Student Name

Instructor Name

MLA uses a short heading on the first page instead of a title page. For assistance with formatting, see the MLA Paper Template.

Course name and number

Date

MLA Style Made Easy

What is MLA style and why do students use it? MLA stands for Modern Language Association, which is a professional organization for scholars in the humanities. MLA was founded in 1883 and works "to promote teaching in scholarship in languages and literatures" (MLA xiv). MLA style was first set down in "The MLA Style Sheet" in 1951 as a guide to

Normally, an author or editor's last name goes here, but the author of the Modern Language Association. You can use an acronym (if it's obvious) to cite a corporate author, *MLA Handbook* is the or abbreviate it (for example, Modn. Lang. Assn.)

help researchers complete their work (MLA xiv). Now in its seventh edition, the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* helps writers pick a topic, support ideas through research, and format a final paper. MLA guidelines also help writers balance the technical side of writing a paper with considerations such as how to present a point of view in written discourse and how to document sources to support opinions and analysis. By reviewing this summary of the guidelines, you will learn the mechanics of writing in MLA style and the basics of quoting and paraphrasing your sources in a professional, academic way.

Put your last name and the page number in the header in the upper-right corner.

Style and Mechanics

MLA doesn't stipulate styles for headings and subheadings. This sample paper uses headings similar to APA style. Your instructor may be able to give you a preferred format.

Grammar and Writing Style

Academic writing often requires more time and care than e-mails or online posts—but not because it needs to be more extravagant and difficult. Rather, the challenge of writing an academic essay is learning to say things as clearly and carefully as possible so your reader follows your analysis easily and trusts you as a writer and thinker. To write clearly, you should keep your sentences readable and concise, free from extra filler words and long-winded ways of saying things. Joseph M. Williams, a respected authority on writing style, warns that when writers lack confidence they often "throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complex sentences," which makes it difficult for the reader to see any good ideas or analysis in the paper (8). The best way to show what you know and to prove your thesis is to lay out your analysis with clear, concise, readable sentences and paragraphs.

Being clear gives you credibility with your reader, as does being careful and correct with your writing. More than grammar and spelling, correctness means using a writing style that is credible and appropriate for the context. In academic writing, readers expect somewhat careful and conservative grammar and wording. With a literary analysis essay, for example, most readers and instructors would expect a paper written in third person (no first-person "I" or "we" or second-person "you") and free from contractions and informal words and phrases. Readers would have different expectations, though, for a personal reflection essay (more "I" and subjective language) or a help guide or walkthrough (addressing the reader as "you" and being as

concise as possible). Correctness in academic writing is not about striving to be formal and dry; it is a matter of choosing the most credible, effective way to write in each situation.

Punctuation

According to the *MLA Handbook,* "the primary purpose of punctuation is to ensure the clarity and readability of writing," which helps the reader understand your message (66). Correct punctuation establishes the rhythm and readability of your sentences. Use only one space after commas, colons, and semicolons. You can use one or two spaces after a period at the end of a sentence, but be consistent throughout the paper. When using a hyphen or a dash, do not include a space before or after (MLA 72). Correct use of commas and semicolons can be challenging; for that and other punctuation and grammatical issues, you are encouraged to proofread your paper and to check the resources at the Center for Writing Excellence.

Capitalization

Capitalization is used to designate a proper noun or trade name as well as major words in titles and headings. Capitalization is not usually necessary for laws, theories, models, and job titles. General literary styles and forms are usually not capitalized (such as realism, modernism, or epic poetry), though historical periods often are (the Renaissance or the Victorian era, for example).

Numbers

The type of paper you are writing will determine whether numbers are spelled out as words or not. If you are working with a subject that will contain few numbers, such as a literature review or research paper on a nonscientific topic, spelling out the numbers as words is the accepted format. For any number that is three or more words long when written out (103, 2004,

or 4,000,022, for example), use numerals instead for the sake of readability. If the paper is a scientific type of study where numbers will be shared throughout the work, it is acceptable to use Arabic numerals for "all numbers that precede technical units of measurement" (MLA 81).

Maintaining good writing style, with proper spelling and grammar skills and effective paragraph-building skills, will help you create a positive experience for your reader. Using accurate MLA format and style will also enhance the paper's overall credibility.

Formatting Your Paper

MLA style has specific guidelines for paper formatting. Setting up the paper in MLA style before you start will streamline the process and help you focus on your writing without being daunted by all the formatting rules. Generally, the following guidelines apply to all MLA papers:

- The paper is double-spaced, typed in a readable font such as Times New Roman. The font size is usually 12 pt.

- The page is set up with one-inch margins on all sides. (Your version of Microsoft® Word may have different default margins, so be sure to check.)

- Indent the first line of paragraphs one-half inch from the left margin. (Using the Tab key will place the cursor in the correct position to begin typing.)

- Create a header aligned with the right margin. Insert page numbers there and type your last name before the number. (See the header of this paper.)

- Use italics for the titles of books, magazines, journals, and other similar sources. Avoid using italics to emphasize words or phrases.

