

Accuracy of Citation and Quotation in Foot and Ankle Surgery Journals

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Abstract

Background: A recent review of technical editing of research suggests that over one third of references cited in articles in medical journals have some inaccuracies and one fifth of quotations to references in these articles are not accurate.

Methods: Two hundred and forty-nine citation references and 408 quotes from 25 articles published in 5 orthopaedic journals were randomly selected to determine referencing accuracy. The presence of citation errors was examined by 1 of the authors while the presence of quotation errors was determined by 2 of the authors. Full copies of articles as well as the references were obtained to compare the accuracies.

Results: The total citation error rate was 41% (103 out of 249 references), and the total quotation error rate was 20% (80 out of 408 quotes) for the 5 orthopaedic journals.

Conclusion: Citation and quotation errors were still relatively common in orthopaedic journals. While we did not identify any factors associated with citation and quotation errors, the use of technical editing may reduce the amount of citation errors.

Clinical Relevance: Readers and authors should be aware that many citations of studies are inaccurate and one should review the original source if it is to be used in another publication or to guide clinical treatment.

Keywords: reference accuracy, citation error, quotation error

As research articles become increasingly complex, references have been and continue to be an integral part of the published manuscript. They act as a crucial tool to give credit to the previous literature, support the author's statements, and calculate the journal's impact factors, which is commonly described as a measure of journal quality.²² However, previous studies have identified citation and quotation error rates in a variety of journals from different specialties.^{1,2,5-7,10-12,21,23,26}

There are two types of reference errors. The first type involves errors in bibliography listing.^{7,10,11,21,26} Author citation mistakes may lead to difficulties in locating valuable resources for other researchers. The second type of error considered is quotation error. These errors occur when there exists an incongruity between the author's statement and the quoted reference. Such errors can frustrate the readers and weaken the author's argument. There has been some concern that authors often quote references without reading and understanding the content, and such action may damage the integrity of the author and the respective journal of publication.⁴

A recent study about biomedical journals reported a median citation error rate of 38% and median quotation rate of 20%.²⁶ There has been one previous study on both citation and quotation errors in orthopaedic journals to our knowledge. Davids et al⁵ reported a median 26% citation error rate and 38% quotation error rate per journal in 4 peer-reviewed orthopaedic journals from 2007 to 2008.

The aim of this study was to explore the reference accuracies for 3 of the major foot and ankle surgery journals not studied before and 2 of the major orthopaedic journals studied previously.⁵ Possible risk factors that increase the error rates were also examined.²¹

Materials and Methods

Five articles from each of the 5 peer-reviewed orthopaedic journals—the *American Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* (JBJS-A), the *British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* (JBJS-B), *Foot and Ankle International* (FAI), *Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery* American version (JFAS), and *Foot and Ankle Surgery* European version (FASE) were selected, resulting in 25 articles. All articles were collected from the 2009 publication year of the journals. A random number generator was used to choose the articles.²⁵ First, the random number generator selected a number between 1 and 12 for the month, then the random number generator was used to select

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a second number from 1 to 5 to signify which article out of the first 5 articles of the month was selected. For example, a 4 and 5 generated the fifth article from the April issue.

Journal impact factors were obtained from *Journal Citation Reports* 2009.¹³ Each article was evaluated by the authors (ML and CCL) together on study type, level of evidence based on the *JBJS-A* standard,¹⁴ number of authors, word count, page number, number of references, and the education level of the authors. The word count of each paper started from the first word of introduction to the last word of conclusion or discussion. Bibliography, abstract, title, and acknowledgments were excluded from the word count. Ten references from each article were chosen using a random sequence generator that created a list of 10 nonrepeating numbers.²⁰ Review articles, textbooks, theses, websites, presentations, abstracts, personal communications, and letters were excluded from the selection. A total of 249 references were selected from 25 articles. Only 9 references from an article were chosen instead of 10 because there were only 9 qualified references. A full copy of 249 reference articles was obtained and examined for citation and quotation errors. All reference articles were searched by entering the first author's name and the title of the article together using Pubmed. Copies of the reference articles were provided by University of Texas Medical Branch library via interlibrary loan service. One of the authors (ML) checked for citation errors for all 249 references. Two of the authors (ML and CCL) evaluated all 408 quotes made to 249 references independently. Discrepancy between any quotation errors was reviewed until both authors agreed to a consensus.⁵

Citation format was checked using the manuscript submission format according to each journal.^{8,9,14-16} Citations errors were classified as major, intermediate, or minor errors to be consistent with previous studies.^{5,7} The major citation errors were any errors in first author's name, journal title, publication year, volume number, and beginning page number. Intermediate citation errors were related to the ending page number and the article title. Minor citation errors cover errors in punctuation, co-author names, and other misspelling. If there were multiple citation errors within the same reference, they were all counted under that reference.

