When to cite

Unless told otherwise, cite everything which is not obvious or universally agreed and which you did not come up with yourself. You do not have to provide a citation that Dublin is the capital of Ireland. However, if you want to claim it is the most important city in Ireland, you would have to provide a citation. This is because it is a debatable claim. It is not so much that others may feel their city is more important, but that ‘important’ is a word which can have many meanings. The first response an academic will have to the claim that Dublin is the most important city in Ireland is to ask “important in what way?” Are you talking about population size, economic impact, cultural influence, the beauty of the city, historical factors, architecture, pollution created, recycling centres, traffic levels, sports performance, or something else? To claim Dublin is the most important city in Ireland you would have to cite a paper or book which defines importance and provides evidence that Dublin meets that criteria of importance better than any other Irish city. The purpose for citing them is so you do not have to make that argument and present that evidence. If the reader is puzzled by what you say, or wants to know more, or wants to see a justification, they can use the citation to find the source you referenced and assess it for themselves.

Citations help your arguments. Effectively, you are saying “I accept what this person says, and I’m moving on from there. If you don’t like it, your argument is with them, not me.” For example, if you want to say that capitalism is evil and discuss alternatives, you’ll have to first explain how and why capitalism is evil. On the other hand, if you say that you accept Marx’s arguments for the evil of capitalism and are now going to discuss alternatives, anyone who doesn’t believe capitalism is evil has to argue with Marx, not you.

Here are situations in which you must cite:

1. Using obscure or newly discovered facts.
2. Using someone’s opinions.
3. Direct quotations.
4. Paraphrasing someone else.
5. Summarising someone’s argument.

Academic papers frequently average one citation for every hundred words. The more advanced your university education, the more citations you should aim for.