- MLA allows for the use of endnotes if specifically requested by your instructor. Include the notes on a separate page after the essay, but before the Works Cited page. Title the page with the word *Notes* in the center of the page in plain letters.

Citing Your Sources

This aspect of academic writing can seem arcane and tedious to many students; behind all the rules, though, citations give writers a system for being responsible and ethical when they borrow material from another source and use it in an essay. Good scholarship requires you to familiarize yourself with what experts and other writers have already said about your topic. You will use those outside opinions for support in your paper: either to back up your ideas or to offer a contrast. When you quote or paraphrase those other writers in your paper, you need to carefully identify the source of those borrowed words or ideas.

If you inserted that borrowed material into your essay—either the actual words or just the ideas—without giving credit to the original author, you would be plagiarizing. Apart from the academic consequences of plagiarism, it would also cause your paper to lose credibility with your reader. He or she would begin to question what other items in the essay might be unoriginal. By following MLA guidelines on carefully citing all your sources, you will avoid any intentional or unintentional plagiarism. You can keep track of your sources as you work through your research and later transfer that information to the parenthetical citations throughout your paper and the Works Cited list at the end.

Quotations in MLA

A quotation is text that is taken word for word from a source. As mentioned earlier, MLA advises writers to be brief in quotation use. MLA advocates that "quotations are effective in

research papers when used selectively" (92). Further, MLA regards "overquotation" as a detriment to a good discussion (92). Many instructors have individual preferences on how much quoted material is allowed in an academic paper. Sometimes the assignment will stipulate a number of sources to be used. Reviewing assignment guidelines and grading rubrics for guidance in this area is a good idea. Quote only as much as you need to support your claims in a scholarly way; the quoted material should never take up a significant amount of your paper or overshadow your own words and analysis. If you are writing a literary analysis paper, where many passages of stories or poetry might be included for support, be sure to quote judiciously—"only words, phrases, lines, and passages that are particularly interesting, vivid, unusual, or apt" (MLA 92).

Quotations can be used in various lengths. Generally, a quote of fewer than 40 words, or one to four sentences, is considered a short quote and can be contained in the paragraph of text. Short quotes always employ quotation marks, with no ending punctuation inside the quotation marks—but a period after the citation. An example "of a quote looks like this" (Author 45). Quotes that are longer than four sentences should be presented in a block format like this example, indented from the left margin. Block quotes do not take quotation marks. Additionally, the citation at the end of a block quote is not included inside the punctuation of the last sentence. The citation stands alone, and because it is not a sentence, it carries no punctuation at all, like this (Author 126).

When quoting poetry, a writer has two choices. Display the lines as they appear in the poem, using the block quote method (being careful not to quote too much—only the most pertinent lines), or write the poetic lines in sentence form with slashes representing line breaks:

In his poem "My Papa's Waltz," Theodore Roethke uses a simplistic rhyme scheme to evoke the childhood innocence of a song or nursery rhyme in contrast to the darkness of the

memory: "The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy; / But I hung on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy. / We Romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf; / My mother's countenance / Could not unfrown itself" (Roethke 769).

Sometimes it is necessary to add, omit, or change words in quotes to make the meaning clear to the reader, because the sentence may be lifted out of the grammatical context of the original work. If you make changes, place square brackets around the changed or added text. If you omit any words within the selection, use an ellipsis (. . .) in place of the missing words to indicate to the reader that the entire sentence is not being presented in the text. Be sure these changes or omissions do not alter the meaning of the original quotation.

Parenthetical citations

A parenthetical citation is a brief parenthetical notation in your sentence that indicates that you are quoting or paraphrasing another source. Sometimes a writer will provide some or all of that information (the author's name, for example) in the sentence itself. If there is a page number involved (if the information comes from a book, for example) then the page number will go inside the parenthesis. See the first few pages of this paper for examples. Here is a list of guidelines for parenthetical citations, organized by the type of source:

1. Print sources: known author

    Use the author's last name in the sentence, with the page number in parentheses at the end of the quote; otherwise, put the author's last name and the page number in the parenthetical citation.

2. Print sources: author not known

    Substitute the title of the article for the author's name inside the citation; use an

abbreviated article title with quotation marks around it.

3. Multiple authors in your paper with the same last name

   Use those authors' first initial and last name in each citation.

4. Works with multiple authors

   For two authors list both authors' last names in the citation. Separate the names with the word "and." For three or more authors, list the first author, then insert *et al.* (which means "and others").

5. Multiple works by the same author

   When working with two different works by one author, include the article or book name in the parenthesis after the author's name and before the page number (Author, *Title* 23). In this case, to keep the citation from being so long, it might be preferable to use the author's name in your sentence, with just the title and page number in parentheses.

6. Multivolume works

   If you cite multiple volumes of a work in your paper, indicate the volume number in the citations. Separate the volume number and the page number with a colon.

7. The Bible

   In the first citation, indicate in italics which version of the Bible is being used, then insert a comma followed by the book and verse numbers for the passage. In any future citations using the same Bible, list just the book and verse.

