OU Writing Center
The University of Oklahoma

OU Writing Center MLA Style Guide
Based on MLA 9th edition

MLA style is developed and maintained by the Modern Language Association as "a set of standards for writing and documentation used by writers to find and evaluate information, alert their audience to the trustworthiness of their findings through citation, and shape the expression of their ideas in conversation with others." These standards have been changed and expanded over time since the style's 1931 inception as a three-page sheet describing the format of articles published by the organization's journal, *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*. While its original goal was to standardize a single journal's articles, MLA style has become the standard for numerous fields in the humanities, especially those concerned with modern languages and literature.

In any field, the purpose of writing in style is the same—to emphasize the content of a document over its formatting and to consistently identify important information, findings, and sources. When most people think of writing in a particular style, the first thing that comes to mind are citations and references. While those are both addressed in this guide, there is much more to writing in MLA style than the way you cite outside resources. This guide will walk you through the process of formatting your paper in MLA style, as well as address particular elements of papers in MLA style.

Formatting Your Paper in MLA Style

Paper formatting takes place on three levels: the text (typeface and type size), the paragraph (line spacing, text alignment, and section headings), and the page (margins and headers). Using a consistent format for these elements of your paper will make your writing more accessible to readers in physical or digital formats and clearly demonstrate your paper's structure and organization.

Text Formatting

When selecting a typeface for your paper, it's important to consider the font's legibility, availability, and versatility. A legible font is one without distracting stylistic qualities, like calligraphic or novelty fonts might have. Serif and sans serif font styles make up the majority of word processing programs' default typefaces.

Source: Easil

Custom or third-party fonts might not be available to a wide selection of your audience, nor are they typically as versatile as the more developed standard font families, which include special characters and symbols beyond the Latin alphabet. The MLA Handbook recommends using a typeface that clearly contrasts with its italic style (e.g., Times New Roman, Arial, or Georgia) in an 11-13pt type size, unless your instructor gives you specific directions otherwise.

Paragraph Formatting

Spacing

The MLA Handbook recommends double spacing all text in your document. Double spacing the text in your paper will increase its legibility in both physical and digital formats by emphasizing the spaces between lines of text and providing the eye a guide as it moves from one line to the next. When beginning a new paragraph, you won't need to add any extra space between the last line of the preceding paragraph and the first line of the paragraph following, since double-spaced text already provides adequate spacing in these cases.

Alignment

In MLA style, your paper's text should generally be left-aligned, but not justified. The result of this formatting is that the left margin of your text should form a straight line, while the right margin has an uneven edge. The first line of each paragraph in the body of your paper should be indented .5", accomplished in most word processing programs by pressing the "Tab" button on your keyboard before you begin typing a new paragraph. Each line of a block quotation should also be indented .5" in order to set this text apart from the rest of your paper's body text.

Section Headings

The MLA Handbook doesn't list specific practices for formatting section headings. Instead, it offers general guidance for creating headings that readers can easily understand. Headings and subheadings should help your reader understand the structure and organization of your paper by establishing the topic or focus of the sections they label. Creating effective and appropriate section headings requires consistency and clarity.

Using a consistent formatting is essential for clearly marking the differences between levels of headings. All level 1 headings should look the same, just as all level 2 headings should look the same. All of the headings in your paper's body text should be aligned to the left edge, rather than centered or indented. The differences between your levels of headings will show their relationship to one another, providing your readers with clarity about your paper's structure.

To distinguish different levels of headings and subheadings, the MLA Handbook recommends using larger, bolded fonts for more prominent headings (i.e., level 1 headings) and using smaller, unbolded or italicized fonts for subordinate headings (i.e., levels 2 and 3). When using headings and subheadings to divide your paper into smaller sections, keep in mind that you should never use a single instance of a heading level within a section. If you use a level 2 heading in a section, you should include two or more level 2 headings. If a particular section only has a single subsection, then consider whether that subsection should simply be integrated into the larger section of which it is a part or separated out entirely into its own section of the same heading level.

Page Formatting

In addition to your paper's text and paragraph formatting, the MLA Handbook also includes guidance for formatting the pages of your document. In MLA style, each page of your paper should have a one inch margin on all sides of the page. The only exception would be if your professor or institution provides specific instructions to increase or decrease the margin size.

According to the MLA Handbook, each page of your paper will also need to include a header which contains the surname of the paper's author or authors and the page number. Using your word processing program's built-in header function, you'll want to type in your surname, as

well as the surnames of any other authors who contributed to your paper, then insert a page number, separating the two with a single space. You won't need to use any abbreviations or symbols before the page number. For more information on inserting page numbers into headers, see this article on adding page numbers in Microsoft Word or this article on how to do so in Google Docs.

