QGWS Episode 6: Citing sources transparently

N: Hi and welcome back! So far in this series, we've looked at the four main sections of an IMRD text. This episode examines something you can find in IMRD texts and most other academic texts, and that's how you refer to other people's work. We'll use examples from this article:

V: "Epidemiology of race-day distal limb fracture in flat racing Thoroughbreds in Great Britain"

N: To recap, the topic is a kind of injury which can occur in racehorses: fractures in the distal limb. The purpose of the study is to find out whether injuries like this happen more often under certain circumstances. Academic writing builds upon earlier work and adds to it to create something new. Readers need to be able to see how earlier works have influenced new ones, and writers have a responsibility to show them. Readers need to know three things: Which facts, ideas, and so on come from another source?; What is the source?; and who is responsible for the way the ideas are formulated? Let's see how writers can answer these questions.

To signal that information comes from a source, writers use a reference. This is also called a citation. For readers, originality is the "default setting." That is, if you don't provide a reference for an idea, readers will assume that it comes from you, not from a source. References can appear in different forms. In the sciences, two are particularly common. They can appear as numbers or the authors' name may appear in the text.

The second question the reader needs to have answered is: "who is the source?" The in-text citation helps answer this question, by naming the source, and the reference list gives full details. Someone who wants to find this and read it has enough information to do so.

The third question is "whose words are these?" In some subjects, this is a complex question, because writers can choose to quote from their sources—that is, use the same words exactly, with quotation marks to show what they've done. But in the sciences, quotations are extremely rare. The expectation is that writers will usually find their own words for reporting information from a source. This often involves condensing the content from the source. In this example, findings from three studies are summarized and presented in a single sentence.

When the reader can see what information comes from a source, which source and whose words are being used, we can say that the writer has used sources transparently. Writers with less experience and confidence sometimes use strategies which cause problems. Let's take a look at the original text first.

V: "Race-day fractures are a concern for a racing industry seeking to maintain racing safety and enhance racehorse welfare."

N: Some writers may start with language from the source and make changes, for example, by substituting some words:

V: "Race-day fractures are a worry for a racing industry wishing to maintain racing safety and improve racehorse welfare."

N: Or changing the order:

V: "Race-day fractures are a worry for a racing industry wishing to maintain racing safety and improve the welfare of racehorses."

N: Or add or remove words:

V: "Race-day fractures are a problem and a worry for a racing industry wishing to maintain racing safety and improve the welfare of racehorses."

N: But even if this makes it look different from the original sentence, this isn't a good strategy. The writer hasn't met the responsibility to use sources transparently. That is, the reader can't see how the source has been used. So this isn't good academic writing. It might also look like plagiarism to your teacher, and that can have serious consequences.

To summarize, academic writers have a responsibility to show their readers how they've used other people's work. Readers need to know what information comes from a source, which sources have been used, and whose language is used. By the way, in the interests of transparency, you can find the sources of our examples in the credits.