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The Use of Mendeley and Zotero in Supporting Information Literacy and Academic Writing among Novice Researchers: A Literature Review

Sesri Ulantari, Sholihah Irva, Maya Sari, Wahidah Fitriani
UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, Indonesia
95sesriulantari@gmail.com

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Abstract

Expanded access to scholarly information has increased the need for reference management and information literacy skills in academic writing. This descriptive qualitative literature review examined how Mendeley and Zotero support these practices and identified factors that facilitate or hinder their use. Publications, most of which appeared between 2020 and 2026, were retrieved through Google Scholar, journal websites, and other academic sources. Relevant findings were identified, classified, compared, and synthesized. Both applications help users organize digital references, manage citations, and generate bibliographies, making it easier to incorporate scholarly sources into academic writing. Effective use depends on users' technical skills and access to academic support. Reported challenges include inaccurate metadata, synchronization problems, and difficulties integrating the applications with word-processing software. Writers remain responsible for reading critically, evaluating and synthesizing sources, developing arguments, and upholding academic integrity. The review recommends integrating reference management tools into information literacy instruction and academic writing guidance so that users develop technical skills alongside the ability to use evidence critically and responsibly.

Keywords: Academic Writing; Information Literacy; Mendeley; Reference Management; Zotero

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information technology has brought changes to the ways in which university students and researchers obtain, manage, and use information sources in academic activities. The availability of electronic journals, digital books, proceedings, and various scientific publications has made information more accessible. However, this convenience also requires the ability to identify information needs, locate relevant sources, evaluate the credibility of information, and use it appropriately in the preparation of scientific papers. These abilities constitute an essential part of information literacy. In the academic context, information literacy is not only related to the ability to find information but also encompasses the ability to understand and utilize information as a basis for developing scientific arguments.

One of the problems frequently encountered by university students and novice researchers in academic writing is reference management. The process of recording source identities, inserting citations, adjusting citation styles, and compiling reference lists manually requires accuracy and consistency. The greater the number of sources used, the higher the possibility of recording errors, inconsistencies between in-text citations and reference lists, and inaccuracies in writing bibliographic information. This condition indicates that academic writing skills need to be supported by the ability to manage references systematically. Saputra (2020) emphasized the importance of scientific reference literacy and structured guidance in supporting students' abilities to manage academic sources (Arifiyana & Prasetyawan, 2023).

The utilization of reference management software has become one alternative for addressing these issues. The use of reference management applications has increasingly become an important component in supporting academic activities in higher education institutions. Istiana and Singh (2025) revealed that most postgraduate students involved in their study were familiar with reference management software, such as Mendeley and Zotero. Of the 52 respondents, 94.2% stated that they were familiar with these applications. This finding indicates that the use of technology for reference management is widely recognized within higher education environments. Nevertheless, familiarity with the existence of these applications alone is insufficient; it must also be accompanied by operational skills to ensure their optimal utilization in the process of preparing scientific papers. Mendeley and Zotero are two applications that can be used to store, organize, and manage reference sources, as well as assist in citation insertion and reference list compilation. The use of these applications

has the potential to reduce repetitive administrative tasks and help maintain consistency in writing formats. Amelia and Khadijah (2026), for example, explained that Mendeley helps students organize references and simplifies the creation of citations and reference lists. Meanwhile, Haliq et al. (2021) examined the utilization of Zotero in scientific writing, including the supporting factors and technical barriers associated with its use.

Although they have similar functions, the utilization of Mendeley and Zotero is not without several challenges. Users need to understand the processes of importing sources, checking bibliographic metadata, organizing reference collections, and integrating applications with word-processing software. Metadata errors can produce inaccurate citation information, while integration and synchronization problems can hinder the application usage process. Haliq et al. (2021) identified technical barriers in the use of Zotero, particularly those related to word-processing plugins and synchronization. Regarding the use of Mendeley, Jud et al. (2024) also reported limitations in device availability among some training participants. These findings demonstrate that the availability of technology does not automatically guarantee users' ability to manage references correctly.

