

## MLA Documentation Style: The Basics

Revised July 2017

MLA (Modern Language Association) documentation style is a system used in the humanities to acknowledge the sources that you borrow from when you do research to help you write a paper. The MLA has recently updated its documentation style guidelines. This handout presents the basics of those updates.

### Why Document Your Sources?

1. To give credit to the sources you have borrowed from to make your paper stronger.
2. To show your credibility: readers can trust you because you care enough about your subject to do research on it to support our own ideas and opinions with the ideas and opinions of expert sources.
3. To let readers know where they can get further information about your topic.
4. To let readers look for themselves at your sources so they can draw their own conclusions.
5. To avoid **plagiarism** (sometimes called “literary theft”), a serious academic offense in which writers borrow words or ideas from a source and present them as if they were their own.

### What Is a Source?

A source is any person, place, or thing from which you borrow information for your paper. Most commonly, it is an article from a journal, magazine, website, or database. It might also be a book, a *YouTube* video, a movie, a song, a personal interview . . . . The list goes on.

### How Do You Know If a Source Is Good?

Ask the following questions to help you evaluate the quality of a source:

1. Who is the author of the source? What are the author’s credentials?
2. What is the source? Does it have a title? If it lacks a title, how would you describe it?
3. Who is the publisher of the source? Is it a publishing company? A reputable organization?
4. Where did you find the source? Is it in a book? In a journal? On the Web?
5. When was the source published? Is it possible that the source is out of date? (MLA Handbook 11)

If you cannot find satisfactory answers to most of these questions, the source you are looking at is probably not good.

### What Information Do You Need about Your Sources to Document Them Properly?

1. Name of author(s).
2. Title of source.
3. Title of “container” (book, website, magazine, newspaper, etc.),
4. Other contributors (editor, translator, etc.),
5. Version (8<sup>th</sup> ed., updated ed., etc.),
6. Number (vol. 1, no. 15, etc.),
7. Publisher (Harvard UP, Bedford/St. Martin’s, etc.),
8. Publication date,
9. Location (pages or URL).

(MLA Handbook 20)

*Note: MLA no longer requires date of access for online sources. However, your instructor might require it, and some style guides recommend it, especially if the source provides no publication or copyright date. See page 5 of this handout for an example.*

## Part 1: Works Cited

### Creating a Works Cited Page

The pieces of information listed above will help you create a **Works Cited** page, which appears at the end of your paper and provides publication information for all of the sources you borrow from within your paper. Each of your sources must have an entry on the Works Cited page. Additionally, the sources should be in double-spaced and in alphabetical order. Here is an example from an essay for a literature class:

#### Works Cited

"Ian McKellen: Understanding King Lear, the Character." *YouTube*, uploaded by Staging Shakespeare, 17 Feb. 2014,

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw).

"*King Lear: Themes, Motifs, & Symbols*." *SparkNotes*, 2016, [www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/lear/themes.html](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/lear/themes.html).

*MLA Handbook*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed., Modern Language Assn. of America, 2016.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear: A Conflated Text. The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, general editors, Stephen Orgel

and A.R. Braunmuller, The New Pelican Text, Penguin Books, 2002, pp. 1574-1621.

Shapiro, James. *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.

Stritmatter, Roger, and Lynne Kositsky. "The Pattern of Parody in *Eastward Ho*, and a New Date for *King Lear*." *Critical*

*Survey*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 21-52. *Literature Resource Center*, doi: 10.3167/cs.2014.260202.

Szalai, Georg. "BBC Orders 'King Lear' with Anthony Hopkins, Whitney Houston Documentary." *The Hollywood Reporter*,

7 Mar. 2016, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176).

### Each Works Cited Entry in Detail

"Ian McKellen: Understanding King Lear, the Character." *YouTube*, uploaded by Staging Shakespeare, 17 Feb. 2014,

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw).

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s):
2. Title of source: "Ian McKellen: Understanding King Lear, the Character."
3. Title of container: *YouTube*,
4. Other contributors: uploaded by Staging Shakespeare,
5. Version:
6. Number:
7. Publisher:
8. Publication date: 17 Feb. 2014,
9. Location: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw)

This source is a video accessed on *YouTube*. It has no author, so the entry begins with the title of the video. The "container" is the website *YouTube*. The video was uploaded by Staging Shakespeare, so this would count as "other

contributors.” It has no version, number, or publisher. It has a publication date. The location is the URL. Notice that the http:// or https:// is removed.

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“*King Lear: Themes, Motifs, & Symbols.*” *SparkNotes*, 2016, [www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/lear/themes.html](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/lear/themes.html).

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s):
2. Title of source: “*King Lear: Themes, Motifs, & Symbols.*”
3. Title of container: *SparkNotes*,
4. Other contributors:
5. Version:
6. Number:
7. Publisher:
8. Publication date: 2016,
9. Location: [www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/lear/themes.html](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/lear/themes.html).

