

MLA Format

A Quick and Easy Guide



When students get writing assignments in college classes, their instructors inevitably say those words that their students have either never heard before, or that they dread hearing: "I want you to cite your sources and write your paper using MLA format." One of the usual reactions to being told that your paper needs to be in MLA format is confusion. What is MLA format? What do I need to do?

MLA format is just a manual of style; basically, it's a checklist of the way your paper needs to look. While MLA format can seem daunting at first glance, it's actually pretty simple to use if you keep a few things in mind. At its most basic level, MLA format encompasses three facets of the paper:

- How the paper looks
- How the sources are cited
- How the citations are acknowledged

All three of those areas can be covered using a simple set of rules. These can be found in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (8th Ed., 2009), but a brief overview can be found here in this little guide.

Format (How the Paper Looks)

The MLA style has guidelines for the basic format of an essay, and those guidelines govern how the paper is supposed to look. To format your paper in MLA style, follow these guidelines:

- Type and then print your paper on white, letter-sized (8.5 x 11-inch) paper.
- Do *not* include a cover page unless your instructor has asked for one.
 - If your instructor requires a cover page, follow his or her instructions on how to format it.
- Double-space your paper.
 - Do this by setting the line spacing options in your word processing software, *not* by pressing the Enter key at the end of each line.
- Set your text in 12-point size, Times New Roman typeface.
- Indent the first line of each main paragraph by half an inch, and indent the entries on the works cited page with a half-inch hanging indent.
 - Indent your paragraphs using the Tab key or by setting the indents on the ruler in your word processing software. Do not use the spacebar to indent (a "five-space" indent is half an inch; this term is a holdover from typewriter-based typing when five spaces amounted to half an inch).
- Insert a header with your last name, followed by the page number, in the upper right of the page.
 - Do not type the header at the top of every page; use your word processor's header options instead.
- In the upper left corner of the first page, type your name, your instructor's name, the class, and the date (as day, month, year, with no commas – e.g. 15 Sept. 2016).

- Put each piece of information on a separate line, but press Shift+Enter at the end of each line to keep them grouped together.
- Give your paper a title, and type it at the top of the first page (below the upper-left corner information), centered.
 - Capitalize all the words in your title except for articles, conjunctions, and prepositions.
 - Use the same font for the title as the rest of the paper, and do not use special formatting like bold or underlined text (use italic text only if your title contains the title of another work. For example, "An Analysis of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*")
- Do not use bold or underlined text in the paper.
- Use italic text only for the titles of complete works, and in rare cases, for emphasis.

Inline Citations (How the Sources Are Cited)

When you write a paper that requires you to support your statements with information from outside sources, you will need to know how to create inline citations (sometimes called in-text citations or parenthetical citations). Any time you use information from an outside source (whether you quote it or put it in your own words), you have to cite where that information was originally found. In the MLA format, a proper inline citation only needs two pieces of information: the name of the source's author, and the page number of information. In fact, sometimes only one piece of information is required (see the fourth bullet point below). Whenever you need a citation, keep these things in mind:

- Each citation should include the author's last name and the page number where the information comes from, with no abbreviations or commas.
 - One author: (Smith 26)
 - Two authors: (Jones and Brown 34)
 - Three or more authors: (Johnson et al. 227)
- If the source is authored by an organization, the citation should use the organization's name.
 - Government agency: (Centers for Disease Control 24)
 - Group authorship: (Mayo Clinic Staff 432)
 - Organization: (Human Rights Campaign 21)
- If no author is known, an alternative source should be used. If no other sources can be found and it is not possible to change to a different topic, the citation should contain the first few identifiable words of the title, in quotation marks.
 - Article entitled "How Technology Affects Our Brains": ("Technology" 54)
- If the source is a Web page, no page numbers should be included unless the source is in Portable Document Format (PDF). Instead, paragraph numbers should be used, with a comma and the abbreviation "par." If the source has no paragraphs or page numbers, the citation should only include the author's last name.
 - Web source with paragraphs: (Smith, par. 16)
 - Web source with no paragraphs: (Johnson)
- When a citation is used at the end of a sentence, it should be before any ending punctuation.

