23 Zotero for Plain Text Writing

Jacques Mock Schindler

14.01.2026

Managing a Bibliography with Zotero

Zotero calls itself a personal research assistant. For high school students, it is a tool to for managing citations in their texts. In addition, Zotero can act as an e-reader with useful note-taking functions.

Zotero Installation and Set-Up

To use Zotero's full functionality, an optional Zotero account must be set up. This can be done on the Zotero website. If you plan to use Zotero for purposes other than strictly private ones, use your school or business email address respectively. The user profile allows multiple email addresses. This means that you can keep your database if you leave your current organisation.

After setting up your optional personal account, you can download and install the Zotero Desktop Client. On the same website you see the possibility to install the Zotero connector plugin for your browser. This plugin is not strictly necessary but it simplifies the collection of sources in your database.

As soon Zotero is installed on your computer, your installation can be linked to your Zotero account (Edit > Settings, Sync Tab).

In the Markdown – Pandoc-Workflow you need the BetterBibTeX plugin. The Plugin can be downloaded from ist GitHub Repository. To install the downloaded `.xpi` file, go to Tools > Plugins, Cogwheel > Install Plugin From File… After you have installed the plugin, you may delete the `.xpi` file.

Create and organise Zotero entries

How to create new entries in Zotero is well explained on the Zotero Website. Therefore, here just the link to the tutorial for adding entries and the organisation of the entries respectively.

For entries from Zotero to be readable in texts, they must be referenced using the citation key. The exact syntax for this is explained in **?@sec-citation_key_syntax**. Zotero creates a standard key for

each entry. However, this can be difficult to remember. It is therefore advisable to define the citation key yourself.

To do this, enter the 'Key–Value' pair 'citation key: own_key' in the 'Extra' field of the entry's metadata. The citation key defined in this way is saved when you exit the 'Extra' field.
The simplest citation key is probably `authorYYYY`, where YYYY stands for the four-digit year.

Create a `.bib` file for the Markdown − Pandoc-workflow

For each project, you must compile all the relevant Zotero entries into a collection. This collection can then be exported as a .bib file. To do so, right-click on the collection and select 'Export Collection' from the context menu. In the dialogue box, select 'Better BibLaTeX' as the export format. Furthermore, select the "Keep Updated" and "Background Export" options. The first option keeps your .bib file up to date, while the second prevents the export process from freezing.
The standard name of the generated .bib file is the name of the collection. During the export setup, you can choose an arbitrary name for the .bib file. However, renaming the file after the export setup may break the update process. In any case, if you do not trust the automatic update process, you can export the collection again at any time.