Frequently, students will ask me: what is the point of citation? Why do they need to go through all this work creating a citation in MLA, Chicago, or APA format when so much stuff is already on the web; why can’t I just include a url? So, I thought I might provide a little bit of insight into what citation is, and why it’s important.

First off, citation is really important to all the people that will be reading your research paper, or your essay, or your project, because what citation does is it allows you to back up your argument, back up your facts, and allows the reader to look up that information on their own. So you’re saying not only do I present this argument, here are all the places I went to back up this information and now you the reader can also look at this information. But when it comes down to putting together the citation, people ask: why can’t I just use a url? And the reason for that is the internet is changing every day, so you want to make sure you are providing enough information to your readers that they can actually find your resources.

Now Wikipedia is a pretty excellent example of this process. Whenever you look at Wikipedia, you will probably notice that it continually links to other parts of Wikipedia, but it also has these little numbers next to some of its links. These numbers actually link you down to a list of citations. And this is places where Wikipedia is saying here, this is where we got this information, and now you can go look at it too.

Now a couple of these resources just include the web link or the url, but they also give you information on when the information was retrieved. That’s really important, because then you know both how old the information is, and if for whatever reason the website is no longer active, you have a general idea of when it was last available.

Now when you’re looking at your own resources you might say: well okay, but I’ve got an article, why do I need all of this information in my work cited page? It’s pretty much the same thing. When you put together a citation, you’re giving your readers a road map to find the information that you used. So you’re providing the author and the title; you’re also telling them when the resource was published so then they know immediately how old that information is. You’re also letting the reader know, especially if it’s a web resource, when you last accessed it. So then they know immediately, as of July 24th this resources was available in this particular journal. So again, you’re giving them a map of all the different ways they can find the information you have used in your research paper.

Now if you’re having trouble putting together your citations, the Owl at Purdue is a wonderful resource to help you put together those citations. It gives very clear examples on how to put together a citation in a number of different formats. You can just go to Google, and type in Owl at Purdue APA or MLA, and then you’ll be able to explore all of these different options you have when putting together your citation page.