

## "CORE ELEMENTS of Online Source Citation," by Elizabeth Shown Mills

FROM: *GENEALOGY POINTERS* (09-23-08)

Online sources are publications with the same core elements as print publications. Most websites are the online equivalent of a book. Thus, we cite the:

- (1) author/creator/owner of the website's content (if identifiable)
- (2) title of the website
- (3) type of item (as with a book's edition data)
- (4) publication data
- (5) place (URL)
- (6) date (posted, updated, copyrighted, or accessed--specify which)
- (7) specific detail for that citation (page, section, paragraph, keywords, entry, etc.)

If the website offers multiple items by different creators, it is the equivalent of a book with chapters by different authors. That calls for citations of two additional items:

- (8) title of database, article, set of abstracts, or image collection
- (9) name of creator of the database, etc.

Within this architecture, a website is not a repository. Conceptually, the repository is the Internet or the World Wide Web. The distinction matters. When a citation template within our data-management software asks us to identify a repository, we invoke [this] basic rule: in published citations, repositories are cited only for manuscript material exclusive to the repository where we used it. Repositories are not cited for published sources. To enter a website's name as our repository would be to say that the website's name is not an essential part of the citation. Therefore, the software might automatically omit it in printing out reference notes.

Identification of authors, creators, and website titles may require careful scrutiny of not only the relevant page but also its root pages. At each site we use, we should thoughtfully consider its construction and meticulously record every piece of information that might help us or someone else relocate the material in the event of a broken link. When we cite material that is available at multiple websites, we should consider which provider is likely to be the most permanent.

### IMAGES vs. DATABASES vs. ESSAYS

Web providers of historical content typically offer digital material in three forms: (a) images of original records; (b) databases that compile historical data from the original images or other sources; (c) essays and other writings that interpret this material. The three types do not carry the same weight on any scale by which evidence is appraised. Thus our citations to websites should specifically state the type of digital file we are using, if the title itself does not state that information.

### MULTIPLE OFFERINGS AT ONE SITE

Websites that offer multiple items (articles, databases, etc.) by different individuals are the online equivalent of books with chapters by different authors. Thus, our citation needs to cover not only the website and its creator and publication data but also the (1) author/creator of item (when identifiable) and (2) title of item

### PUNCTUATION

Punctuation in online citations follows most rules for books and their chapters, or journals and their articles:

- \* Website titles (like book titles) appear in italics.
- \* Database titles (like article and chapter titles) appear in quotation marks.
- \* Publication data such as the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) and date of posting or access are the equivalent of publication data for books. Logically, they should appear in parentheses within the reference notes. (Note: Angle brackets around URLs were recommended in the early days of the Internet. However, as electronic citations have evolved, the use of angle brackets has been discouraged because it conflicts with their use in HTML coding.
- \* Citations to specific details such as paragraph numbers (like page numbers in a book) appear after the parentheses that enclose the publication data.

### **WEB ADDRESSES (URLs)**

Identification of a website's address--its URL--can be tricky. Long URLs typically represent dynamic pages created on the fly when we enter a search term. We may find a long URL reusable so long as we do not clear our computer's browser cache. However, it likely will not work for others or for us at a later time. An alternative is to cite the website's home page, along with keywords in the path that takes a browser to the proper site. That method is not more permanent, however. The reorganization of a website could eventually make our cited keywords and path unworkable. By recording the access date, we may have a reference point usable at some Internet caches to retrieve the material.

### **Capitalization:**

Many URLs are case sensitive. We should copy a URL exactly, with no corrections of capitalization or alteration of style. When a URL appears at the beginning of a sentence, immediately following a period (as in most bibliographic entries), we should not capitalize the first letter.

### **Hyphens, Tildes & Underlines:**

We should take special care in reproducing hyphens (-), tildes (---), and underlines (\_). Each has a distinct coding and one cannot be substituted for the other.

### **Line Breaks & Punctuation:**

When it is necessary to break a URL at the end of the line, we should not hyphenate the line break. If a URL contains a hyphen, we do not break the line immediately after the hyphen. A break may be made between syllables or after a colon, slash, or double slash. However, if we need to break the line near any other embedded punctuation mark, then we place the punctuation mark at the start of the next line.

In Evidence Style citations, URLs are followed by a space and a colon, then the appropriate date. This practice serves two purposes: (1) it follows the practice already used in library cataloging of books, whereby the publication place is followed by a space, then a colon, then a space before information on the publisher and date; and (2) the space between the URL and the colon creates a clear and finite break between the URL and other punctuation that might follow it in the sentence under present or future protocols.

[The preceding article is excerpted from Chapter Two of Mrs. Mills' acclaimed textbook, EVIDENCE EXPLAINED: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace. Chapter Two lays the foundation for the more than 1,000 citation examples found throughout the volume. For more information about EVIDENCE EXPLAINED, please visit the following URL.]

[http://www.genealogical.com/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&item\\_number=3843&NLC-GenPointers1](http://www.genealogical.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&item_number=3843&NLC-GenPointers1)