Elements of Papers in MLA Style

First Page Heading and Title

Papers in MLA style do not need a title page. Rather, you will include a heading on the first page of your paper which lists your full name, your professor's name, the course number, and the paper's due date on separate lines (Modern Language Association 2). These elements, like all the text in your paper, should be double spaced. Below the heading, centered on a new line, you should type out your paper's title. The text of your title won't need to be bolded, underlined, or otherwise formatted in any special way, and it shouldn't include any final punctuation.

In-Text Citations

When you use information from outside sources in your writing, you need to include in-text citations which direct readers to the relevant entry on your works cited list. The MLA Handbook directs writers to include the author's name, or the title of the work if no author is provided, as well as the location of the information being referenced as a page, chapter, or line number. Since these citations refer to your works cited list entries, you should include the first piece of information provided on the full entry—typically the author's surname, but sometimes the work's title. These in-text references to outside resources can take two different forms in your paper's text: parenthetical citations and citations in prose.

Parenthetical Citations

In parenthetical citations, all of the information your reader will need to locate the source material in your works cited list should be located inside parentheses at the end of the sentence, inside the final punctuation. If you are quoting or paraphrasing a particular part of an outside

source and the source includes information such as page or line numbers, you should include the location of the information directly following the author's name or source title. Page numbers should be provided using only the number. References to chapters, scenes, or lines will need labels such as "ch.", "sc.", or "line", respectively.

Table of In-Text Citation Examples		
Type of Work	Parenthetical Citation	Example
Source with one author	(Surname #)	(Bryant 136)
Source with two authors	(Surname and Surname #)	(Bryant and Tyson ch. 4)
Source with three or more authors	(Surname et al. #)	(Tyson et al. sc. 2)
Source with no listed author	("Title" #)	("Untitled Poem" line 14)

Citations in Prose

You can also cite a source in the text of your sentence, which is called a citation in prose. To create a citation in prose, you will include the author's full name the first time you mention them. After this first citation, you can use the author's surname instead of their full name. Be aware that in some languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, individuals' surnames will come before their given name. If you are referencing a particular part of the author's text, include the page, chapter, scene, or line number in parentheses at the end of the sentence, inside of the final punctuation.

Citations in Prose for Works with a Single Author
In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault describes how the confinement of unreason alongside society's criminal element gave way to the asylum and the medicalization of madness. Foucault claims this confinement depended on the presence of medical professionals who "by their nature, were of a moral and social order" (272).
According to Gao Xingjian, "Literature in essence is divorced from utility" (7). Gao adds,

however, that the market for publishing works is constricted by politics (13).[1]
Works Cited Entries
Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* Translated by Richard Howard, Vintage-Random House, 1988.
Gao Xingjian. *Aesthetics and Creation*. Cambria Press, 2012.

When referencing a work that has two authors, include the full names of both authors the first time you mention the work. For sources with three or more authors, you will either need to list all of the authors in your citation in prose or include only the first author's name, followed by "and colleagues" or "and others." The abbreviation "et al." should only be used in parenthetical citations and your works cited list. As with other citations in prose, the first time you mention the source, you will need to include the authors' full names. In the following citations, you may use the authors' surnames only.

Citations in Prose for Works with Two Authors
Richard Ryan and Edward Deci provide a framework for considering students' level of motivation in relation to internal or external motivational factors. Ryan and Deci identify three innate psychological needs which enable students' sustained engagement and internalized motivation (70).
Works Cited Entry
Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being." *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2000, pp. 68–78., https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.68.

Citations in Prose for Works with Three or More Authors
Michael Sherry, Gretchen Dodson, and Sherridon Sweeney precede their study with an analysis of how classroom discourse shapes and is shaped by the cultural contexts in which it takes place (36). Sherry, Dodson, and Sweeney investigated how dialogic interactions

[1] This example is pulled directly from the *MLA Handbook* (Modern Language Association 231).

influence both students' and teachers' self-concept in the classroom.
Michael Sherry and colleagues precede their study with an analysis of how classroom discourse shapes and is shaped by the cultural contexts in which it takes place (36). Sherry and others investigated how dialogic interactions influence both students' and teachers' self-concept in the classroom.
Works Cited Entry
Sherry, Michael B., et al. "Improvising Identities: Comparing Cultural Roles and Dialogic Discourse in Two Lessons from a US Elementary Classroom." *Linguistics and Education*, vol. 50, 2019, pp. 36–45., https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2019.02.002.