- Example: Japan, which has long been known for its earthquake preparedness programs, was devastated by the quake, which destroyed thousands of buildings and killed tens of thousands of people (Stimpson 96).
- When a citation is used with a direct quotation, it should be outside of the quotation but before the ending punctuation.
 - Example: According to a professor at Virginia Tech, Congress has been treating FEMA “like a patient in triage. [They] must decide whether to treat it or let it die” (Roberts 16).
- If the author’s name is given in the text, the citation does not need to include it.
 - Example: Congress has been treating FEMA, according to Prof. Patrick Roberts of Virginia Tech, “like a patient in triage” (16).

Works Cited Page (How the Citations Are Acknowledged)

The reason for citing your sources, aside from the obvious ethical reason of giving authors credit for their ideas, is to give your readers a way to follow up on the information you’ve cited. This is done using a special page at the end of your paper. This page is the works cited page. There are two main things to remember with the works cited page: the formatting of the page, and the contents of the entries. The formatting of the page is straightforward:

- The title “Works Cited” should appear at the top of the page, centered.
- The header, font, and line spacing should all match the rest of the paper.
 - Do not create the works cited page as a separate file; use a page break (Ctrl+Enter) instead.
- The entries on the works cited page should be arranged alphabetically.
- Each entry should be treated as a paragraph, with a half-inch hanging indent.
 - Create a hanging indent using the ruler in your word processing software.

Each source that you cite in your paper needs to have an entry on your works cited page. The works cited page is, as the title implies, a list of all the works you have cited in your paper. While the inline citations only need an author name and page number, the entries on your list of works cited need more information.

For that, there are certain pieces of information, and the MLA style dictates the order in which they should appear. One cardinal rule in creating a works cited page is to use your best judgment; you can’t include information you don’t have. That being said, however, don’t be lazy! Don’t assume that information is not available just because it’s not immediately visible. For some sources – especially Web pages – you have to do a little bit of “digging” to find the information you need. For example, you may be reading an article where no author name appears on the page, but is instead listed on the Web site’s “about us” section. The general layout of a works cited reference is to list the author name first, then the name of the source, then the name of the larger work of which the source is part (if there is one), the publication information, and the medium of publication (usually “Web” or “Print”). There are many different kinds of research sources, but the three that you’re most likely to use are scholarly journals (often from a research database), books, and Web articles. There are obviously many other possible sources, all of which are covered in the *MLA Handbook*. For the three main types, however, your works cited entries should look something like these examples.

For an academic journal article in a database:

Last, First. "Title of Article." *Title of Journal*, other contributors, version, number, publisher, publication date, DOI or URL. *Title of Database*, DOI or URL.

Bangarino, Ricardo T. "Households' Natural Disaster Preparedness: A View from a Second Class Municipality in a Developing Country." *Environmentasia*, vol. 9, no. 2, July 2016, pp. 158-164. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.14456/ea.2016.20.

In the above example, the journal title and database title are examples of *containers* – that is, larger works of which a source is part. The above example has two containers (*Environmentasia* and *EBSCOhost*, the journal name and database name, respectively). As with most citation rules, if you're missing an element from the citation, simply skip it and move on to the next source. Many database articles will have *digital object identifiers* (DOI), which is what you should give as its location if available. Otherwise, use the URL (a "permalink" if possible), omitting the "http://" or "https://" part.

For a book:

Last, First. *Title of Book*. Other contributors, version, number, publisher, publication date.

Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. Norton, 2011.

Some books will have additional information. If a book source has a container (for example, an e-book in an online research database), treat it as you would treat an academic journal.

For a non-database Web article:

Last, First. "Title of Article." *Title of Web site*, other contributors, version, number, publisher, publication date, URL.

Perez, Evan. "Report Shows US Officials Struggled to Assess Usefulness of Post-9/11 Warrantless Surveillance." *CNN Politics*, CNN, 25 Apr. 2015, www.cnn.com/2015/04/25/politics/nsa-warrantless-surveillance-report/.

If you have used MLA format before, this is one of the most noticeable changes from the past formatting guidelines: where the *MLA Handbook* directed you to omit the URL in previous versions, it now recommends that you include it.

Additional Writing Center Resources

- Citing Sources
- Formatting in Microsoft Word
- APA Format: A Quick and Easy Guide

Further Reading

- Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) guide to MLA format:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01>
- *Strategies for Successful Writing* by James A. Reinking and Robert von der Osten (2014, Pearson)
- *MLA Handbook*, 8th Edition (2016, Modern Language Association)