Furthermore, the use of reference management tools needs to be situated within the framework of information literacy and academic writing skills. The ability to use Mendeley or Zotero should not be measured solely by the successful automatic generation of citations and reference lists. Users must also be able to assess the suitability of sources, understand the information being cited, connect ideas from various sources of literature, and acknowledge sources responsibly. Anjali and Istiqomah (2020) discussed Zotero training in relation to improving information literacy for students' scientific writing. Rafi'i et al. (2025) also examined students' perceptions of Zotero utilization in reference management during the academic writing process. Dahlen et al. (2024) highlighted that the use of sources in academic writing also requires skills in citing, paraphrasing, summarizing, and appropriately integrating information. Thus, reference management tools can be understood as supporting instruments for academic skills rather than substitutes for critical thinking abilities and an understanding of scientific sources.

Several previous studies have examined the utilization of Mendeley and Zotero, particularly in terms of reference management efficiency, user training, ease of citation preparation, and technical challenges. However, based on the body of research reviewed in this article, the discussions have tended to focus on the use of each application separately.

Studies that comprehensively connect both tools with the dimensions of information literacy and academic writing skills still need to be strengthened. Therefore, a literature synthesis is needed that not only identifies the functions and benefits of Mendeley and Zotero but also discusses their contributions, limitations, and the prerequisites for users to utilize both applications responsibly.

Based on this background, this article aims to examine the utilization of Mendeley and Zotero in supporting information literacy and academic writing, identify the similarities and differences in their functions for reference management, and analyze the challenges encountered by users along with efforts to optimize their utilization. The findings of this review are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of reference management tools as supporting instruments for managing scientific information and preparing academic papers, particularly among university students and novice researchers.

METHODS

This study employed a literature review method with a descriptive-qualitative approach. This method aimed to examine, identify, and synthesize previous research findings relevant to the use of Mendeley and Zotero applications in supporting information literacy and academic writing. The descriptive-qualitative approach was adopted because this study focused on understanding the concepts, findings, and trends in research results concerning the use of reference management applications. Accordingly, this study was not intended to statistically test hypotheses or conduct direct experiments, but rather to review and interpret various relevant scientific sources.

The literature search was conducted through various scientific publication sources, with Google Scholar serving as one of the primary sources. Searches were also conducted through scientific journal websites and academic publication documents relevant to the research topic. The keywords used included Mendeley, Zotero, reference management, information literacy, digital reference literacy, citation, and academic writing. The literature primarily consisted of publications from 2020 to 2026. However, publications from before this period were also considered if they had conceptual relevance and could support the theoretical foundation of the research discussion.

Literature selection was conducted based on the relevance of each publication to the objectives and focus of the study. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) publications

discussing the use of Mendeley or Zotero applications for reference and citation management; (2) publications related to information literacy, digital reference literacy, or academic writing; (3) publications constituting scientific works with identifiable bibliographic information and traceable content; and (4) publications containing information, research findings, or discussions relevant to the research problem. Meanwhile, publications that were not directly related to the focus of the study or did not provide sufficient information were not used as the primary basis for the synthesis.

The literature was analyzed descriptively and qualitatively through several stages. First, identifying and collecting scientific publications relevant to the research topic. Second, reading and examining the content of each publication, particularly the research objectives, methods, results, and conclusions. Third, classifying the information and findings according to the research themes, namely the functions of Mendeley and Zotero in reference management, the contributions of both applications to information literacy and academic writing, and the supporting factors and barriers to their use. Fourth, comparing research findings from various publications to identify similarities, differences, and trends in the findings. Fifth, synthesizing the results of the review and presenting them descriptively and qualitatively to obtain a comprehensive overview of the use of reference management applications in supporting academic activities.

RESULTS

1. The Role of Mendeley and Zotero in Reference Management

Mendeley and Zotero help users digitally store, categorize, and organize references, as well as facilitate the automatic generation of citations and bibliographies. Mendeley provides PDF document management and collaboration features, while Zotero offers flexibility in reference management, is open-source, and integrates with web browsers. Both applications have relatively similar core functions; therefore, the choice between them can be adjusted to users' needs, abilities, and academic working habits.

