When teachers discuss source citation with their students, inevitably the subject of common knowledge comes up. Students struggle to understand which information they should cite and which their audience will consider common knowledge. In response to this struggle, teachers tend to define common knowledge in terms of form (is it a fact?) or availability (how many sources have the same information?). Unfortunately, these limited definitions do not take into account the dynamic nature of common knowledge and discourse communities. In addition, teachers who consult professional literature in an effort to solve this dilemma will find virtually no discussions about the nature of common knowledge in composition studies. With the availability of information increasing daily, the diversity of the college student population, and the growing popularity of pedagogical strategies such as theme courses, our current approach to common knowledge is inadequate for our students’ needs. In this essay, I argue for a more dynamic definition of common knowledge and suggest pedagogical strategies to enact this new approach. My purpose is to expand our current definition of common knowledge by analyzing the assumptions underlying this definition and by applying theories of discourse communities. My goal is to encourage teachers to move beyond believing that common knowledge is a stable entity that remains consistent regardless of rhetorical concerns and toward a new conception of common knowledge that takes into account the evolutionary nature of literacy and knowing.

While conducting research on how teachers represent source use and plagiarism to their students, I had the opportunity to read dozens of student essays from two first-year composition classes and one junior-level literature class and became intrigued by the idea of common knowledge. In
order to code the students’ essays to determine incidences of patch-written or plagiarized material from secondary sources, I first had to eliminate common knowledge information, a time consuming and sometimes difficult process. This elimination process was further complicated by the fact that both of the first-year composition classes were organized around themes; as such, the students spent most of the semester discussing a specialized area of knowledge. In one section, the class discussions and readings focused on work, while the other section’s theme was memory and erasure. Because the classes focused on these themes, the students developed a common field of knowledge that they often displayed in their essays. As the semester progressed and the students grew in their understanding of the class theme, the amount of uncited common knowledge material in their essays increased.

The popularity among students of researching via the Internet further complicates common knowledge. Just as it is often defined based on the type of information, common knowledge is often defined by the availability of information. I will discuss some of these definitions in more detail in a moment, but for example, one popular rule of thumb is that if the exact same information can be found in four different sources, it can be considered common knowledge. Since each URL indicates a separate source, the same information disseminated on the Internet can easily be found in multiple sources, depending, however, on how we define a “source.”

For example, in an essay on the importance of strikes in the early labor movement, one student wrote:

One of the most well known of these [strikes] was the Bay View Tragedy, May 5 1886, where workers who were peacefully marching to get their 16 hour work day reduced were shot at by police, seven marchers died.

This information is not cited in the student’s essay. Using a word string search on Google, I found more than four different sites had this same information but not the same phrasing that the student used. Each of the sites I viewed was an electronic version of a different newspaper account of the Bay View strike, yet each was the same story from the same wire service. So did that count as four sources or one? In the traditional sense of the word, “source” equates with a particular publication, but as the availability and duplication of electronic information increases daily, that definition and the assumptions that accompany it are not as effective as they once
were. However, because of the general nature of the information and its availability on the Internet, I classified this passage and others like it as common knowledge.

At times, it was difficult to differentiate between common knowledge and a student’s argument. In the same essay on unions, the student wrote:

It is important to note though, that it is the union that has the power to strike. Employees working without a union find it not only nearly impossible to strike, but worthless. A union allows enough workers to strike that it hurts the company, however it also limits your ability to get paid more than the other workers. The unions have their good and bad points much like strikes, but a strike will almost never occur unless it is union organized.

Is this information the student gleaned from sources and class discussions or is the student making an argument? Without talking directly to the student, it is impossible to say for sure. I ultimately classified this passage as common knowledge, both because the topic of the strikes had been extensively discussed in class and the information in the passage is very vague. (The student refers to unions and strikes in general, not specific unions or events.)

Both of these examples illustrate the importance of discourse community context in determining whether or not particular information can be considered common knowledge. My initial response to the first passage was to label it patch writing because the student used the name and date of the event without citing the source. Only after investigating the possible sources of the information did I see that it could also be considered common knowledge. For the second passage, the classroom context and the evolution of that particular discourse community provided the swing vote for my decision. Had I simply read the paper as an outsider, I would have been more likely to classify that material as patch-written as well.