This source is an article on a website. It has no author, so the entry begins with the article title. Next comes the title of the “container,” the website *SparkNotes*. It has no other contributors, versions, or numbers. The publisher of the source is the same as the title of the website, so that does not have to be repeated. The publication date is 2016. The location is the URL. Notice that the http:// or https:// is removed.

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*MLA Handbook*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed., Modern Language Assn. of America, 2016.

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s):
2. Title of source: *MLA Handbook*.
3. Title of container:
4. Other contributors:
5. Version: 8<sup>th</sup> ed.,
6. Number:
7. Publisher: Modern Language Assn. of America,
8. Publication date: 2016.
9. Location:

This source is a book. It has no author, so the entry begins with the book’s title. It is a single book, so there is no “container” for it. It has no other contributors. The version is the 8<sup>th</sup> edition. It has a publisher and a publication date. No location needs to be specified because the source is self-contained.

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Shakespeare, William. *King Lear: A Conflated Text. The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, general editors, Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller, The New Pelican Text, Penguin Books, 2002, pp. 1574-1621.

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s): Shakespeare, William.
2. Title of source: *King Lear: A Conflated Text*.
3. Title of container: *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*,
4. Other contributors: general editors, Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller,
5. Version: The New Pelican Text,
6. Number:

7. Publisher: Penguin Books,
8. Publication date: 2002,
9. Location: pp. 1574-1621.

This source is a full-length play within the author's collected works. The source has an author and a title. The title is the full-length play *King Lear: A Conflated Text*. It is within the book (or, in this case, "container") *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*. Other contributors are the general editors of the book, Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller. The version of the book is The New Pelican Text. It has no number. It has a publisher and a date. The location of *King Lear: A Conflated Text* is pp. 1574-1621 in *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*.

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Shapiro, James. *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s): Shapiro, James.
2. Title of source: *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*.
3. Title of container:
4. Other contributors:
5. Version:
6. Number:
7. Publisher: Simon & Schuster,
8. Publication date: 2015.
9. Location:

This source is a book. It has an author and a title. It is a single book, so there is no "container" for it. It has no other contributors, version, or number. It has a publisher and a publication date. No location needs to be specified because the source is self-contained.

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Stritmatter, Roger, and Lynne Kositsky. "The Pattern of Parody in *Eastward Ho*, and a New Date for *King Lear*." *Critical Survey*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 21-52. *Literature Resource Center*, doi: 10.3167/cs.2014.260202

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s): Stritmatter, Roger, and Lynne Kositsky.
  2. Title of source: "The Pattern of Parody in *Eastward Ho*, and a New Date for *King Lear*."
  3. Title of container 1: *Critical Survey*,
  4. Other contributors:
  5. Version:
  6. Number: vol. 26, no. 2,
  7. Publisher:
  8. Publication date: 2014,
  9. Location: pp. 21-52.
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3. Title of container 2: *Literature Resource Center*,
  4. Other contributors:
  5. Version:
  6. Number:
  7. Publisher:
  8. Publication date:
  9. Location: doi: 10.3167/cs.2014.260202.

This source has two “containers.” It is an article published in the journal *Critical Survey*, which was accessed on the online database *Literature Resource Center*. The source has two authors. Note that only the first author’s name is inverted. There is an article title. Container 1 is the journal *Critical Survey*. It has no other contributors or version. Its number is vol. 23, no. 2. It has no publisher. It has a date, and the location is the page numbers. The article was accessed on the online database *Literature Resource Center*, which is container 2. Container 2 has no other contributors, version, number, publisher, or publication date. Its location is doi: 10.3167/cs.2014.260202. The doi stands for “digital object identifier.” Many scholarly sources use a doi instead of a URL.

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Szalai, Georg. “BBC Orders 'King Lear' with Anthony Hopkins, Whitney Houston Documentary.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 Mar. 2016, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176).

#### Explanation

1. Name of author(s): Szalai, Georg.
2. Title of source: “BBC Orders 'King Lear' with Anthony Hopkins, Whitney Houston Documentary.”
3. Title of “container”: *The Hollywood Reporter*,
4. Other contributors:
5. Version:
6. Number:
7. Publisher:
8. Publication date: 7 Mar. 2016,
9. Location: [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176).

This source is an article on a website. It has an author and a title. The “container” is the website *The Hollywood Reporter*. It has no other contributors, version, or number. The publisher of the source is the same as the title of the website, so that does not have to be repeated. It has a publication date and a location. Notice that the <http://> or <https://> is removed from the URL.