Quotation errors were evaluated by comparing the statement made in each article to the original data and/or opinions of the reference. Quotation errors were classified as either major or minor to be consistent with previous studies.^{5-7,21} Major quotation errors were said to occur if the reference contradicted, failed to substantiate, or was irrelevant to the author's assertion in the article. Minor quotation errors included misquoting numbers, indirect referencing, oversimplification, and conclusion not reached by reference. Failure to substantiate occurred when the statement in the article was not made in the cited article; it is contrasted with conclusion not reached by the author where the cited

author made similar conclusions to the quote but not equivalent to the actual quote. *Indirect referencing* was a term used when the original data presented were cited in the cited reference. All quotes related to the same reference were checked. Each quote was considered a different sample. If the reference was quoted 5 times, then they were considered as 5 samples.

Statistical Analysis

The error rate was calculated by the number of references that contained at least 1 error rather than the total number of errors divided by the number of total references. The error rates and the 95% confidence intervals (CI) were calculated by dichotomous logistic regression analysis. Interjournal differences in citation and quotation errors were compared pairwise using the chi-square test. The Kendall's tau rank correlation test was used to assess the relationship between the error rates and the articles' demographic data. Percentage of the author educational level was calculated by dividing the number of authors in that category by the total number of authors. The kappa statistic was used to calculate interobserver agreement on the presence of quotation errors. All statistical tests were at the 95% level of confidence.

Results

Journals and Article

Table 1 shows a summary of the demographics of the articles and journals. The impact factors of 3 journals were 3.427 (*JBSS-A*), 2.655 (*JBJS-B*), and 1.101 (*FAI*).¹³ The impact factors were all from 2009. The impact factors of *JFAS* and *FASE* were not published in the *Journal Citation Report* in 2009.¹³ Two hundred and forty-nine references were chosen from 25 articles. There was difficulty locating 2 references because in 1, the actual title of the reference was completely different from the cited title; in the other, the article title was missing completely. The analyzed articles consisted of 1 meta-analysis, 3 clinical trials, 5 prospective cohort studies, 3 retrospective case control studies, 9 case series, 1 cross-sectional study, and 3 nonexperimental descriptive studies. The median level of evidence was 3 (range, 1-5). The mean number of authors was 4.4 (range, 2-8). The mean number of word count is 2560 (range, 1067-4782). The mean number of pages was 6.5 (range, 4-10). The mean number of cited references was 29.6 (range, 12-86). The mean percentages of contribution from different education level of the authors were: 11.2% from PHDs, 77.8% from MDs, 15.7% from graduate students, and 1.1% from undergrad. The sum of contribution percentage added up to be above 100% because some authors were both MDs and PHDs.

Table 1. Summary of Articles.^a

Journal	Study Type/Level of Evidence	Authors	Word Count	Page	No. of References
<i>American Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-A)</i> Impact factor 3.427	Prospective cohort study/II	8	4547	10	42
	Meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials (RCTs)/II	7	2453	8	34
	Non-experimental descriptive study/IV	7	3376	10	28
	Prospective RCT/I	5	3369	9	34
	Prospective cohort study/III	7	3335	8	24
<i>British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-B)</i> Impact factor 2.655	Unrandomized Prospective clinical trial/II	3	1954	5	35
	Retrospective case series/IV	5	1686	5	20
	Unrandomised prospective clinical trial/II	7	3753	9	30
	Prospective cohort study/II	5	2306	5	24
<i>Foot and Ankle International (FAI)</i> Impact factor 1.101	Retrospective case series/IV	6	1937	6	18
	Retrospective case series/IV	2	1764	5	27
	Retrospective case control series/III	6	2395	5	19
	Retrospective case series/IV	2	1516	4	20
	Cross sectional study/IV	3	2823	8	39
<i>Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery American version (JFAS)</i>	Retrospective case series/IV	3	2809	6	21
	Prospective cohort study/II	4	1290	3	12
	Retrospective case control/III	3	2824	8	86
	Retrospective case series/IV	3	1926	6	20
	Nonexperimental descriptive study/V	6	3128	8	18
<i>Foot and Ankle Surgery European version (FASE)</i>	Unrandomized prospective clinical trial/II	3	4782	10	18
	Prospective cohort study/II	5	1956	4	25
	Retrospective case series/IV	3	1067	5	42
	Nonexperimental descriptive study/V	2	2738	5	16
	Retrospective case control/III	4	2600	6	65
	Prospective case series/IV	2	1668	4	23
Mean		4.44	2560	6.5	29.6
Range		2-8	1067-4782	4-10	12-86

