Crediting Sources Without Compromising Confidentiality

by the Walden Dissertation Editors

Use this SMRTguide to clear the document of potentially identifying information or content that could compromise confidentiality. Nothing in the document should reveal or lead a reader to deduce the identity of participants, including references, citations, or appendix materials. The Walden preference is to NOT NAME the study site and instead (a) use a pseudonym or (b) refer to the study site, the community partner, the organization, or similarly generic terms.

Check out the FAQ on IRB, Anonymity, and Confidentiality and “Maintaining Confidentiality” blog posts Part 1 and Part 2.

Pro Tip

Use the Find function and the navigation pane in MS Word to quickly scroll through a larger document. These and other MS Word functions under the Home, Review, and View tabs make working in a longer manuscript much easier. Use this technique to search for potentially identifying information, such as individual names, contact information, specific locations, or words that reveal the research site.

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In the process, they describe three general-purpose heuristics: availability, representativeness, and anchoring and adjustment. These heuristics, each associated with a set of biases,
Citations and References That Reveal the Research Site

Remove all information from the document that could compromise confidentiality, including in the references, citations, or appendices. Try to cite from a different source that does not reveal identifying content or rephrase the paragraph to indicate the source of information more generally.

- In the following example, the author has not named the company in the narrative text, but they have revealed the research site by citing directly from a company source:

  **Error:** Employees at the firm where this research took place were largely unaware of the company’s mission statement, which included a section on fostering staff’s individual professional development (*Fulbright Investments Inc.*, 2016).

  To address this, delete all citations and reference entries from the research site and revise the narrative text to indicate the source in general terms:

  **Solution:** Employees at the small firm where this research took place were largely unaware of the company’s mission statement, which included a section on fostering staff’s individual professional development, according to the company’s website.

- Avoid naming specific individuals from the research site, even if they are not participants. Use more generic phrases in the narrative text:

  **Error:** The problem at the local hospital is that providers lack the opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues and coordinate care for patients at risk of relapse (*S. Williams-Ross, personal communication, March 29, 2017*).

  **Solution:** According to current head of nursing, the problem at the local hospital is that providers lack the opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues and coordinate care for patients at risk of relapse.

- Some sources do not come directly from the research site, but if a reader retrieved and read the cited source, they would be able to figure it out:

  **Error:** I will refer to the school in this project study by the pseudonym *ABC Elementary School*; this school has participated in a service learning partnership with the local university for English language learners (*Monroe County Community School Corporation*, 2018).

  **Solution:** I will refer to the school in this project study by the pseudonym *ABC Elementary School*; this school has participated in a service learning partnership with the local university for English language learners, according to the school district’s Winter 2017-2018 newsletter.

- Even if the document does not include citations and reference entries that name the research site, including directly quoted passages could allow a reader to find the research site through a basic Internet search. Consider paraphrasing the material instead:

  **Error:** The technology mission statement from 2011 at the school where this study was conducted stated, “It is the vision of the department to create an environment where students, teachers, and staff have safe, secure, and reliable access to all technology that invokes creativity and critical thinking as well as higher learning.”
Solution: The technology mission statement from 2011 at the school district where this study was conducted emphasized safety, security, and reliability of technology access for students, teachers, and staff.

References and Citations with Pseudonyms or Altered/Incomplete Information

Often, the simplest solution to maintaining confidentiality is to merely leave out specific names and titles:

- “The company where this research took place. . .”
- “At the local elementary school, . . .”
- “Three small businesses in a large Midwestern urban area . . .”

Some people choose to use pseudonyms (e.g., “Nonprofit A and Nonprofit B,” “Happy Valley Middle School,” “123 Investments,” etc.). If employing pseudonyms, make sure no terms correspond to actual, existing companies, schools, or organizations unrelated to the study.

REGARDLESS, all information in the reference entries (and corresponding citations) must be accurate, current, and retrievable. DO NOT include reference entries or citations with masked, incomplete, or altered information. Therefore, do not include citations or references that could compromise the site

- This example is incorrect because it includes blacked-out or redacted sections:


- This example is incorrect because it leads to a directory page where the author accessed a specific school district’s report card, but it does not provide complete information for a reader to retrieve the same report card the author cited in the main text:


- This example is incorrect because it includes altered information based on the pseudonym the author chose, not the accurate information to retrieve the cited source:
Contact editor@waldenu.edu with questions about preparing the proposal and final doctoral capstone document for submission.