

## **Transformative Adaptations in the Harvard Style of Referencing and Citation**

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### ***Abstract***

*The Harvard style of referencing has become one of the most widely used author–date systems in global academia, yet it has never been governed by a single official manual. Over time, universities, publishers and style-guide authors have adapted Harvard to new media, technologies and educational needs, producing multiple modifications and periodic changes to its rules. Recent years have seen transformative adaptations in widely used guides such as Cite Them Right and institutional “Harvard” handbooks, particularly regarding the treatment of digital sources, the use of Digital Object Identifier (DOIs) and Uniform Resource Locator (URLs) and the simplification of bibliographic elements. This paper traces the historical evolution of the Harvard style, analyses key contemporary updates in prominent modifications, compares these developments with neighboring styles such as APA 7 and assesses their implications for students, researchers and institutions. Using a qualitative document-analysis approach to library guides, institutional announcements and comparative style discussions, the paper argues that these changes reflect broader processes of norm evolution and localization in academic writing. It concludes with recommendations for universities, librarians and researchers on managing Harvard-style adaptations in ways that promote clarity, consistency and academic integrity in postgraduate scholarship, including International Relations and Diplomacy.*

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**Keywords:** *Transformative Adaptation; Referencing; Citation; Empirical Research; Methodology.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Referencing and citation are central to the credibility, transparency and cumulative character of academic knowledge production. Among the various reference styles in use today, the Harvard style also known as the author–date system, occupies a prominent position because of its relative simplicity, flexibility and compatibility with different disciplines and types of sources (Pears and Shields, 2022; Open University Library, 2025). Unlike fully codified styles such as APA or Chicago, Harvard has historically existed as a family of closely related but not identical conventions that institutions and publishers adapt to their local needs. This has made Harvard both widely accessible and a source of confusion when students move between institutions or encounter different “Harvard” manuals (Goodall, 2023; University of Wolverhampton Library, 2018; York St John University, 2025).

**1.1** In recent years, the Harvard style has undergone notable transformations driven by the digitalization of scholarship and the proliferation of electronic sources. Key developments include revised expectations for DOIs and URLs, changing approaches to access dates and the progressive removal of elements such as place of publication from book references in some modifications (Goodall, 2023; University of Wolverhampton Library, 2018). Widely used frameworks like Cite Them Right have been updated multiple times and several universities have issued guidance announcing a shift from local Harvard modifications to a standardized “Cite Them Right Harvard” model (Pears and Shields, 2022; Manchester Metropolitan University Library, 2025; University of the West of Scotland Library, 2025). These developments can be understood not as minor technical adjustments but as transformative adaptations that reshape how academic work is documented and evaluated.

**1.2** This seminar paper examines these transformative adaptations in the Harvard style of referencing and citation in order to understand both their historical roots and their contemporary implications.

The first objective is to trace the historical evolution of Harvard from its late nineteenth-century origins to its present status as a global author–date convention.

The second is to identify and analyze recent adaptations in prominent Harvard modifications, particularly in widely used university guides and Cite Them Right-based systems.

The third is to compare these developments with changes in neighboring styles such as APA 7, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence.

The fourth is to assess the implications of these transformations for students, researchers and institutions, with a view to formulating practical recommendations.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The literature on Harvard referencing reveals a long historical evolution and a growing diversity of institutional variants that shape how scholars document their sources.

### **2.1 Historical evolution of Harvard style**

The Harvard style is commonly traced to the late nineteenth century, when the zoologist Edward Laurens Mark is credited with introducing an author–date referencing system in his scholarly writing at Harvard University (NCAD Library, 2021; Massive Wisdom Group, 2023). This approach departed from traditional footnote-based systems by bringing the author’s surname and year of publication into the body of the text, with a corresponding reference list providing full bibliographic details. Over time, the clarity and economy of the author–date method helped it gain acceptance beyond Harvard, particularly in the natural and social sciences where concise in-text citations are valued for minimizing disruption to the flow of argument.