2. The Contribution of Reference Managers to Information Literacy and Academic Writing

The use of Mendeley and Zotero helps students improve their skills in collecting, storing, and managing scholarly information sources, while making the preparation of citations and bibliographies more efficient. However, the use of these applications needs to

be accompanied by the ability to search for, understand, and evaluate the credibility of sources, paraphrase, synthesize literature, and develop scholarly arguments. Thus, both applications support the processes of information literacy and academic writing but do not replace users' critical thinking abilities and writing skills.

3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Use of Mendeley and Zotero

The successful use of Mendeley and Zotero is supported by computer skills, an understanding of academic writing techniques, the availability of technological devices, training, and guidance from lecturers, peers, and libraries. Meanwhile, the challenges encountered include limited technical knowledge, difficulties with installation, synchronization, integration with Microsoft Word, and metadata inaccuracies. To overcome these challenges, practical training, user guides, video tutorials, and guidance on citation style settings, metadata verification, reference management, and citation ethics are necessary.

4. Implications of Reference Manager Use for the Quality of Scholarly Work

The use of Mendeley and Zotero provides benefits in improving the efficiency of source management, citation consistency, and bibliography organization, while reducing technical errors in academic writing. Nevertheless, users still need to verify the accuracy of metadata and the consistency of citations with their original sources. The use of these applications also does not automatically guarantee that scholarly work is free from plagiarism. The quality of scholarly work remains determined by the accuracy of source selection, understanding of the literature, the ability to synthesize information and develop arguments, as well as responsibility in upholding academic ethics.

5. Synthesis of the Literature Review Findings

Overall, Mendeley and Zotero have relatively similar core functions in reference management, citation insertion, and bibliography compilation, without indicating that either application is consistently superior to the other. Their contributions to information literacy and academic writing are supportive rather than substitutive of users' abilities. The successful use of these applications is influenced by technical skills, the availability of facilities, training, and support from the academic environment. The literature review also indicates that previous studies have focused more on application features, user perceptions, training, and technical challenges than on directly measuring improvements in information literacy and scholarly writing quality. Therefore, future research should examine the relationship between

the use of these two applications and users' abilities to evaluate sources, synthesize literature, develop arguments, and improve academic writing quality.

DISCUSSION

1. The Role of Mendeley and Zotero in Reference Management

Based on the literature review, Mendeley and Zotero are reference management applications that help users manage bibliographic sources in academic activities. Both applications provide features for storing, organizing, and categorizing references, as well as facilitating the automatic generation of citations and reference lists. The use of these applications makes the reference management process more structured compared to manual recording.

Regarding the use of Mendeley, several studies have shown that this application helps students collect literature sources in a single digital library, organize documents, and integrate references with word-processing software. Amelia and Khadijah (2026) explained that Mendeley can facilitate the preparation of citations and reference lists in academic writing. These findings are consistent with the studies conducted by Jud et al. (2024) and Candra et al. (2025), which discussed the use of Mendeley through training and mentoring activities for students. Santosa et al. (2021) also found that students had positive perceptions of using Mendeley in thesis writing, although challenges remained regarding its integration with Microsoft Word and metadata verification.

Although they serve nearly identical purposes, Mendeley and Zotero have distinct characteristics that users may consider when selecting an application. Krishnamurthy and Tejas (2024) explained that differences among reference management tools can be identified in terms of features, ease of use, storage capacity, and compatibility with operating systems and word-processing software. Mendeley provides PDF document management features and collaboration support, whereas Zotero is known as open-source software that offers flexibility in reference management and integration with web browsers. These differences indicate that application selection should take into account users' needs and academic working habits rather than relying solely on application popularity.