8. Indirect or secondary sources

When you want to use a passage that your source quotes from another author, and you do not have access to the original source, indicate where the work was quoted in the source you have, such as: (qtd. in Holzhauer 121).

9. Nonprint sources such as the Internet

    If there is no author, use a shortened version of the title in the citation (and be sure your Works Cited entry begins with that title, too). There are no page numbers in web entries, nor are there paragraph numbers.

10. Film

    Depending on the focus of the essay, you can use the director in place of the author's name in the Works Cited list, or you can use the main actor or the producer instead. After the name, indicate the title the person holds (not abbreviated, director, performer, producer as a few examples).

11. Common knowledge

    Common-knowledge items do not need citations. Remember that what counts as common knowledge will always depend on your audience.

Works Cited Page

The second part of crediting your sources is completing the Works Cited entry. The parenthetical citation and the Works Cited entries are a matched set: the author or title in the parenthetical citation will match the first part of your Works Cited entry. These entries are designed to guide readers to the source. Here is what a set of parenthetical citations and Works Cited entry will look like:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (Dickens 1).

Or, you might have a quotation like this, with the author's name in your sentence:

> Dickens was famous for the first line of *A Tale of Two Cities,* beginning, "It was
>
> the best of times, it was the worst of times" (1).

In either case, your sentence and citation will lead the reader to the correct Works Cited entry:

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Simon & Brown, 2011.
        | | |

Author   **Title**   **Publisher and date**

Because the Works Cited entry is an abbreviated way of providing all the necessary information about the source, the structure and punctuation become important for separating the individual pieces of information.

Works Cited page format. All MLA papers follow this format for the Works Cited list:

- Start the Works Cited page on a new page at the end of the essay. The margins, typeface, double-spacing, and font size all remain the same.

- Title the page as Works Cited, and center this heading.

- Use a hanging indent for each entry. This means the first line of the entry is flush with the left margin and all subsequent lines of the entry are indented one-half inch (see the Works Cited page at the end of this sample paper).

- For digital sources MLA Works Cited entries should include a URL or DOI (Digital Object Identifier) if available, with the DOI being preferred.

- Capitalize each important word in the titles of works and publications. Do not capitalize words such as *the*, *and*, and *of* unless they come at the beginning of the title, as in *The Great Race*.

- Use italics for book, magazine, and journal titles.

- Use quotation marks for short works such as poems and articles.

- Entries begin with the author's last name, then a comma, then the first name: Dickens, Charles.

- If you have more than one work by the same author, start the second (and third, etc.) entry with three dashes like this:

    Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol.* […]

    ---. *A Tale of Two Cities.* […]

- When there is no author, use the title as the first part of the Works Cited entry.

Entry format Works Cited sources. The most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook* provides a simple and streamlined formula for works-cited entries applicable to all types of sources.

There are 9 core elements of any works-cited entry that are placed in the order below followed by the punctuation mark shown. **Simply omit any element that is irrelevant to that specific source.** The final element of the entry will end with a period.

1) Author.

2) Title of source.

3) Title of container,

4) Other contributors,

5) Version,

6) Number,

7) Publisher,

8) Publication date,

9) Location.

The items shared here are the most common types of Works Cited entries that writers need to create when writing in MLA style. For a more comprehensive explanation and examples, review the *MLA Handbook*.

1. Book with single author

   Author last name, Author first name. *Title of Book*. Publisher, copyright date.

2. Book with editor

   Editor last name, Editor first name, editor. *Title of Book*. Publisher, copyright date.

3. Book with multiple authors

   Author 1 last name, Author 1 first name, and Author 2 first name last name. *Title of Book*. Publisher, copyright date..

4. Story or poem in an anthology or collection

   Author last name, Author first name. "Title of Story/Poem/Essay." *Title of Collection/Anthology,* edited by Editor's name, Publisher, date of publication, Page range.

5. Periodicals, print

   Author last name, Author first name. "Title of Article." *Title of Journal,* vol. #, no. #, year, pp. page range of article.

6. Web: an entire website

   Editor, author, or compiler name (if available). *Name of Website.* Version number (if available), Name of institution/organization affiliated with the site (sponsor or publisher), Date of resource creation (if available), DOI # or (URL address).

7. Web: page on a website

    Same as for a website, but add the title of the specific page in quotation marks between the author and the name of the whole site.

Using MLA style helps writers control the flow of information that goes into the paper; the standardized format of parenthetical citations and Works Cited entries gives the paper a professional appearance and covers all ethical considerations in borrowing sources. Throughout this discussion, the sample essay has demonstrated the basics of MLA mechanics and formatting and the guidelines for properly identifying and citing sources in an academic paper. For more details and a wealth of citations examples, you can refer to the *MLA Handbook*. Additional guidance on grammar, punctuation, and the writing process is offered in the many resources available on the Center for Writing Excellence's Grammar Guide on your student web site.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. Dover Publications, 1991.

---. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Simon and Brown, 2011.

Modern Language Association. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 7th ed., MLA,
2009.

Roethke, Theodore. "My Papa's Waltz." *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, edited
by Michael Meyer, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 8th ed., Pearson Longman, 2005.