For students and teachers alike, deciding what is and what is not common knowledge can be both crucial and extremely frustrating. An error in judgment can result in a verdict of plagiarism from the teacher, and common knowledge is at best a slippery concept. The resources available to students offer limited help in this matter; handbook advice tends to be formulaic or nonexistent. For example, in *Doing Honest Work in College*, a text devoted to ethical academic behavior, Charles Lipson never mentions common knowledge, focusing all of his attention on various styles of citation.
and academic honesty, including a detailed discussion of avoiding plagiarism, both deliberate and “accidental.”

In Rules for Writers, Diana Hacker defines common knowledge as “general information that your readers may know or could easily locate in any number of references” (403). She adds, “As a rule, when you have seen certain general information repeatedly in your reading, you don’t need to cite it. However, when information has appeared in only a few sources, when it is highly specific (as with statistics), or when it is controversial, you should cite it” (403). This same advice is in both the MLA and APA sections of the handbook. However, the examples Hacker uses differ in each section. In the MLA section, she uses the facts that “Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in 1993 and that Emily Dickinson published only a handful of her many poems during her life” as examples of common knowledge (403). But the examples she uses in the APA section are quite different. She states, “For example, the approximate population of the United States is common knowledge among sociologists and economists, and psychologists are familiar with Freud’s theory of the unconscious” (458). What’s different in these two sets of examples is the specification of discourse community members, which I will discuss in more detail in a moment.

Robert Harris, author of The Plagiarism Handbook, defines common knowledge as “whatever an educated person would be expected to know or could locate in an ordinary encyclopedia” (19). He specifies three types: “easily observable information,” “commonly reported facts,” and “common sayings,” each with several examples (19). He also explains that in particular instances, such as using common knowledge in a direct quote, common knowledge still needs to be cited. In a flowchart that maps the decision-making process of whether or not to cite material, Harris differentiates between material the writer thought of (a problematic distinction in itself) and information that would be considered common knowledge. Later in the book, Harris reminds his readers that “any item of background information you mention must be cited unless it is common knowledge” (23).

There are several assumptions underlying both Hacker’s and Harris’ approach to common knowledge:

**Assumption Number 1: Students will be able to determine what their audience considers to be common knowledge.** Hacker equates common knowledge with “general information . . . readers may know,” while Harris uses the phrase “whatever an educated person would be expected to know.” The fail-safes built into these phrases are qualifiers like general, may, educated, and
expected; these vague terms require writers to make judgments about their readers’ knowledge about the topic. However, without explicit experience with a discourse community, students really aren’t able to make this decision. Beginning writers in particular also have difficulty with audience analysis, making it almost impossible for them to gauge what their audience does or does not know.

Assumption Number 2: The use of examples in explanations of common knowledge provides sufficient information for students to make judgments about the commonness of the information they include in their essays. The strategy of providing examples as substitutes for detailed explanations is fairly common in handbooks. The belief being enacted here is that students will be able to internalize the strategies associated with the examples and then transfer those strategies to their own writing. In Hacker’s examples, one explanation mentions specific discourse communities and the other does not. The discourse communities she does mention are sociologists, economists, and psychologists, professional communities to which the majority of our students do not yet belong. However, as we can see from the examples of student work I mentioned before, knowledge about the discourse community is necessary in order to judge the commonness of the examples. Sometimes even those of us considered expert can lack the necessary knowledge base; for example, while I knew Toni Morrison had won the Nobel Prize, I didn’t know in what year she won it. Does that mean I’m not an expert member of the discourse community that uses MLA for its documentation?