^aThe *JFAS* and *FASE* impact factors were not published in the 2009 journal citation report.

Citation Errors

The total citation error rate (major, intermediate, and minor error rates combined) among all journals was 41% (103 references out of 249 articles; 95% CI, 35%-48%) (Table 2). The error rate for major error was 15% (95% CI, 11%-20%) with first author name misspelling as the most common major citation error. The error rate for intermediate error was 14% (95% CI, 10%-19%) with article title misspelling as the most common intermediate error citation. The error rate for minor error was 27% (95% CI, 22%-33%) with punctuation error as the most common minor error. Overall, punctuation error was the most common citation error, affecting 58 out of 249 references (Table 3).

JBJS-A was significantly different from *JBJS-B* ($P = 0.0012$), from *FAI* ($P < 0.0001$), from *JFAS* ($P = 0.0001$), and from *FASE* ($P < 0.0001$) in total citation error rate. Likewise, *JBJS-B* was shown to be significantly different from *FAI* in total citation error rate ($P = 0.0051$). No other significant differences between other journals were observed.

There was no correlation demonstrated between the citation error rate and the impact factor of the journal ($\tau = -0.365$, $P = 0.098$), the article word count ($\tau = -0.105$, $P = 0.478$), the number of pages ($\tau = -0.114$, $P = 0.469$), the number of cited references ($\tau = 0.029$, $P = 0.850$), the number of authors ($\tau = 0.046$, $P = 0.772$), the percentage of PHD author contribution ($\tau = 0.144$, $P = 0.376$), the percentage of MD author contribution ($\tau = -0.151$, $P = 0.331$), the percentage of graduate author contribution ($\tau = 0.214$, $P = 0.189$), the percentage of undergraduate author contribution ($\tau = 0.144$, $P = 0.418$), or the different levels of evidence ($\tau = -0.068$, $P = 0.676$).

Quotation Errors

The 249 selected references were quoted 408 times in the 25 articles. The quotation accuracies were assessed by 2 of the authors (ML and CCL). The initial agreement was 90.4% (369 out of 408 quotations). The agreement was substantial ($\kappa = 0.710$, 95% CI, 0.625-0.795). The

Table 2. Summary of Citation Errors.

	<i>American Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-A)</i>	<i>British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-B)</i>	<i>Foot and Ankle International (FAI)</i>	<i>Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery American version (JFAS)</i>	<i>Foot and Ankle Surgery European version (FASE)</i>	Overall
Major	1	3	10	15	16	45
Intermediate	1	7	5	10	14	37
Minor	2	15	40	14	30	101
No. of references with at least 1 citation error	3	17	32	21	30	103
N	50	50	50	49	50	249
Error Rate ^a	6%	34%	64%	43%	60%	41%
95% confidence interval	2%-17%	22%-48%	50%-76%	30%-57%	46%-73%	35%-48%

^aThe error rate is calculated with number of references out of N that contains at least 1 error.

Table 3. Types of Citation Error in Each Journal.