**2.2** As Harvard spread, it did so without a single, authoritative manual comparable to the APA Publication Manual or the Chicago Manual of Style. Instead, universities and publishers adapted the basic author–date logic to their own contexts, creating local modifications that differed in details of punctuation, ordering of bibliographic elements and treatment of specific source types.

Library guides from major institutions emphasizes that “Harvard” refers to a general approach rather than a uniform global standard, with each university specifying its own version (University of Reading Library, 2016; University of the West of Scotland Library, 2025). This history helps explain both the popularity of Harvard and the persistent confusion when students encounter differing instructions under the same label.

### **2.3 Multiplicity and codification of Harvard modifications**

The literature on referencing identifies the emergence of handbooks and online guides that attempt to organize particular versions of Harvard for wider use. One influential development has been the Cite Them Right family of guides, which provide detailed examples for a wide range of source types and have been adopted or adapted by numerous universities and colleges. Several institutions explicitly describe their Harvard style as “based on Cite Them Right”, and their library websites offer downloadable guides that align local practice with this framework. At the same time, some universities maintain their own Harvard modifications, often labelled “Harvard institution”, which retain legacy rules while partially incorporating new features such as DOIs and updated web-referencing conventions. Recent institutional announcements illustrate this dynamic. As some universities have issued notices to staff and students highlighting changes such as the removal of place of publication from book references, new formats for electronic journal articles and revised instructions for social media and audiovisual materials. These updates are justified in terms of simplifying references, aligning with international practice and responding to the increasing centrality of digital sources. In this way, Harvard is continually reconstructed through a negotiation between tradition, usability and compatibility with digital publishing infrastructures.

### **2.4 Comparisons with APA and other styles**

Comparative discussions of referencing systems often focus on the similarities and differences between Harvard and APA, as both use an author–date approach but have distinct rule sets. Analyses highlight that APA has a single, central manual and prescribes detailed formats for particular disciplines, whereas Harvard is more decentralized and institution-specific. Recent revisions in APA 7, such as deprioritizing place of publication and foregrounding DOIs and URLs, have parallels in changes observed in several Harvard modifications. Likewise, guides that compare the two styles note convergence on certain points, especially treatment of electronic sources while underlining continuing differences in punctuation, capitalization and reference-list ordering conventions.

**2.5** Beyond APA, studies of referencing stress that citation styles form part of larger epistemic cultures and educational. Footnote-based systems like Chicago and numeric systems like Vancouver are often associated with particular disciplines and publication outlets and each embeds implicit assumptions about how readers engage with sources (University of Reading Library, 2016). In this context, Harvard’s adaptability can be seen as both a strength and a challenge. Its flexibility allows localization across disciplines and institutions, but its lack of a single authoritative standard creates room for inconsistency and misunderstanding, especially for postgraduate students navigating multiple style requirements (University of Cumbria Library, 2023; The Manchester College Library, 2022).

### **2.6 Educational and practical implications**

Library and study-skills literature has paid particular attention to the educational consequences of frequent changes in referencing guidance. Studies indicate that students often struggle to keep up with updates in rules, especially where multiple official documents are in circulation or where different departments quietly use slightly different Harvard modifications. Guides emphasize the need for clear, up-to-date documentation and the importance of aligning institutional instructions with the output of citation-management software to reduce confusion. There is also concern that inconsistent guidance can undermine confidence and increase the cognitive load associated with academic writing, diverting attention from substantive engagement with sources.

**2.7** At the same time, the literature recognizes potential benefits from recent adaptations. Simplified referencing formats, clearer examples for digital and non-traditional sources and harmonization with broader international practice can improve accuracy and reduce mechanical errors when changes are well communicated (Pears and Shields, 2022; Open University Library, 2025; Manchester Metropolitan University Library, 2025). The relative scarcity of work that explicitly conceptualizes these developments as “transformative adaptations” in citation norms suggests a gap that this seminar paper seeks to address, particularly by linking the evolution of Harvard style to ideas about institutional change, diffusion and localization in the governance of academic practices.

