Using MLA Format

Inquire: MLA Formatting and Citation

Overview

Most academic and professional organizations have a set of formatting guidelines they prefer. From the American Psychological Association (APA) to the Modern Language Association (MLA), and from Google to Apple, companies and organizations have their own particular preferences on how materials are produced and shared. In language, composition, and literature fields, MLA is the preferred style of formatting. Formatting styles cover everything from how the words and elements are arranged on a page to the way sources are cited.

Big Question: What is MLA formatting, and how can I use it?

Watch: MLA: What’s the Use?

When your teacher tells you to submit something in MLA format, do you know what that means? Why is there a difference between MLA, APA, Turabian, and Chicago styles of formatting? Every field of study and research has its own preferred style of formatting; the fields of language, composition, and literature studies most often prefer MLA. Formatting styles are easy once you figure out each one’s clear and necessary purpose; from there, it’s really just a matter of remembering to do it correctly!

MLA stands for the Modern Language Association, which is a professional and academic organization for scholars and professionals who work with language, composition, and literature. Other organizations have their own style guides. For example, the American Psychological Association has the APA style guide. Even companies such as Google, Apple, and the New York Times have their own style guides to ensure that products produced by their employees meet a certain standard of consistency.

MLA’s style guidelines are all about how information is produced. The style guide offers guidance on two major elements of writing: the way information is arranged on the page and how information is cited.

MLA formatting requires several things, including how a document looks, which elements are included, and how those elements are arranged on the page. In MLA, for example, no cover page is required. Other style guides, like APA, require a cover page for all essays. There are a few important aspects to remember about MLA formatting.

First, your last name and page number should be in the upper right-hand corner. Second, you need a header with your full name, the instructor’s name, the course name, and the submission date. This information goes at the top of the first page, and is left-aligned. Third, your title should be centered. You should never bold or italicize this. Finally, your font should be 12 point and Times New Roman.
The other major aspect of MLA formatting is citation. Citation in MLA consists of two major elements: in-text citations, which include the author’s last name and the page number of the quote or paraphrase, and the works cited page.

How familiar are you with MLA formatting? Are you ready to begin incorporating it into your essays?

**Read: MLA Formatting**

**Overview**

When your teacher tells you to submit something in MLA format, do you know what that means? Why is there a difference between MLA, APA, Turabian, and Chicago styles of formatting? Every field of study and research has its own preferred style of formatting; the fields of language, composition, and literature studies most often prefer MLA, which is why you will spend a little bit of time learning about it for this class. Formatting styles are easy once you figure out each one’s clear and necessary purpose; from there, it’s really just a matter of remembering to do it correctly!

**MLA Documentation**

MLA style is one of the most common citation and formatting styles you will encounter in your academic career. The MLA (the Modern Language Association) — an organization of language scholars and experts — aims to present a straightforward process to standardize the format and presentation of academic writing. MLA format is widely used in many high school and introductory college English classes, as well as scholarly books and professional journals. If you are writing a paper for a literature or media studies class, it is likely your professor will ask you to write in MLA style.

**Overall Structure of an MLA Paper**

One purpose of using MLA format is to streamline the writing process and establish a consistent and uniform way of presenting material. For this reason, there are specific guidelines you’ll need to follow when formatting your paper. Generally, MLA papers use a 12-point font, have 1-inch margins, are double-spaced, include page numbers, and include personal information in the upper left-hand corner.

**General MLA Formatting Rules**

- **Font:** Your paper should be written in 12-point text. Whichever font you choose, MLA requires that regular and italicized text be easily distinguishable from each other. Times and Times New Roman are often recommended.
- **Line spacing:** All text in your paper should be double-spaced.
- **Margins:** All page margins (top, bottom, left, and right) should be 1 inch. All text should be left-justified.
- **Indentation:** The first line of every paragraph should be indented 0.5 inches.
- **Page numbers:** Create a right-justified header 0.5 inches from the top edge of every page. This header should include your last name, followed by a space and the page number. Your pages should be numbered with Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3…) and should start with the number 1 on your title page. Most word-processing programs have the ability to automatically add the correct page number to each page so you don’t have to do this manually.
Use of italics: In MLA style, you should italicize (rather than underline) the titles of books, plays, or other standalone works. You should also italicize (rather than underline) words or phrases that you want to lend particular emphasis — though you should do this rarely.

Sentence spacing: Include just one single space after a period before the next sentence: "Mary went to the store. She bought some milk. Then she went home."