	<i>American Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-A)</i>	<i>British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-B)</i>	<i>Foot and Ankle International (FAI)</i>	<i>Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery American version (JFAS)</i>	<i>Foot and Ankle Surgery European version (FASE)</i>	Total
Major						
First Author's name	0	1	4	7	6	18
Journal title	0	0	3	1	6	10
Publication year	1	0	1	2	2	6
Volume number	0	1	1	3	1	6
Beginning page	0	1	1	2	1	5
Intermediate						
Ending page	0	1	2	2	4	9
Article title	1	6	3	8	10	28
Minor						
Punctuation	1	9	36	2	10	58
Coauthor names	1	5	4	12	16	38
Others	0	1	0	0	4	5

quotation error rate among all journals was 20% (95% CI, 16%-24%) (Table 4). The error rate for major error was 9% (95% CI, 6%-12%) with failure to substantiate as the most common major citation error. The error rate for minor error was 11% (95% CI, 8%-14%) with conclusion not reached by reference as the most common minor error. Overall, failure to substantiate was the most common quotation error, demonstrated in 22 out of 408 references (Table 5).

No significant differences in quotation errors between journals were observed. There was no correlation demonstrated between the quotation error rate and the impact factor of the journal ($\tau = 0.191$, $P = 0.391$), the article word count ($\tau = 0.110$, $P = 0.462$), the number of pages ($\tau = 0.200$, $P = 0.207$), the number of cited references ($\tau = 0.217$, $P = 0.153$), the number of authors ($\tau = 0.146$, $P = 0.357$), the percentage of PHD author contribution ($\tau = -0.027$, $P = 0.872$), the percentage of MD author contribution ($\tau =$

-0.134 , $P = 0.394$), the percentage of graduate author contribution ($\tau = 0.168$, $P = 0.307$), the percentage of undergraduate author contribution ($\tau = 0.055$, $P = 0.761$), or the different levels of evidence ($\tau = -0.113$, $P = 0.490$).

Discussion

Previous studies have characterized reference errors,^{1,2,5-7,10-12,21,23,26} most notable the Cochrane review in 2008, which reviewed 69 reference accuracy studies with over 27 000 references evaluated.²⁶ The 2008 review reported a median citation error rate per journal of 38%, with a range of 4% to 67%. The median quotation error rate per journal was 20%, with a range of 0% to 50%. Because of differences in methodology used among the studies, the ranges of the errors are wide. Our median reference error rates were comparable at 43% for citation errors and 20% for quotation errors.

Table 4. Summary of Quotation Errors.^a

	American Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-A)	British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-B)	Foot and Ankle International (FAI)	Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery American version (JFAS)	Foot and Ankle Surgery European version (FASE)	Overall
Major	5	5	10	7	9	36
Minor	10	7	6	14	8	45
Quotes with at least one error	14	12	16	21	17	80
N	70	74	78	113	73	408
Error rate	20%	16%	21%	19%	23%	20%
95% confidence interval	12%-31%	9%-26%	13%-31%	12%-27%	15%-34%	16%-24%

^aA quote can have more than one error; the error rate is calculated by the number of quotes with error/total quotes.

Table 5. Quotation Errors by Type.

	American Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-A)	British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (JBJS-B)	Foot and Ankle International (FAI)	Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery American version (JFAS)	Foot and Ankle Surgery European version (FASE)	Total
N	70	74	78	113	73	408
Major						
Contradict reference	1	1	5	0	1	8
Failed to substantiate	3	3	4	4	8	22
Irrelevant to reference ^a	1	1	1	3	0	6
Minor						
Misquoting numbers	4	1	0	4	5	14
Indirect referencing ^a	3	1	2	1	1	8
Oversimplification	0	0	0	3	0	3
Conclusion not reached by reference ^a	3	5	4	6	2	20

^aFailure to substantiate: Conclusion in the article was not made in the cited article. Conclusion not reached by reference: Cited author made similar conclusions to the quote but not equivalent to the actual quote. Indirect referencing: Original data quoted is cited in the cited reference.

Two of the journals, *JBJS-A* and *JBJS-B*, were studied previously in 1985, 1995, and 2007 for citation errors.^{5,24} The error rates for *JBJS-A* in 1985, 1995, and 2007 were 6%, 12%, and 10%, respectively, whereas the *JBJS-B*'s error rates in 1985, 1995, and 2007 were 4%, 9%, and 20%, respectively. We also explored 3 journals not previously studied: *FAI*, *JFAS*, and *FASE*. Our study examined journals in 2009 and supported that *JBJS-A* made the fewest citation errors with 6% of references having errors compared to *JBJS-B*'s error rate of 34%. *FAI* and *FASE* had error rates of 64% and 62%, respectively. In Davids et al's⁵ study of 4 orthopaedic journals in 2007 and 2008, article title error was the most common citation error. In our study, punctuation was the most common citation errors.

