academic, informative...) of the same book, and we just choose which one we want to cite. Printed books have existed for a little over 500 years, and our horizon does not often extend beyond that. But humanity has been producing written works for several thousand years and, in any case, systematically so in the last 2,500 years. A work, therefore, by Plato or Aristotle cannot be cited in the same way as the work of a contemporary philosopher, such as Arendt or Heidegger, nor in the same way as we cite the work of a classic author of the last five hundred years, like Descartes or Madame de Staël.

Any reader of philosophy knows that it is common to find, throughout the classic works, some numbers, sometimes in brackets, others on the page margins. Thus, if we read the *Letter to Herodotus* by Epicurus, we will see that, at the beginning of the text, the number 35 appears, which corresponds to the same paragraph of the tenth book of the work *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius (where, for the first time, this letter of Epicurus is transmitted to us in its entirety) in accordance with the proposed paragraph numbering by Marcus Madebonius in his bilingual (Greek-Latin) edition of 1692. Or, if we are reading a dialogue by Plato, such as *Phaedrus*, we will find, at the very beginning of the text, the number 227a, which corresponds to page (227) and section (a) of the bilingual edition (Latin - Greek) that, of Plato's dialogues, was published in 1578 by the Venetian typographer Henri Estienne (or Henricus Stephanus, as he used to sign his prints). Similarly, if we open Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, we see in the first line the number 980a, which corresponds to page (980) and column (a, that is, the first one) of the edition of *Aristotelis Opera* which, between 1831 and 1870, was edited by Immanuel Bekker in Berlin, in two columns: a and b. These canonical numbering systems, used by academics from all over the world, allow any passage of a classic work to be identified in a standardized way, regardless of the edition or translation with which we work. It should be kept in mind that we are talking about works of which there are hundreds of editions, in hundreds of different languages. It would make no sense to reference them with the year of publication and page to locate a fragment cited in a book or an article because this would require having the same edition used by the author of the text we are reading.

APA7 system: lacks and problems

It would seem logical that, if this is a standardized system and it is used by publishers and academics around the world, it would also be considered in the various guidelines of bibliographic citation. This is not always the case, however. The 7th edition of the *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association^[1], in section 8.13 (264), tells us how to cite specific excerpts. In relation to classical works, they recommend avoiding page numbers and instead using canonical numbers: "For religious and classical works with canonically numbered parts common across editions (e.g. books, chapters, verses, lines, cantos), quote the part instead of a page number (see Section 9.42)". And among other examples, they propose the following format: "Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/1994, Part IV", and remind us that "it is possible to quote a specific part of a source whether you are paraphrasing (see Sections 8.23-8.24) or directly quoting (see Sections 8.25-8.27)".

For further guidance on quoting works without page numbers, the APA Manual refers us to section 8.28, where it says: “To directly quote from material with canonically numbered sections (e.g., religious or classical works; see also Section 9.42 and Chapter 10. Examples 35–37), use the name of the book, chapter, verse, line, and/or canto instead of a page number”.

And in section 9.42:

When the date of original publication for a classical work is ancient, use the abbreviation “B.C.E.” (which stands for “before the common era”), and if that date is approximate, use the abbreviation “ca.” (which stands for “circa”; see Chapter 10, Example 36). If a religious or classical work has canonically numbered parts common across editions (e.g. books, chapters, verses, lines, cantos), use these numbers instead of page numbers when referring to a specific part of the work (see Section 8.13) or directly quoting the work (see Section 8.28).

We’ve already seen sections 8.13 and 8.28 above, so let’s see what they propose in section 10.36:

Aristotle (1994). *Poetics* (SH Butcher, Trans.). The Internet Classics Archives.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html> (Original work published ca. 350 BCE)

Parenthetical citation: (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/1994)

Narrative citation: Aristotle (ca. 350 BCE/1994)

As we can see, to fully understand the guidelines of APA7 for the citation of classical works, we must puzzle over at least four different sections of the manual. The APA is an association of psychologists, and it’s perhaps normal for them to want us to go crazy. But the main problem with the APA7 proposal, however, is that it does not seem to have been designed for cases like those we described at the beginning of this article. It is strange, indeed, that APA cites a work of Aristotle referring to “Part IV”. Note that, with this reference, we have no way of knowing even to which work of the Stagirite the *Manual* refers, until we look at the final list of bibliographic references and search for the title of Aristotle’s work published in 1994, which turns out to be his *Poetics*. Scholars, when they refer to works by classical authors, such as Aristotle, tend to do so by means of the title, most of the time abbreviated: *Pol.* (for *Politics*), *Phys.* (for *Physics*), *NE* (for *Nicomachean Ethics*) or *EE* (for *Eudemian Ethics*).¹ Thus, with only the abbreviation and standard paragraph numbering of the Bekker edition, we can succinctly and accurately reference any classical work that has canonical numbering. If I refer to

"EN 1094a1", I will be placing the reader, very precisely, in the first line of the first paragraph of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whichever edition the reader and I use.

