

“How many references do I need to include?”

Of all the questions lecturers receive this is the one most likely to make our eyes roll and our heads turn full circles!

What students seem to want is a solid number, a guarantee that if they include a particular number eg 5 or 10 or 15 references, then they can be guaranteed not to fail. Unfortunately there is no such guarantee. Referencing is not about numbers: it also depends on what references are being used, how scholarly they are and how they are being utilised. And of course one can reference brilliantly but still fail if the content and structure of the writing is inadequate.

My more generous response to this question is to suspect that what students are looking for is something to help them understand the standard required. The problem is, there is no magic number. It will need as many references as it needs.

I also understand that for some students, even at postgraduate level, referencing may be new. So the following answer is intended in the spirit of helping you find some solid ground in an otherwise confusing environment. It comes with the caveat that this is simply my interpretation and may not be welcomed by other lecturers or in other subjects.

Let's try this for a response:

1. Every time you use an idea from somewhere it needs to be referenced. Every time you make an assertion or claim, it needs to be referenced. So your essay will have as many references as it will have ideas.
2. Each paragraph you write should contain AT LEAST one idea – because your whole paper is all about making an argument. Your argument is advanced one idea at a time. Each idea should be expanded upon, discussed and then backed up by evidence and references. So on this principle, each paragraph should contain AT LEAST one reference. Where there are no or very few references it suggests one of two things: either there are no or very few ideas or this work is plagiarised. So without references you have already begun to fail. (You may like to know that the reference list is the first thing I look at when marking – I turn to the back page first).
3. A paragraph contains AT LEAST two sentences, but of course, it may contain many more. Imagine you like to write in short paragraphs of say, 200 words. For an essay of 2000 words this makes roughly ten paragraphs. So you would be looking at AT LEAST ten references.
4. That would be your absolute minimum. What you do beyond this is up to you. It is not a guarantee. It is a small solid place to stand just for a minute to help you get your bearings.

If you are not experienced in referencing you are STRONGLY encouraged to see Student Services for assistance and to attend their workshop on referencing. See: <http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services/calendar>