Long reference lists in articles, single author, and articles published in journals with low impact factor were all identified as risk factors in certain citation errors.¹⁷ Impact factor of 2009 is defined as citations to articles from journal X in 2007 and 2008 in 2009 divided by number of substantial articles published from journal X in 2007 and 2008.²² While some

agree that the impact factor is a good indicator of how well the physicians view the journal,²² others argue that there are shortcomings such as short citation period (1 year).¹⁸ In this study, we were not able to observe any articles' demographic data as risk factors for higher citation error rates.

Citation of a reference has mainly been used for the retrieval of additional resources. Before the electronic retrieval tools such as Pubmed,¹⁹ the readers often relied heavily on citation listing to manually find the articles in paper format. However, with the introduction of Pubmed, there has been less emphasis on the need to have the correct citation. In this study for example, 1 reference was cited without a title and another reference was cited with a title of different reference, but both references were located using Pubmed with little difficulty. Even though citation errors may not have significant consequences, it creates extra burden for the user, and such mistakes can make the journals look unprofessional.

Quotation errors are usually harder to characterize and can be subjective. Two authors evaluated each quote

independently and then resolved any discrepancies upon comparison. Studies of quotation errors in orthopaedic literatures are very limited. Davids et al⁵ and Buijze et al³ were the only 2 publications specifically looking at orthopaedic literature. Davids et al reported an overall quotation error of 38% while Buijze et al found inaccuracy in only 7.6% of the quotes. Our study had a 19.6% quotation error rate. For 2 of the previously examined journals, *JBJS-A* and *JBJS-B*, Davids et al found quotation error rates of 46% and 29% compared to our error rates of 20% and 16%, respectively. Journal and type of study were identified as risk factors for quotation errors in orthopaedic literature.³ In our study, we did not observe any correlations between quotation error rates and parameters studied.

Each of the 5 orthopaedic journals had clear instructions on how to cite in their author guide section^{8,9,14-16} and citation continued to be primary responsibility of the authors. However, the high rate of citation errors suggests that editorial office, editors, and reviewers should also check the reference citation list. The 2 journals *JBJS-A* and *JBJS-B* perform technical editing for citation accuracies. *JBJS-A* has a significantly lower citation error rate than the other 4 studied journals, and *JBJS-B* had a significantly lower citation error rate than *FAI*. The results from this study might promote the idea of instituting technical editing for other journals. Quotation errors are much harder to detect for the editorial staff and the reader. It may not be financially feasible for the editorial staff to hire outside experts to review all quotations, therefore, the responsibility lies solely with the authors. Some have suggested limiting the number of cited references,^{7,21} however, there has not been any convincing evidence to support such restriction.

A limitation in the current study is the usage of only 5 articles to represent a journal in 2009. However, 5 articles with 50 references for each journal were selected to be consistent with the prior study of Davids et al on pediatric orthopaedic literature.⁵ Several journals were not significantly different from each other in error rate, and this could be due to only selecting a sample size of 5 articles per journal. Reference accuracy could be assessed better if more articles were selected to evaluate a journal. Another limitation for the study was that we only considered the first 5 articles of each month, which may have introduced a selection bias. However, the selection of the month was done randomly in an effort to replicate previous similar studies. Lastly, only 2 investigators analyzed the quotation errors, and there was a potential problem when certain quotes could be falsely labeled as errors when in reality they were phrased differently. However, a reasonable interobserver agreement was obtained, and our quotation error rates in the 5 journals in 2009 (20%, 16%, 21%, 19%, and 23% in each journal) were comparable to Cochrane database review's 20% in 2008.

In summary, this is a cross-sectional study of 5 peer-reviewed orthopaedic journals in 2009. Across 5 journals, there is a 41% citation error rate and 20% quotation error rate, similar to the Cochrane database review of 27 000 references in 2008.²⁶ While Pubmed has made articles easier to locate electronically, the high citation error rate is still unacceptable. Although the main responsibility of reference accuracy lies with the authors, the use of technical editing may lower the incidence of citation errors.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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