A Freshman’s Guide to MLA

What is plagiarism? (a) Failing to cite quotations and borrowed ideas, (b) failing to enclose borrowed language in quotation marks, and (c) failing to put summaries and paraphrases in your own words. It is worth noting that you only need cite things that are not considered “common knowledge.” When in doubt, cite the source.

The MLA system generally works in three parts (with some variations): (1) The source is introduced by a signal phrase that names its author, (2) the material being cited is followed by a page number in parentheses, (3) at the end of the paper, a list of works cited (arranged alphabetically according to authors’ last names) gives complete publication information about the source. Parenthetical citations will be modeled in **boldface**.

**FORMATTING GUIDELINES**

**General** | Type should be in an easy to read, 12-point font (Times New Roman preferred, Arial, and Calibri accepted). Titles of poems, articles, and short stories should appear inside quotation marks (“”). Titles of novels, plays, and longer works should be **underlined** or **italicized**.

**Title and identification** | In the upper left corner of your paper, list your (1) full name, (2) teacher’s name, (3) course title, and (4) the date. On the next line, center your title. It should not be in boldface.

**Pagination** | Put the page number, preceded by your last name, in the upper right corner of the page, one-half inch from the top.

**Margins, line spacing, and paragraph indents** | Leave margins of one inch on all sides of the page. Left-align your text. Double space throughout the paper. Do not allow extra line spaces above or below the title or in between paragraphs. Indent the first line of each paragraph one-half inch (or five spaces) from the margin.

**IN-TEXT CITATIONS**

In-text citations name the author of a source (usually in a signal phrase) and give the page number of the reference in parentheses. A signal phrase indicates that something taken from a source is about to be used and will usually include the author’s name. The parenthetical reference usually includes at least the page number.

For example:

Kwon points out that the Fourth Amendment does not give employees any protections from employer’s “unreasonable searches and seizures” (6).

When possible, introduce the material being cited with a signal phrase that includes the author’s name.

For example:

Frederick Lane reports that employers do not necessarily have to use software to monitor how their employees use the Web: employers can “use a hidden video camera pointed at an employee’s monitor” and even position a camera “so that a number of monitors [can] be viewed at the same time” (147).

Note that the period follows the parenthetical citation. When a quotation ends with a question mark or an exclamation point, leave the end punctuation inside the quotation mark and add a period after the parentheses: “. . . ?” (8). If a signal phrase does not name the author, put the author’s last name in parentheses along with the page number.

For example:

Companies can monitor employees’ every keystroke without legal penalty, but they may have to combat low morale as a result (Lane 129).

When the author is unknown, either use the complete title in a signal phrase or use a short form of the title in parentheses.

Citing Literary Works | Many literary works do not have parts or page numbers you can directly refer to. In such cases, cite the page number.

Verse Plays | For verse plays, MLA recommends giving act, scene, and line numbers that can be located in any edition of the work. Always use Arabic numerals and separate the numbers with periods.

For example:

In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Gloucester, blinded for suspected treason, learns a profound lesson from his tragic experience: “A man may see how this world goes / with no eyes” (4.2.148-49).

Poems | For a poem, cite the part (where applicable) and the line numbers.

For example:

When Homer’s Odysseus comes into the hall of Circe, he finds his men “mild / in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil” (10.209-10).

For poems that are not divided into parts, use line numbers. For a first reference, use “lines”: (lines 5-8). Thereafter, just use the numbers: (12-13).
**Novels** | When a novel has numbered divisions, put the page number first, followed by a semicolon, and then indicate the part, book, or chapter in which the passage maybe found. Use abbreviations such as “bk.” and “ch.”

One of Kingsolver’s narrators, teenager Rachel, pushes her vocabulary beyond its limits. For example, Rachel complains that being forced to live in the Congo with her missionary family is “a sheer tapestry of justice” because her chances of finding a boyfriend are “dull and void” (117; bk. 2, ch.10).

**Ellipsis Marks** | Ellipsis marks allow you to condense a quoted passage. They will show that you have omitted words from the source. Be sure that what remains is grammatically complete. If you must omit one or more full sentences, use a period before the ellipsis mark. Ellipses should not be used to distort the meaning of your source.

Lane acknowledges the legitimate reasons that many companies have for monitoring their employees’ online activities, particularly management’s concern about preventing “the theft of information that can be downloaded to a . . . disk, e-mailed to oneself . . . , or even posted to a Web page for the entire world to see” (12).

**Brackets** | Brackets may be used to insert your own words into a quote. You may do this to explain a confusing reference or to keep a quote grammatically correct in the context of your sentence.

Legal scholar Jay Kesan notes that “a decade ago, losses [from employees’ computer crimes] were already mounting to five billion dollars annually” (311).

**Long quotations** | When you quote more than four typed lines of prose (or more than three of poetry), set the quotation off by indenting it one inch (ten spaces) from the left margin. Long or “block” quotes should be introduced by an informative sentence. Note that quotation marks are unnecessary here, and that the parenthetical citation goes outside of the final punctuation mark.

**MLA LIST OF WORKS CITED**

Alphabetize entries in a list of works cited by authors’ last names. The author’s name is important because it serves as a reference for the in-text citations. For a book with a single author, begin with the author’s last name, followed by a comma; then give the author’s first name, followed by a period: Tannen, Deborah. For a book with two to three authors, name the authors in the order in which they are listed in the source. Reverse the name of only the first author: Walker, Janice R., and Todd Taylor.

**Basic format for a book** | For most books, arrange the information into three units, each followed by a period and a space: (1) author’s name, (2) title and subtitle, and (3) the place of publication, the publisher, and the date. Remember to use the short form of a publisher’s name. If a copyright page lists more than one date, list the most recent one.


**Work in an anthology** | Begin with (1) the name of the author of the selection, followed by (2) the title of the selection, (3) the title of the anthology, (4) the name of the editor (preceded by Ed.), (5) publication information, and (6) the pages on which the selection appears.


**Edition other than the first** | Include the number of the edition after the title.


**Foreword, Introduction, Preface, or Afterword** | Begin with the author of the book part, followed by the name of the part, the title of the book, author’s name preceded by the word “by,” publication information, and the page numbers of the selection.


**NOTE** that there are specific guidelines for citing information and sources gathered from library subscription database services – be sure to provide as much information as possible.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University’s MLA Guide: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/

OWL Full MLA Citation Chart: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/media/pdf/20110928111055_949.pdf