Assumption Number 3: Successfully integrating common knowledge into a text only involves deciding whether or not the information should be cited. In handbooks, common knowledge is defined and explained in terms of what action the writer should take—to cite the material or not. Yet studies of citation analysis show us that expert writers approach common knowledge differently, basing their decisions not on whether the information is or is not cited, but rather on how that common knowledge is rhetorically cued in the text. In her analysis of common knowledge in scientific essays, Koutsantonri details the various markers of common knowledge expert writers employ and the effect those markers have on an audience. These markers generally fall into two categories: “evaluative adjectives, such as well-known or common” and “expressions of generalized attribution, such as it is known [or] it is widely accepted” (Koutsantonri 175). These markers have multiple functions: they “stress the author’s commitment to certain commonly held beliefs,” they “add to the argumentative force by presenting the view as
one which is not theirs alone, but one which is shared with the wider community or with relevant experts,” they indicate “endorsement of sources which are highly respected in the field,” and they allow the authors to “emphasize their own status as members of [the community] by showing awareness of these sources and by their relevance to their work” (Koutsantonii 176). By using these rhetorical cues, expert writers indicate which information is held in common by the community and which is new information.

Assumption Number 4: Common knowledge is an established, static set of facts. None of the reference resources I consulted portrayed common knowledge as something other than what is “known,” ignoring the fact that what is “known” evolves over time. New information enters the knowledge base; old or faulty information fades out. As Hunt argues, “Information and ideas are not inert masses to be shifted and copied in much the same way two computers exchange packages of information, but rather need to be continuously reformatted, reconstituted, restructured, reshaped, and reinvented and exchanged in new forms” (2). Our cultural knowledge base increases daily; therefore, our common knowledge base increases as well. It’s also true that some of what used to be common becomes uncommon: it is forgotten. Common knowledge also changes from community to community and within a community. It is not a static entity, but one that grows with the society, the group, and the individual.

Assumption Number 5: Students will be familiar enough with the field of study to be able to tell the difference between ideas that are “common” and ideas that are “controversial” (Hacker 403). When initiates enter a field of knowledge, familiarity with the dominant concepts is marginal at best. As the student continues to work and learn in a specialized field, her knowledge of the dominant ideology and information increases. The longer she remains active in the field, the more that knowledge base increases. However, undergraduate writers are at the beginning of this learning cycle and may be hard pressed to determine which ideas are common and which are not.

Assumption Number 6: The concerns of a specific discourse community are secondary to the location and prevalence of the common knowledge. Apparently where and how often we find the information overrides discourse community requirements. The majority of handbooks make no attempt to include discourse convention specifics when defining common knowledge; instead, handbooks tend to define common knowledge by where it’s found, how often it’s found, and whether or not the audience is likely to recognize it as common knowledge. However, as we’ve already seen, the context of
the discourse community and the knowledge base it develops continually evolves and plays a profound role in determining what information its members hold in common and what is new information to all or some of the members.

In addition to these assumptions, the information missing from these discussions is also quite revealing. For example, there is no mention of using common knowledge to establish solidarity and credibility with readers such as Koutsantoni describes. As Ann Johns points out, members of a discourse community have shared genre knowledge, and one aspect of this is “shared knowledge of text content,” which includes “the types of content and vocabulary that are brought into the text, the ways in which the content is organized, the assumptions about prior knowledge of readers and . . . appropriate use of details” (31). Certain words, ideas, and theories become repeated so often in a discourse community’s communications that every other member recognizes and understands their significance. Indeed, a writer announces her membership in a particular community by employing these commonplaces appropriately. Writers who are experienced community members recognize that these commonplaces don’t need to be cited because they have a more thorough understanding of the shared textual knowledge of the group; inexperienced members, on the other hand, are forced into a guessing game: to cite or not to cite?—or, following the advice of most handbooks, overcite. While this latter practice allows them to avoid plagiarism, it also announces their novice status and thus diminishes their credibility or authority with their readers. If these novice members are fortunate, they have access to more experienced members who can guide them through this decision-making process. Unfortunately, as Johns claims, “Many students receive little or no instruction” in discourse conventions and are left to discover the rules through trial and error (68). Error in this case can be an extraordinarily risky proposition for the student.

Also absent from discussions of common knowledge in handbooks and other reference texts is the effect different readers can have on a text. Handbook advice tends to portray all readers as being the same, requiring the same approach and responding in the same way. Nowhere is this less true than in the academic world, where the teacher is not only reader, but peer reviewer, judge, and sometimes executioner.