Tables and Illustrations

Tables and illustrations that are referenced in your paper's text should be placed as close as possible to the sentence where they are first mentioned (Modern Language Association 6). If the table or illustration takes up a full page, it should directly follow the page on which it is mentioned. Otherwise, it should be located either on the same page where it is first mentioned or on the page directly following. Keeping these elements close to their first mention in the text will help your reader keep track of your meaning, as well as understand the relevance of included tables and illustrations.

Any tables included in your paper should be labeled with the word "Table" followed by arabic numerals showing the order of your tables (Modern Language Association 6). For example, your first table will be labeled "Table 1" and your second table will be labeled "Table 2," continuing in that order throughout the whole paper. On the line directly below this label, you will include the table's title in title case, meaning the first letter of all major words are capitalized. The text of your table should be double-spaced like the rest of your paper's text, using dividing lines to separate sections of the table if necessary. Immediately below the table, you should include the source if it is not an original creation, as well as any notes about the table's contents or a caption describing the significance or relevance of the table's information.

If your paper includes any illustrations, such as photographs, drawings, maps, graphs, or charts, you will include many of the same elements as tables, although they will be arranged differently. Directly below the illustration, label it with the word "Figure" or the abbreviation "Fig." followed by arabic numerals showing the order of your illustrations (Modern Language Association 7). Like tables, your first illustration will be labeled "Figure 1" or "Fig. 1" and the second illustration will be labeled "Figure 2" or "Fig. 2," continuing that order throughout your paper. Include a period after the label, then caption the illustration on the same line.

Your illustration's caption may include either the complete source information or a partial source that references one of your works cited list entries (Modern Language Association 7-8). If you include the complete source information in your caption, you'll use the same punctuation as you would in a works cited list entry. The only difference in format will be the order of the source's given name and surname. In a caption, you won't invert these names like you would in the works cited list. If this source isn't referenced anywhere else in your text, you won't need to include a works cited list entry. However, if the source is mentioned elsewhere in your paper, or if you only provide partial source information, you'll need to provide the full publication details in your works cited list. In the caption, separate the elements of your caption with a comma and end it with a period.

Works Cited Page

In MLA style, each source that you use in your paper should be listed in a separate section at the end of your paper titled "Works Cited". This title should be centered at the top of a new page, without any punctuation or quotation marks and in a plain font (i.e., not bolded or italicized). The pages of this section should be formatted like the rest of your paper, with the same margins and header as your other pages. The citation list entries should be double spaced

and left-aligned, with no indentation for the first line. Rather, your works cited list entries will use a hanging indent, meaning every line after the first line of an entry will be indented .5". For more information on creating a hanging indent in Microsoft Word or Google Docs, see this page from the CCSU Elihu Burritt Library.

In addition to using a hanging indent, you will want to ensure your works cited list entries are formatted appropriately in MLA style. The titles of articles, books, films, etc. should be formatted in title case, capitalizing every word except for articles (a, an, and the), prepositions, or conjunctions, unless they are the first word of a title or subtitle. For larger works, such as books, magazines, or journals, format the title in italics. Shorter works, such as chapters, poems, or articles, should be placed inside quotation marks. If you cite a digital article that was originally published in print, you should provide the online database which you used to retrieve the article in your works cited list entry for this source, formatted in italics. Articles that you found online should include the associated digital object identifier (DOI) or, if that is unavailable, a stable URL. To find a source's DOI, you may use sites like CrossRef to search for it using the title, year, author(s), or other associated metadata. After the source's DOI or URL, you should include a final period.

The entries of your works cited list should be in alphabetical order, with each entry beginning with the author's surname or the source's title, if no author is listed. Author names should be formatted with their surname first, followed by a comma and the author's given name, along with their middle name or initial, if provided by the source. You won't need to include titles or degrees, but suffixes such as "Jr." or "III" should follow the author's given name, separated by a comma (e.g., King, Martin Luther, Jr.). If multiple sources share an author, list

them alphabetically by title, including the author's name only on the first entry. In following entries, you may replace the author's name with three hyphens, followed by a period.

Different types of sources require different elements in MLA style to demonstrate to the reader where the source is located and how it can be accessed. For an overview of how to format specific types of works cited list entries, see this page from the MLA website. For templates and examples of different types of works cited list entries, see the Purdue Online Writing Lab's articles on formatting entries for books, periodicals, electronic sources, and other common sources.

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* Translated by Richard Howard, Vintage-Random House, 1988.

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Sherry, Michael B., et al. "Improvising Identities: Comparing Cultural Roles and Dialogic Discourse in Two Lessons from a US Elementary Classroom." *Linguistics and Education*, vol. 50, 2019, pp. 36–45., https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2019.02.002.

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