#### **4.0 Methodology**

Given its focus on evolving rules, guidance and institutional practice, this study employs a qualitative document-analysis method. Document analysis is suitable for examining policy texts, style manuals and institutional communications to identify patterns of change, underlying rationales and implications for practice. The primary material comprises contemporary Harvard referencing guides, quick-reference sheets and online help pages from universities that publicly document their modification of Harvard, alongside general overviews of referencing systems and comparative notes on Harvard and APA.

**4.1** The quantity includes Cite Them Right-based guides such as the Wolverhampton quick guide, York St John’s online Harvard guide and short guides produced by the University of Cumbria and The Manchester College, which illustrate how institutions operationalize Harvard in everyday teaching. These are supplemented by more general Harvard overviews and style lists from the University of Manchester and the University of Reading, as well as comparative documents discussing differences between APA 7 and institutional Harvard styles (University of Manchester Library, 2023; University of Reading Library, 2016; UTS Library, 2020; 15Writers, 2024). The analysis proceeds by coding references to specific changes such as the removal of place of publication, revised handling of DOIs and URLs and new examples for social-media sources, then grouping them into thematic categories of “simplification”, “digital alignment” and “standardization”. The study is limited by its focus on English-language guides from a subset of mainly UK and Australian institutions, so its findings are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

#### **5.0 Discourse on the Objectives**

This section discusses each objective in turn, showing how the historical evolution, recent adaptations and comparative features of Harvard referencing illuminate its contemporary transformation.

### **5.1 Historical evolution of the Harvard style**

The first objective is to trace how Harvard referencing has evolved from a local convention to a widely diffused author–date family of styles. Historical sketches attribute the style to work at Harvard University in the late nineteenth century, often highlighting the role of Edward Laurens Mark in introducing systematic author–date citations within the text (NCAD Library, 2021; Massive Wisdom Group, 2023). This innovation responded to the need for concise, readable scientific prose in which multiple sources could be acknowledged without lengthy footnotes and it quickly proved attractive to other disciplines that valued economy and clarity. Over time, the basic pattern like surname and year in brackets linked to a full alphabetical list at the end became closely associated with the label “Harvard” (University of Manchester Library, 2023; Ref-n-Write, 2025).

**5.2** As the style spread beyond its original setting, it interacted with existing disciplinary traditions and publisher house styles. Institutions developed their own written guidelines, often labelled as “Harvard style”, which shared the core author date principle but diverged in details such as punctuation, ordering and use of page numbers. The lack of a single, official Harvard manual meant that local practice solidified into distinct modifications, even as the generic term “Harvard” continued to be used in handbooks, assignment briefs and study-skills resources. This history underpins the present situation in which there is broad agreement on the logic of Harvard referencing but significant diversity in how the rules are implemented in different universities and countries.

### **5.3 Recent adaptations in major Harvard modifications**

The second objective is to identify and analyze recent adaptations in major Harvard modifications, especially those aligned with Cite Them Right. Institutional quick guides and library pages show that several universities have updated their Harvard instructions over the last decade, explicitly linking the changes to digital publishing and the rise of online sources. One prominent adaptation is the removal of the place of publication from standard book references in some guides, justified on the grounds that this element is less relevant where readers access texts primarily via electronic catalogues and databases (UTS Library, 2020). At the same time, there has been a move to standardize publisher names and streamline punctuation, aiming to make references easier for students to construct and for markers to read.

**5.4** Another important area of adaptation concerns the treatment of digital sources. Contemporary guides emphasize the inclusion of DOIs in URL format where available and provide clearer instructions on when access dates are required, particularly for web pages that are likely to change. Examples now routinely cover journal articles accessed online, organizational reports in PDF form, social-media posts and streaming video, reflecting the broader range of materials used in student assignments and research projects. Many institutions explicitly describe their Harvard guidance as “based on Cite Them Right”, signaling a desire to reduce local peculiarities and align practice with a widely recognized reference point while still allowing some flexibility for discipline-specific.