When a teacher takes it upon herself to decide whether or not information in a student’s text is or is not common knowledge, she is asserting her authority over that student’s text. This authority has more weight than the
authority a lay reader asserts. When a lay reader makes judgments about a text, those judgments affect only her interpretation of or response to the text. A teacher, however, wields an additional authority that the average reader does not. If an average reader rejects a text, the effects on the writer are minimal. The reader might refuse to read the rest of the text, or tell a few acquaintances that she didn’t like it, or she might respond to the text in writing via a letter or some other form of discourse. On the other hand, the teacher has the authority not only to reject a text she perceives as faulty, but also to prevent further dissemination of that text to other readers and impose some sort of penalty on the writer. A verdict of plagiarism or sloppy citation practices from the teacher imposes sanctions on both the writer and the text that stem from the teacher’s perception of the author’s strategy. If, for example, one of these sanctions is to fail the paper, then the writer’s text is stopped in its tracks. Even a less severe punishment, such as requiring the student to revise the text, requires the writer to alter the text before it is read again. My argument is that this position of authority leads the teacher away from the role of reader and toward the role of judge in situations where the role of reader would be more beneficial to the student. The role of reader allows the teacher to mentally inquire into the student writer’s possible motives and take into account discourse community conventions, while the role of judge requires a purely evaluative response. If teachers assume the role of reader, they can be more flexible in their responses to questions regarding common knowledge. They can suspend their judgment while reading essays, similar to what Peter Elbow encourages in the believing game, allowing different possible interpretations of common knowledge in a text rather than judging it by the standards of a discourse community with which students may have only marginal or intermittent contact.

As participants in the classroom discourse community, teachers also have the unique opportunity to introduce and prompt discussion of the conventions of discourse communities and the role common knowledge plays in community communications. Setting discussions of common knowledge in this larger context allows teachers to move beyond the formulaic handbook advice to more complex rhetorical issues such as the textual cues Koutsantoni describes and the idea of using common knowledge to establish solidarity and authorial authority with the reader.

In addition to changing the reader position they assume, teachers can also borrow inspiration from other forms of common knowledge. One of these is how common knowledge is utilized in the corporate world. Nancy
Dixon’s *Common Knowledge: How Companies Thrive by Sharing What They Know* details the systems and strategies major corporations use to share common knowledge. While Dixon takes great pains to point out that her use of the term *common knowledge* refers to the “‘know how’ rather than the ‘know what’ of school learning” (11), her analysis of how companies create and disseminate information still provides us with valuable insights into new ways to view common knowledge. For example, in her discussion of how knowledge is transferred from one team to another, she describes three changes in perspective that accompany these transfers:

- The first is a shift from thinking of experts as the primary source of knowledge to thinking that everyone engaged in work tasks has knowledge someone else could use to advantage.
- The second is a shift from thinking of knowledge as residing with individuals to thinking of knowledge as embedded in a group or community.
- The third is a shift from thinking of knowledge as a stable commodity to thinking of knowledge as dynamic and ever changing. (148–49)

Each of these shifts relocates common knowledge from the individual to the community, from the static to the dynamic, to a “reciprocal model in which all contribute and all receive” (152). This corporate view of common knowledge supports the idea that common knowledge in composition can be viewed as a more complex proposition than the current characterization of it allows.

By framing conversations and instruction about common knowledge in the larger context of discourse community conventions and expectations, we can help our students move beyond the formulaic handbook approach to resolve questions on common knowledge in several ways. They will be able to approach common knowledge and citation practices from a more informed perspective, one that takes into account the effect of their audience on how and what they cite. Students will gain a more realistic picture of how information is created and transferred from one community to another, and the emphasis will shift away from the individual toward collaboration with other individuals and texts. Finally, resolving questions about the dynamics of common knowledge can promote critical thinking, discussion, and reflection about the larger issues of source citation and intertextuality. In short, we can help students develop the qualities of academic thinkers and writers we set as goals for our classes.


Works Cited