Meanwhile, the use of Zotero also demonstrates similar functions in reference management. Haliq et al. (2021) found that Zotero helps students manage references, build digital libraries, and facilitate the insertion of citations into academic papers. The study by

Rafi'i et al. (2025) also showed that students perceived Zotero as an easy-to-use and beneficial application for preparing citations and reference lists. Sastrani et al. (2026) identified challenges related to integration and metadata, as well as the strategies adopted by Zotero users to address them.

Based on these findings, Mendeley and Zotero share relatively similar primary functions, namely facilitating the digital management of reference sources and supporting the technical accuracy of citations. Differences in users' experiences with these applications are more closely associated with ease of use, mastery of features, integration with word-processing software, and individual user needs. Therefore, application selection can be adjusted to users' abilities, needs, and academic working environments.

2. The Contribution of Reference Managers to Information Literacy and Academic Writing

The use of reference management applications is closely related to information literacy, particularly in activities involving the collection, storage, organization, and use of scientific information sources. Students writing academic papers need to possess the ability to identify relevant sources, assess the suitability of information, understand the content of references, and use them as a foundation for developing academic arguments.

Wahyudi et al. (2025) discussed efforts to strengthen students' digital reference literacy through Mendeley training. Their study demonstrated that introducing and practicing the use of reference management applications constitutes one form of support for developing digital source management skills. Similarly, Saputra (2020) emphasized the importance of scientific reference literacy among students in supporting the preparation and publication of academic papers. These two studies demonstrate that reference management skills are an essential component of the process of utilizing information in academic activities.

The relationship between reference management applications and academic writing is also evident in the study conducted by Rafi'i et al. (2025). Based on interviews with 12 students, the study found that students perceived Zotero as helping to improve time efficiency, facilitate citation and reference list preparation, and support academic writing activities. Students also stated that their use of the application was influenced by academic encouragement, peers, and lecturers.

The relationship between information literacy and academic writing skills is further supported by Yu's (2025) study. The findings revealed a strong relationship between the two abilities, with a correlation coefficient of 0.815. The ability to evaluate and understand information was found to have a closer association with the writing process. This finding illustrates that academic writing requires not only technical skills in composing written work but also the ability to understand and evaluate the information used. Therefore, the use of Mendeley and Zotero needs to be accompanied by efforts to strengthen information literacy so that students can utilize references appropriately when developing scientific arguments.

Furthermore, Thesia et al. (2026) examined the relationship between digital literacy and students' academic writing skills. Their study provides context for understanding how the ability to use digital technology is related to the academic writing process. However, digital literacy and information literacy cannot be considered entirely equivalent. The ability to operate applications constitutes a technical skill, whereas information literacy also encompasses the ability to critically evaluate, understand, and use information.

The study by Arifiyana and Prasetyawan (2023) also demonstrated that the use of Mendeley is related to students' personal information management practices. The utilization of this application is influenced by individual users' needs and abilities in managing information sources. Meanwhile, Dahlen et al. (2024) explained that source-based writing involves more than merely citing references; it also requires the ability to quote, paraphrase, summarize, and integrate information into written work. This finding indicates that reference management skills need to be accompanied by the ability to understand and process information.

Thus, Mendeley and Zotero can be regarded as supporting tools in the processes of information literacy and academic writing. Both applications facilitate the technical aspects of reference management but do not replace users' abilities to read critically, assess source credibility, construct arguments, and develop scientific ideas.

3. Supporting Factors and Barriers to the Use of Mendeley and Zotero

The literature review indicates that the successful use of reference management applications is determined not only by the features available but also by users' skills and the support provided by the academic environment.

Supporting factors for the use of Mendeley and Zotero include computer proficiency, an understanding of academic writing techniques, device availability, and access to training and mentoring. The study by Haliq et al. (2021) demonstrated that computer skills, mastery of academic writing techniques, and ease of metadata management are factors that support the use of Zotero. The study by Rafi'i et al. (2025) also identified the influence of academic support, peers, and lecturers on students' use of Zotero. Sastrani et al. (2026) further demonstrated the role of training, peer assistance, independent exploration, and online tutorials in overcoming barriers to its use.

