



# MLA Format

## A Quick and Easy Guide

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When you get a writing assignment in a college class, your instructor is inevitably going to say those words that you've either never heard before, or that you dread hearing: "I want you to cite your sources and create your paper in 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 things you need to do while you're setting up, writing, and formatting your paper. It can seem pretty daunting at first glance, but it's actually pretty simple to use if you keep just a few things in mind. At its most basic level, MLA format covers three things:

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

All three of those areas can be covered using a clear set of rules set down by the Modern Language Association in the *MLA Handbook* (9<sup>th</sup> edition, 2021). This guide isn't intended to be a replacement for the *Handbook*, but rather as a quick primer to cover the basic rules that you're most likely to need at the community college level.

### Format (How the Paper Looks)

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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:

- If your paper needs to be printed, use white, letter-sized (8.5 x 11-inch) paper.
- Do *not* include a cover page or title page unless your instructor asks for one. If your instructor requires a cover page, follow the formatting instructions your instructor gives you.
- Double-space your paper by changing the line spacing settings. (Do not double-space by pressing the enter key at the end of each line.)
- Set your text to a size from 11 to 13, and use an easy-to-read typeface such as Times New Roman. (Always follow your instructor's specific guidelines, if any are given.)
- 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. Always set your indent by

adjusting the paragraph settings in your word processing software, never by using the spacebar.

- On the right side of the header space, type your last name, followed by the page number. Always create headers using your word processor's header tools, never by simply typing it at the top of every page.
- In the upper left corner of the first page (in the main space of the page, not in the header), on separate lines separated by soft returns (create a soft return using Shift+Enter), type your name, your instructor's name, the class, and the *due date* (not the current date) of the assignment (written as day, month, year with no commas or abbreviations – for example, “15 September 2021”). This is known as the byline.
- Give your paper a title and type it at the top of the first page, centered and below the byline.
  - Capitalize all words in your title except for articles (“a,” “an,” and “the”), conjunctions (“and,” “but,” etc.), and prepositions (“to,” “in,” “of,” etc.).
  - If you're writing a literary analysis or reader response, your title should *not* be the same as the title of the work you're discussing.
  - Use the same font for the title as you use for the rest of the paper, and do not use 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*”).
- Don't use bold or underlined text in the paper.
- Use italic text only for the titles of complete works, and (sparingly) for emphasis.
- Use inclusive, gender-neutral language (unless gender-specific language is called for), and avoid using “we” and “our” unless you make it clear whom “we” is intended to include.

## Inline Citations (How the Sources Are Cited)

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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 MLA format, a proper inline citation only needs two pieces of information: the name of the source's author, and the page number from the page in the source where the information came from. When you create a citation, follow these guidelines:

- 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 and Prevention 24)
  - Group authorship: (Mayo Clinic Staff 432)
  - Organization: (Human Rights Campaign 21)
- If you can't find any authorship information for your source, you should find a better source. If no other sources exist and you can't change topics, use the first few identifiable words of the title in quote marks (for articles) or italics (for complete works).
  - An article of unknown/unclear authorship entitled "How Technology Affects Our Brains": ("Technology" 3)
  - A book entitled *Beowulf and Other Old English Poems* whose author is unknown/unnamed by the publisher: (*Beowulf* 223)
- If you're using information from a source that does not contain page numbers (a website, for example), give only the author's name (do not give paragraph numbers or line numbers unless they are numbered in your source).
- Citations at the end of a sentence should be given after the quotation marks (in a direct quote) and before the ending punctuation.
  - Example of a paraphrase: In spite of its earthquake preparedness programs, Japan was devastated by the quake, which destroyed thousands of buildings and killed tens of thousands of people (Stimpson 96).
  - Example of a quote: According to a researcher at the University of Virginia, 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 requires only a page number.
  - Example: According to Patrick Roberts of the University of Virginia, Congress has been treating FEMA "like a patient in triage" (16).

## Works Cited Page (How the Citations are Documented)

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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 and find it in its original context. You'll do this with a special page at the end of your paper, called the **works cited** page. There are two main things to remember with the works cited page: the formatting of the page itself, and the contents of each entry.

Formatting the page is straightforward:

- The works cited list should be on its own page (or pages), not with the main text.
  - Don't create a separate document for your works cited page unless your instructor requires it. Use a page break (Ctrl+Enter) instead.

- The title “Works Cited” (or “Work Cited” if you’re only using one source) should appear at the top of the page, centered.
- The header, font, and line spacing should all match the rest of the paper.
- The entries on the works cited page should be arranged alphabetically.
- Each entry should be treated as its own “paragraph” for formatting purposes, with a half-inch *hanging indent*.
  - Create the hanging indent with the paragraph tools or rulers in your word processing software. Never use the spacebar to indent text.

Each source that you cite in your paper needs to have a matching 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 you need, 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, you still need to put in effort to make your works cited page correct: don’t just assume that information isn’t available just because it’s not immediately visible. For some sources, especially web pages, you have to do a 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. Each entry on your works cited page should include each of the elements on the following list (omitting the information you don’t have), in this order:

1. Author
  - a. Authors should be listed last name, first name (for example, “Smith, John”).
  - b. For two authors, only the first author’s name should be written with last name first (for example, “Smith, John, and James Johnson”).
  - c. For more than two authors, list only the first author’s name and follow it with “et al.” (for example, “Smith, John, et al.)
2. Title of article, in quotation marks and title case
3. Title of container (that is, the title of the complete work – such as an academic journal or a book), in italics and title case
4. Other contributors (for instance, an editor or a translator)
5. Version (for instance, an edition number)
6. Number (for example, volume and issue for a magazine or season and episode for a television show)
7. Publisher
8. Publication date
9. Location (the page numbers in a journal article, for instance, or the web address or DOI). For DOIs and web addresses, include the full URL (including “http://” or “https://”). If the DOI doesn’t include this information, use “https://doi.org/” before

the DOI. If your source includes a permalink, use that as your location instead of the regular URL.

10. Title of superior container (for example, a research database like *EBSCOhost*)

11. Repeat numbers 4-10 as many times as needed

An exhaustive list of examples for every type of source is beyond the scope of this resource (see the *MLA Handbook* for complete information on creating works cited entries), but there are three types of sources that you're likely to use the *most* often: peer-reviewed journals (often from a research database), books, and web articles.

For an academic journal article in a database:

Last name, First name. "Title of Article." *Title of Journal*, volume, number, publisher, publication date, page numbers. *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*, <https://doi.org/10.14456/ea.2016.20>.

In the above example, the journal title and the database title are examples of **containers** – that is, larger works of which a source is part. The above example has two containers (*EnvironmentAsia* is the journal that *contains* the article, and *EBSCOhost* is the database that *contains* the journal). As with most citation rules, if you're missing an element from the citation, simply skip it and move onto the next element. Many database articles will have a digital object identifier (or "DOI"), which is what you should give as the location if it is present. Otherwise, use the URL.

For a book:

Last name, First name. *Title of Book*. Edition (if other than first), publisher, publication date.

Wiley, Louise, et al. *Composition in Four Keys: Inquiring into the Field*. Mayfield Publishing Company, 1996.

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 the same way you would treat the database for an academic journal.

For a web article:

Last name, First name. "Title of Article." *Title of website*, publisher, publication date, URL.

Borunda, Alejandra. "The Science Connecting Wildfires to Climate Change" *National Geographic Science*, National Geographic, 17 Sept. 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/09/climate-change-increases-risk-fires-western-us/>.