Year of original publication or year of modern edition?

It is somewhat surprising that APA7 advises us to include, in the citation, the year of original publication. The very notion of original publication, for any ancient work, is frankly strange. In the case of Aristotle, for example, the set of texts that we have preserved was never a published work. They were not even, strictly speaking, *a work*, but a heterogeneous collection of teaching material used by Aristotle in his lessons at the Lyceum. For the most part, they were probably not even written by him, but collected by some of his disciples. What most resembles an original publication in ancient times of the works of Aristotle is the compilation that, of all these writings, Andronicus of Rhodes made in the 1st century BC —two hundred and fifty years after the death of the philosopher. We owe the *editio princeps* of the complete Aristotelian works to Aldo Manuzio, who published it in five volumes in Venice, between 1495 and 1498. And as we have already seen, the critical edition that has finally become mandatory to determine the canonical numbering is that of Bekker, published in the 19th century, starting with the first volume in 1831. Which of these years should we choose as "original publication" to properly cite any Aristotelian work? Writing "ca. 350 BCE" is problematically ambiguous, and it does not provide any kind of bibliographically relevant information. In 350 BCE, Plato was still alive, and we know for sure that Aristotle, aged 34, was still with him in the Academy. It was not until well over fifteen years later, around 335 BCE, when he returned to Athens and began his public activity at the Lyceum, that we can consider his written production (not publication) to have begun. The data "ca. 350 BCE", then, is not only inaccurate, but it has no way of being verified; the exact year of writing of any Aristotelian work, like most of the Platonic dialogues, or even the order in which these works were written, is still today a matter of controversy among specialists, and it is not possible for us to have a close enough idea of it to be worth referencing, not even with an approximative *circa* ("ca.").

It is easy to understand that, by referring to the year of original publication, APA7 wanted to prevent the reader from encountering a citation such as "(Aristotle, 2019, 84)" —which is certainly surprising, to say the least. It is also true that the insistence of APA7 not to use page numbers but the canonical numbering in the case of classic works would allow the standard numbering to be incorporated at the end of each citation. This, however, would give rise to citations of this kind:

“(Aristotle ca. 335–323 BCE / 2019, 1094a7)”, where we could have referenced exactly the same work and fragment with complete accuracy just by writing “NE 1094a7”. This last system is perfectly viable—and it seems preferable—in those cases in which we are paraphrasing, and therefore, it is completely unnecessary to refer to a specific modern (“2019”) edition. It is enough that the first time the author mentions the work *Nicomachean Ethics* includes, immediately afterwards, the usual parenthesis indicating: “(NE from now onwards)”. On the other hand, in those cases in which we are directly quoting, it is relevant to know which edition we are using. This is because if we are quoting a translation, as is common, there may be substantial differences between one version and another. Here, then, it will be inevitable to have to refer to the modern edition, but it will also be essential not to forget the canonical numbering which, in any case, cannot be something like “Part IV” but has to be the exact page and column number from the Bekker edition, for any Aristotelian text, and the corresponding one for the rest of the classical authors who have similar canonical numbering systems.

Our proposal

At this point, let’s try to offer a proposal for citation perfectly compatible with APA7 but which dispenses with irrelevant information while incorporating essential bibliographic identifiers:

Ex. 1 (giving credit when paraphrasing):

According to Aristotle an act is involuntary when it occurs by force or by ignorance (NE 1109b35).

Ex. 2 (parenthetical in-text citation):

As the Stagyrte argues in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1109b35): “It is then generally held that actions are involuntary when done (a) under compulsion of (b) through ignorance” (Aristotle, 1934).

Ex. 3 (narrative in-text citation):

As Aristotle (1934, NE 1109b35) argues: “It is then generally held that actions are involuntary when done (a) under compulsion or (b) through ignorance”.

In the first example, no reference to a concrete modern edition is needed because there is no literal quotation. For the second and third examples, in the reference list we will find: “Aristotle (1934). *Nicomachean Ethics* (H. Rackam, Trans.). Harvard University Press.”

Conclusion

With this proposal, we will always have, next to the author's name, the publication year of the modern edition we are using, to provide to the reader the source of our translation (in philosophy, this point is especially important because divergences between translations can be meaningful and deeply affect the sense of the quote). At the same time, we should not fail to provide the canonical reference so that readers can easily locate the quoted fragment in the edition that they have closest at hand, whether we are just paraphrasing or if we are quoting *in extenso*. Finally, we will avoid, in all cases, any indication of page number because the canonical numbering constitutes a precise system for locating the quoted fragment in any edition and the reference to the page number would be redundant.

Footnotes

¹The most used abbreviation proposal is that of Hornblower et al.^[2].

References

1. [^]APA (2020). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. 7th Edition. American Psychological Association.*
2. [^]Hornblower S, Spawforth A, Eidinow E (2012). *The Oxford Classical Dictionary. Fourth Edition. Oxford University Press.*

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