### **5.5 Comparison with APA 7 and neighboring styles**

The third objective is to compare these Harvard adaptations with developments in APA 7 and other styles. Comparative notes from university libraries and study-skills providers stress that APA is itself a specific author–date style within the broader Harvard family, but one that is tightly collated in a central manual rather than left to institutional disparity. Both APA 7 and many Harvard revised now omit the place of publication for books and foreground DOIs for electronic journal articles, reflecting a shared response to digital-first publishing (UTS Library, 2020; Assignment Task, 2025). However, differences remain in aspects such as how many authors are listed before using “et al.”, how titles and subtitles are capitalized and punctuated, and whether issue numbers are mandatory for journal articles.

**5.6** These technical differences have practical consequences for students and researchers who move between requirements. Study-skills websites aimed at UK students note that confusion often arises because both APA and Harvard are described as “author–date” and sometimes even conflated in local practice, yet they diverge in details that matter for assessment (Assignment Task, 2025; Ref-n-Write, 2025). Some institutions have responded by formally adopting APA 7 as their default style while describing it to students as their “Harvard scheme”, explicitly to reduce the proliferation of modifications. Others maintain a separate Harvard variant but provide comparison tables and explanatory notes to help writers understand when they must follow journal-specific APA rules rather than local Harvard guidance.

## **5.7 Implications for students, researchers and institutions**

The fourth objective is to assess the implications of these transformations for key academic actors. For students, the coexistence of multiple Harvard modifications and the periodic updating of rules generate both uncertainty and learning opportunities. Library guides report that students can be unsettled when instructions change or when different programs within the same institution quietly apply different Harvard formats. Yet the same guides argue that simplified formats, clearer digital examples and alignment with widely used frameworks like Cite Them Right can ultimately reduce the mechanical burden of referencing once the new rules are understood (Pears and Shields, 2022; Manchester Metropolitan University Library, 2025). The key condition is effective communication and integration of referencing guidance into teaching and assessment.

**5.8** For researchers and institutions, the implications center on academic integrity, interoperability and governance of academic standards. Consistent up-to-date Harvard guidance helps ensure that sources are traceable and properly acknowledged, supporting plagiarism-avoidance policies and fostering a culture of transparency in scholarship. In an environment of international collaboration and cross-border study, aligning local Harvard modifications with broadly recognized conventions makes it easier to share work, check sources and move between institutions. At the same time, persistent variation between Harvard implementations and their relationship to APA underline the need for explicit institutional choices and coherent communication, rather than leaving referencing norms to evolve informally. From an institutionalist and norm-diffusion perspective, the current period of adaptation can be seen as a critical moment in which citation practices are being renegotiated by an expert community in response to technological and educational needs.

## **6.0 Conclusion**



These changes show that Harvard referencing is not a fixed, singular style but an evolving family of author–date practices shaped by institutional decisions, digital technologies and educational considerations. Recent adaptations in Cite Them Right-based modifications and local university guides especially around dropping the place of publication, foregrounding DOIs and clarifying web-source formats represent significant shifts in what is considered sufficient information to identify and verify sources in scholarly work. When viewed through the lenses of institutionalism and norm diffusion, these developments illustrate how an epistemic community of librarians, editors and academics continually renegotiates the rules of academic writing in response to new conditions. For PhD-level research in International Relations and Diplomacy, engaging critically with these transformations is part of the broader responsibility to understand and uphold evolving standards of scholarly communication.

## 7.0 Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following is recommended:

- a. Universities should adopt one clear Harvard modification and ensure all departments use the same guide.
- b. Libraries should update Harvard guides regularly and highlight any changes in simple comparison tables.
- c. Lecturers should integrate practical Harvard exercises into coursework, not leave referencing to students alone.
- d. Librarians and academics should consult students before major changes to Harvard rules are implemented.
- e. Institutions should align their Harvard guidance with reference-management tools and online generators as far as possible.
- f. Postgraduate students should learn one institutional Harvard guide thoroughly and avoid mixing rules from different modifications.
- g. Researchers should treat referencing as part of research ethics and transparency, not just a formatting requirement.

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