



# The ambassadors' honor: a citation policy for open access

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The authors whose works are [openly accessible](#) make [a public use of reason](#). The ones that prefer closed access make a [private use](#) of it. They do not address themselves to the citizens of the world through the best media technology available: they talk only to the restricted group of people who can afford to pay. Usually authors choose closed access either because they are accustomed to follow the publishing practices of their scholarly communities without thinking too much, or because they fear that their career could be damaged by a way of publishing still perceived as uncommon. Their theater of action, here, is not a virtually universal public sphere: it is a particular set of institutions.

[Citations are the currency in the trade of science communication](#). When I build my thesis upon the ideas of others, they are useful both to pay my debts and to display the soundness of my credit: my voice resonates louder if I back it with the literature assets I withdrew from the big bank of learning.

Moreover, citations are the raw matter of [bibliometrics](#), which may be crucial to research evaluation, career advancements and [libraries purchase policies](#). In such a use, citations are currency not only metaphorically, but also in a very literal sense.

Besides, in a paper published on the web, citations, as links, are money in the meaning of the [attention economy](#): every time I link a resource, I increase its value, by boosting its search engine [rank](#) and making it more visible. And, **as [Open Access brings an increased citation impact](#), a citation in an openly accessible article is a wonderful present.**

**If the cited document is openly accessible as well, such a citation is a token of gratitude for the very gift of its presence. However, can we say the same about closed access papers?**

According to George Monbiot's *Guardian* [recent article](#), academic publishers "are the most ruthless capitalists in the Western world": they exploit the work of researchers and reviewers without paying them; they privatize their product, which is publicly funded by research grants and academic stipends, and they sell it to its very producers for outrageous prices. **Why should open access authors advertise their journals for free and without reciprocity, [for the sake of their profit](#)?**

The recommendation to cite only openly accessible resources would be radical but unfair. The oligopolists of academic publishing are inclined to make us believe that the worth of our contents depends on where they have been published (Björn Brembs, [What's wrong with scholarly publishing today?](#) slide 87): we cannot make the same mistake, by ruling out that a really good idea might appear even in a closed access site. Therefore, we have to figure out a kind of harm reduction citation policy, with some changes to the current practices.

1. Give always preference to open accessible literature over closed access items;
2. always cite the documents archived in open access institutional or disciplinary repositories even when there is a closed access version of them;
3. if ideas are relevant regardless of their authors, always cite an openly accessible paper that contains them, even if you have to prefer the article of a Ph. D. candidate over the latest book of some well-known academic star;
4. if the closed access resource is irreplaceable, do not cite it directly, but mention the openly accessible papers reporting and reviewing its content. If they are missing, write a short, openly accessible report about it, stressing that, if it is the case, the access to it is closed and behind a paywall whilst it could have been open.

A second hand citation leaves almost unchanged the citation impact of the text and it has another major merit.

In an environment of increasing information overload, curators - or [trail blazers in the meaning of Vannevar Bush](#) - play a creative role: they suggest [which way to turn](#), reduce complexity by means of standards more sophisticated and human than popularity based algorithms, [create new ideas from the combination of already known concepts](#). Just for this reason only, they deserve to be given credit.

However, **the curators who expound the content of a closed access resource in an openly accessible site**, add something still more important: they **make free for the public use of reason something that was captive of its private use** ; they speak in light what was told in darkness and publish upon the housetops what they heard in the ear. In this regard, they are the actual scholars, because they are the ones telling the citizens of the world something that the nominal authors reserved for the chosen few blessed with money.

According to the current scholarly practices, second hand citations are deprecated because they make people suspect we did not

read the cited text, especially if they contain the same inaccuracies of the copied citation. The proposed citation policy does not comply with such a rule. Second hand citations are right and proper when they are not due to the laziness of the citing person, but to a choice, sometimes unwitting, of the cited authors. **If they prefer to speak to the few and in behalf of someone while they could speak to everyone and in behalf of everyone**, they must become aware that they are declining to enter into the public sphere first-hand as well. That they have to accept the mediation - not necessarily accurate and well-meant - of others taking away their merit. For **today's public use of reason is in the open access**.

*The present proposal is a reaction to the still prevailing publishing practices in the field of human and social sciences and to the still lingering lack of awareness of a wide portion of the Italian scholarly community. Do you have better solutions? They are welcome.*