Support from the academic environment also plays a role in helping students master the use of reference management applications. Through a training program involving 29 nursing students, Hermawati et al. (2023) found an increase in participants' knowledge after they received guidance on using one of these applications to manage references and insert citations into academic papers. Consistent with these findings, Istiana and Singh (2025) showed that libraries and librarians are among the main sources of information through which students learn about reference management tools.

On the other hand, several barriers remain in the use of reference management applications. These barriers include limited technical knowledge, installation difficulties, synchronization problems, integration issues with Microsoft Word, and inaccurate reference metadata. Haliq et al. (2021) specifically identified difficulties involving installation, synchronization, integration, and the insertion of citations through Microsoft Word. Meanwhile, the study by Amelia and Khadijah (2026) also described users' limited skills and integration difficulties as challenges in utilizing Mendeley. Santosa et al. (2021) and Sastrani et al. (2026) likewise reported technical problems related to integration with word-processing software and metadata accuracy.

These findings indicate that the availability of an application does not automatically guarantee that users can utilize it optimally. Users still require practical skills and an understanding of reference management procedures. Therefore, training accompanied by hands-on practice, the provision of user guides and video tutorials, as well as guidance from lecturers and libraries, can serve as strategies to overcome these barriers. This is consistent with the report by Hastuti et al. (2025) on Mendeley training to improve students' academic digital literacy and the study by Agung et al. (2026) on improving reference management competencies through training and mentoring.

When compared, the findings of Haliq et al. (2021) and Sastrani et al. (2026) demonstrate that barriers to using Zotero can be addressed through guides, tutorials, training, peer assistance, and independent exploration. This indicates that mentoring should not focus solely on introducing application features but should also include practical activities involving metadata verification, citation style configuration, reference collection management, and an understanding of citation ethics. In this way, users can not only operate the application but also understand the proper use of references in academic writing.

4. Implications of Reference Manager Use for the Quality of Academic Papers

The use of Mendeley and Zotero has implications for the process of preparing academic papers, particularly in terms of source management efficiency, citation consistency, and reference list organization. With the assistance of reference management applications, authors can reduce repetitive tasks when entering bibliographic information and updating reference lists whenever changes are made to a document.

The findings of Rafi'i et al. (2025) indicate that students experienced the benefits of Zotero in accelerating the writing process and facilitating the preparation of citations and reference lists. Sastrani et al. (2026) also reported that users continued to use Zotero because they considered it helpful in improving reference management efficiency and citation accuracy. Similarly, the study by Haliq et al. (2021) showed that using Zotero helped students manage references more efficiently. Regarding Mendeley, Amelia and Khadijah (2026) also described the application's benefits in organizing references and reducing technical errors in citation practices.

Nevertheless, the use of reference management applications needs to be accompanied by verification of the stored bibliographic information. Metadata errors, such as incorrect author names, publication years, titles, or publication details, can result in inaccurate citations and reference lists. Furthermore, users still need to understand the writing style required by their journals or institutions. Thus, the automation provided by these applications does not eliminate authors' responsibility to verify and ensure the accuracy of references.

Another implication concerns academic ethics. The use of these applications can help authors cite their sources more systematically, but it does not automatically guarantee that a paper is free from plagiarism. Plagiarism prevention still requires an understanding of

paraphrasing, citation practices, source attribution, and academic integrity. Therefore, the quality of academic papers is determined not only by the use of technological tools but also by authors' intellectual abilities and responsibility in processing information.

The findings of Dahlen et al. (2024) reinforce this explanation by demonstrating that source-based writing does not end with the inclusion of citations but also involves the ability to select quotations, paraphrase, summarize, and integrate information according to the purpose of the writing. This means that reference managers can help maintain the organization of the technical aspects of citation, but the quality of source utilization remains dependent on authors' ability to understand the content of their reading materials and use them appropriately in developing arguments.