The first page: Like the rest of your paper, everything on your first page — including the headers — should be double-spaced. The following information should be left-justified in regular font at the top of the first page (in the main part of the page, not the header):
- On the first line, your first and last name.
- On the second line, your instructor's name.
- On the third line, the name of the class.
- On the fourth line, the date.

The title: After the header, the next double-spaced line should include the title of your paper. This should be centered and in title case, and it should not be bolded, underlined, or italicized (unless it includes the name of a book, in which case just the book title should be italicized).

The Oxford comma: The Oxford comma (also called the serial comma) is the comma that comes after the second-to-last item in a series or a list. For example: The UK includes the countries of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In the previous sentence, the comma immediately after “Wales” is the Oxford comma. In general writing conventions, whether the Oxford comma should be used is actually a point of fervent debate among passionate grammarians. However, it’s a requirement in MLA style, so double-check all your lists and series to make sure you include it!

Reflect Poll: Bogged Down in Details

How well do you do with things like MLA formatting?
- It’s no problem; I like learning all the little details!
- I find it really difficult; I can’t remember all the small elements.

Expand: Citing Sources

Overview

So now you understand the basics of formatting your essay in the style of MLA, but MLA is more than just a preferred style of document formatting — it also encompasses citations. To properly cite a source, you will need to reference the author briefly in the text of the paper itself (as an in-text citation), and you will need to provide information about accessing the source in your works cited page at the end of your essay.

Why Cite?

Citing is important because:

- Citations help others find the information you used in your research paper.
- Citing your sources accurately helps establish the credibility of your research.
- Citations connect your work to the work of other scholars.
- Citations are one way in which scholars have a dialogue with one another.
- Citations are a way to honor and acknowledge the work of others who have made your own research possible.
Formatting the Works Cited Section

When you format your paper in the MLA style, you will need to include a works cited page, which is a page at the end of your essay that lists all of your sources and where to find them. Your works cited page should be formatted in the following way:

- Title: The title of your works cited page is “Works Cited.” You should center it and write it in Times New Roman, 12 point font.
- Spacing: As with your essay, make sure this page is double-spaced with 1-inch margins.
- Page Number: Continue your page numbering from the rest of your essay onto this page. The page number should appear in the upper right-hand corner of the page with your last name.
- Alphabetical order: All sources should be arranged in alphabetical order.
- Hanging indents: A hanging indentation is when the first line of your citation is at the left margin of your paper (not indented), but the subsequent lines of that citation are indented 0.5 inches over. Every word processor is different, so you might have to play around or do a little bit of research in order to figure out how to make this work for your individual word processor.

In-Text Citations

The general format for an in-text citation is as follows:

“Quotation” or paraphrase (Author’s Last Name Page Number).

Observe in the above example that the punctuation comes after the final parenthesis, not after the quotation or paraphrase. Additionally, there is no punctuation in the parenthetical citation itself. These are two of the most common errors in writing in-text citations.

However, there are a few times when your citation might not look like the above example:

- If you mention the author’s last name in your quote or paraphrase’s introduction, you should not include it in the parenthetical citation.
- If you are quoting or paraphrasing from a source that does not have page numbers or consists of only one page, you will not include a page number.

So, if you were quoting from this article, which is not paginated, it could look like this:

“These are two of the most common errors in writing in-text citations” (Jackson).

OR

Cady Jackson argues misplaced punctuation marks before and during parenthetical citations “are two of the most common errors in writing in-text citations.”

Generally speaking, the goal of an in-text citation is to point your reader to the proper source in your works cited page. This is why the author’s last name is the most important part; that’s what is listed first, and thus easiest to find, in your works cited page! The author’s last name must be attached to your quote or paraphrase, either in the introduction or in the parenthetical citation that follows. If a page number exists, it should also be included in the parenthetical citation.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An overview of in-text citations

- Link to resource: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-englishcomposition1/chapter/text-mla-in-text-citations/

A quick-reference MLA formatting and style guide

- Link to resource: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html

A video tutorial of MLA formatting

- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22CPQoLE4U0

Lesson Glossary

**hanging indention**: the first line of a citation is at the left margin of a paper (not indented), but the subsequent lines of that citation are indented 0.5 inches over

**works cited page**: a page at the end of an essay that lists your sources and where to find them

Check Your Knowledge

1. MLA is mostly about how you format the first page of your essay.
   a. True
   b. False
2. If the author’s last name is included in the quote introduction, you can drop it from your parenthetical citation.
   a. True
   b. False
3. If your source doesn’t have a page number, you may omit the page number from your parenthetical citation.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

Lesson Content:

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