

# Automatic citation extraction from URLs

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2019-12-13

[pandoc-url2cite](#) [1] allows you to instantly and transparently cite most papers directly given only a single URL.

You simply add a URL of a publication, and it will replace that with a real citation in whatever [CSL](#) [2] style you want. This means you can avoid dealing with [Mendeley](#) [3] or [Zotero](#) [4] and keeping your Reference Manager database and bibtex file in sync, especially when collaborating with others.

## Minimal Example

Here is a minimal example:

**minimal.md**

```
1 # Introduction
2
3 The GAN was first introduced in [@gan].
4
5 # References
6
7 [@gan]: https://papers.nips.cc/paper/5423-generative-adversarial-nets
```

Compiling this file with this command

```
pandoc \  
  --filter=pandoc-url2cite --filter=pandoc-citeproc \  
  --csl ieee-with-url.csl \  
  minimal.md -o minimal.pdf
```

This results in the following output:

**minimal.pdf**

## Introduction

The GAN was first introduced in [1].

## References

[1] I. Goodfellow *et al.*, "Generative Adversarial Nets," in *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 27*, Z. Ghahramani, M. Welling, C. Cortes, N. D. Lawrence, and K. Q. Weinberger, Eds. Curran Associates, Inc., 2014, pp. 2672–2680 [Online]. Available: <http://papers.nips.cc/paper/5423-generative-adversarial-nets.pdf>. [Accessed: 14-Dec-2019]

For a longer example, you can look at the source of this file itself, which is both a [blog post \[5\]](#), GitHub Readme and LaTeX “paper”:

## README.pdf

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You simply add a URL of a publication, and it will replace that with a real citation in whatever [CSL \[2\]](#) style you want. This means you can avoid dealing with [Mendeley \[3\]](#) or [Zotero \[4\]](#) and keeping your Reference Manager database and bibtex file in sync, especially when collaborating with others.

### Minimal Example

Here is a minimal example:

```
minimal.md
1 # Introduction
2
3 The GAN was first introduced in [GAN].
```

[Source README.md](#) - [Result README.pdf](#)

## How to Use

Install this package globally using `npm install -g pandoc-url2cite`.

Then, add `--filter=pandoc-url2cite` to your pandoc command (before `pandoc-citeproc`, see the minimal example above).

Alternatively, clone [this repo](#) [1] somewhere, then install the dependencies using `npm ci install`.

If you're not familiar with writing papers in pandoc, you can refer to [e.g. this article](#) [6]. It's pretty flexible, you can use templates from whatever conference you want, and you can still use inline latex code if you need it (and you are ok with not being able to convert your document to nice HTML or EPUB anymore).

## Citation Syntax

`url2cite` allows multiple ways to cite:

1. (PREFERRED) Use the pandoc citation syntax for citations:

```
The authors of [@alexnet] first introduced CNNs to the
ImageNet challenge.
```

More information about referencing specific pages etc. is in the [pandoc manual](#) [7].

Then add the URLs with the usual "link reference" syntax to the bottom of your document in its own paragraph:

```
[@alexnet]: https://...
```

2. Convert all links to citations

Add `url2cite: all-links` to your [yaml front matter](#) [8]. This will cause all links in the document to be converted to references.

You can still blacklist some links by adding `no-url2cite` to either the CSS class of the link (pandoc-only):

```
[foo](http://example.com){.no-url2cite}
```

or to the link title:

```
[foo](http://example.com "no-url2cite").
```

## How it Works

The main idea is that usually every piece of research you might want to cite is fully identifiable by an URL - no need to manually enter metadata like author, release date, journal, etc. Citation managers like Zotero already use this and enable you to automatically fetch metadata from a website. But then you still have a citation database somewhere that you may or may not be able to synchronize with different computers, but probably won't be able to add to the version control of your paper. There's hacks such as [better-bibtex](#) [9] to automatically generate and update diffable bibtex files - But that means you

now have two sources of truth, and since the export is one-way this leads to multiple contributors overriding each other's changes. `pandoc-url2cite` goes a step further: URLs are directly used as the cite keys, and the “bibliography file” is just an auto-generated intermediary artifact of those URLs.

`pandoc-url2cite` is based on the work of the [Zotero](#) [4] developers. Zotero has a set of “[Translators](#)” [10] that are able to extract citation info from a number of specific and general web pages. These translators are written in Javascript and run within the context of the given web site. They are made to be used from the Zotero Connector browser extension, but thankfully there is a standalone [Translation Server](#) [11] as well. To avoid the effort required to automatically start and manage this server locally, `pandoc-url2cite` instead uses a publicly accessible instance of this server provided by Wikipedia with a [public REST API](#) [12].

All citation data is cached (permanently) as bibtex as well as CSL to `citation-cache.json`. This is both to improve performance and to make sure references stay the same forever after the initial fetch, as well as to avoid problems if the API might be down in the future. This also means that errors in the citation data can be fixed manually, although if you find you need to do a lot of manual tweaking you might again be better off with Zotero.

## Limitations

1. Currently, extracting the metadata from direct URLs of full text PDFs does not work, so you will need to use the URL of an overview / abstract page etc. I'm not sure why, since this does work in Zotero. [More info might be here](#) [13].
2. Currently, this filter only works if you use `pandoc-citeproc`, because the citations are written directly into the document metadata instead of into a bibtex file. If you want to use `natbib` or `biblatex` for citations, this filter currently won't work. Using `citeproc` has the disadvantage that it is somewhat less configurable than the “real” LaTeX citation text generators and the CSL language has some limitations. For example, the [bibtex “alpha”](#) [14] style sometimes used in Germany can't be described in CSL. To make it work with `biblatex`, this script would need to write out a `*.bib` file somewhere temporarily and reference that in the latex code.
3. Some websites just have wrong meta information. For example, `citation-styles.org` has set “Your Name” as the website author in their [Open Graph](#) [15] metadata.
4. Using URLs directly as citekeys (e.g. `[@https://google.com]`) does not work because of `pandoc` parsing, see [this issue](#) [16]. But it does work for ISBNs and DOIs:

The book [isbn:978-0374533557, pp. 15-17] is interesting.

See [this example](#) [17].

## Related Work (Longer Example)

AlexNet [18] first introduced CNNs to the ImageNet challenge. [19]–[21] further improved on the results.

## References

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