Thus, the implications of using Mendeley and Zotero for the quality of academic papers need to be understood in two dimensions. In the technical dimension, these applications improve efficiency, citation consistency, and reference list organization. In the substantive dimension, the quality of academic work remains determined by the appropriateness of source selection, depth of understanding, synthesis and argumentation skills, and compliance with academic ethics. Metadata verification and checking the consistency of citations with their original sources are essential steps to ensure that the convenience of automation does not instead lead to bibliographic or citation errors.

5. Synthesis of Literature Findings

Overall, the literature review demonstrates that Mendeley and Zotero have relatively similar primary functions in facilitating digital reference management, citation insertion, and reference list preparation. Studies on Mendeley, including those by Santosa et al. (2021) and Arifiyana and Prasetyawan (2023), demonstrate the application's use in managing sources and meeting users' academic information needs. Meanwhile, studies on Zotero by Haliq et al. (2021) and Sastrani et al. (2026) indicate its benefits in organizing references, as well as the existence of technical challenges that need to be addressed. These findings suggest that both applications can support academic work, but they do not provide a basis for concluding that one is always superior to the other in all usage contexts.

The literature synthesis also indicates that the contribution of reference managers to information literacy and academic writing is supportive rather than substitutive. These applications help users collect, store, organize, and cite sources. However, the ability to

identify relevant information, assess source credibility, understand reading materials, integrate ideas, and develop paraphrases and arguments still requires information literacy skills and writing proficiency. This is consistent with Dahlen et al. (2024), who positioned the use of sources in writing as a process involving citation, paraphrasing, summarizing, and information integration rather than merely including references.

The successful use of Mendeley and Zotero is also influenced by users' circumstances and the academic environment. Technical skills, an understanding of academic writing, device availability, training, and support from lecturers and peers can help users utilize these applications more effectively. Conversely, difficulties integrating the applications with word-processing software, synchronization problems, and inaccurate metadata can hinder their use. Therefore, training should not focus solely on how to insert citations automatically but should also cover metadata verification, citation style selection, source management, and information-use ethics.

Within the reviewed literature, discussions have focused more extensively on application functions, user perceptions, training, and technical barriers. Meanwhile, studies that directly measure changes in information literacy skills or improvements in the substantive quality of academic papers remain relatively limited within the body of research examined. This provides an opportunity for future research to examine the relationship between reference manager use and the ability to evaluate sources, synthesize literature, construct arguments, and produce high-quality academic writing. Accordingly, the use of Mendeley and Zotero should be positioned as part of efforts to strengthen the information literacy ecosystem in higher education through the integration of application training, information literacy instruction, and academic writing guidance.

Research implications, this study highlights the importance of integrating reference manager applications, such as Mendeley and Zotero, into academic writing activities to improve reference management efficiency, citation accuracy, and information literacy. Their effective use requires technical skills, critical thinking, and institutional support.

Research limitations, this study is limited to a literature review and does not involve empirical data collection. Therefore, it cannot directly measure the impact of Mendeley and Zotero on students' information literacy and academic writing quality.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the literature review, Mendeley and Zotero play an important role in supporting reference management and academic writing, particularly for novice researchers, by facilitating the storage of sources, management of citations, and systematic and efficient compilation of bibliographies. However, the use of these two applications is merely supportive and does not directly guarantee the quality of scholarly work without being accompanied by information literacy skills, such as identifying and evaluating source credibility, paraphrasing, synthesizing literature, and developing critical and ethical arguments. Optimizing their use also requires technical skills, adequate facilities, and institutional support through training and guidance. This study has limitations because it is based solely on a literature review and does not empirically measure the impact of using the two applications. Therefore, future research should examine the relationship between the use of Mendeley and Zotero and improvements in information literacy, source evaluation skills, and academic writing quality in higher education.

This study contributes to the understanding of how reference manager applications support information literacy and academic writing. It also emphasizes that technological tools complement, rather than replace, critical thinking and academic writing competencies.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct empirical studies examining the relationship between Mendeley and Zotero usage, information literacy, source evaluation skills, and academic writing quality among university students. Comparative studies may also identify differences in user experiences and application effectiveness.

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