#### More Things to Know about the Works Cited Page

1. It is alphabetized.
2. Its entirety is double-spaced.
3. “Hanging” indents are used to make the authors’ names more visible.
4. Months are indicated as follows: Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., May, June, July, Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.
5. For more information about the Works Cited, see the *MLA Handbook* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.), the Purdue OWL website, or the free handouts in the Writing Center.
6. If your instructor requires a date of access for online sources, it comes at the end of your Works Cited entry. Here’s an example:

“10 Ways to Be a Shakespeare Expert.” *Folger Shakespeare Library*, [www.folger.edu/10-ways-be-shakespeare-expert](http://www.folger.edu/10-ways-be-shakespeare-expert). Accessed 20 July 2017.

## Part 2: Quoting and Paraphrasing

The two main ways to borrow information from a source and include it in your paper are quoting and paraphrasing.

- A quotation is an exact borrowing of words from a source, and those borrowed words are put inside quotation marks.
- A paraphrase is the borrowing of an idea from a source, and that borrowed idea is written in your own words. A paraphrase is not put inside quotation marks.

### MLA In-Text Citation Style

MLA suggests an in-text citation style that uses a minimum of clutter to match the quotations and paraphrases in your paper with the publication information about the sources of them in your Works Cited. Here is the basic formula:

Introductory word group/phrase of attribution  
that mentions author's name and perhaps some additional information  
+  
"Exact words borrowed enclosed in quotation marks" or paraphrase  
+  
(page number, if available, where the borrowed material appears).

**Now, here are some excerpts from sources followed by examples of effective quoting and paraphrasing as well as the matching Works Cited entry:**

#### Excerpt 1

Oswald, for example, belongs to a well-defined Shakespearean character type, represented in *Hamlet* by the foppish aristocratic messenger, Osric, with whom Oswald even shares the first syllable of his name.

#### Quotation 1

Writing in *Critical Survey*, Roger Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky contend that "Oswald, for example, belongs to a well-defined Shakespearean character type, represented in *Hamlet* by the foppish aristocratic messenger, Osric, with whom Oswald even shares the first syllable of his name" (29).

#### Paraphrase 1

In a recent study, Roger Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky trace the similarities between Oswald in *King Lear* and Osric in *Hamlet*, noting even the similarity of the two characters' names (29).

#### Work Cited

Stritmatter, Roger, and Lynne Kositsky. "The Pattern of Parody in *Eastward Ho*, and a New Date for *King Lear*." *Critical Survey*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 21-52. *Literature Resource Center*, doi: 10.3167/cs.2014.260202

Notes: Both the quotation and the paraphrase mention the authors' names and an additional piece of information in a phrase of attribution. The authors' names lead readers directly to the appropriate works-cited entry. Note the quotation marks around the exact borrowed words in the quotation. Note the absence of quotation marks in the paraphrase; this is because paraphrases borrow only the idea but use the student's own words to convey the idea. Both the quotation and the paraphrase end with a page number in parentheses because the source has page numbers.

#### Excerpt 2

A title in a parenthetical citation often has to be abbreviated. Usually the title is shortened to its initial noun phrase. Because the books of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare are cited often, there are well-established abbreviations for their titles.

## Quotation 2

The *MLA Handbook* advises, “Because the books of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare are cited often, there are well-established abbreviations for their titles” (97).

## Paraphrase 2

The *MLA Handbook* mentions the existence of common abbreviations for the works of Shakespeare and the books of the Bible because these sources are so frequently cited (97).

## Work Cited

*MLA Handbook*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed., Modern Language Assn. of America, 2016.

Notes: Both the quotation and the paraphrase above use the title of the book in the phrase of attribution because there is no author. The book title leads readers directly to the appropriate works-cited entry. Note the quotation marks around the exact borrowed words in the quotation. Note the absence of quotation marks in the paraphrase; this is because paraphrases borrow only the idea but use the student’s own words to convey the idea. Both the quotation and the paraphrase end with a page number in parentheses because the source has page numbers.

## Excerpt 3

The BBC has ordered *King Lear*, starring Anthony Hopkins, a documentary about Whitney Houston and a TV version of a play that sees Prince Charles ascending to the British throne, the U.K. public broadcaster said Monday.

## Quotation 3

Georg Szalai, writing in *The Hollywood Reporter*, confirms the rumor: “The BBC has ordered *King Lear*, starring Anthony Hopkins . . . .”

## Paraphrase 3

A recent article in *The Hollywood Reporter* confirms the rumor about the *King Lear* production with Anthony Hopkins in the lead role (Szalai).

## Work Cited

Szalai, Georg. “BBC Orders 'King Lear' with Anthony Hopkins, Whitney Houston Documentary.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 Mar. 2016, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bbc-king-lear-anthony-hopkins-873176).

Notes: The quotation begins with a phrase of attribution that mentions the author and an additional piece of information. The phrase of attribution is an independent clause, so it is followed by a colon. The quotation ends with an ellipsis mark (three spaced periods) because it does not quote the entirety of the sentence in the source. However, what the student has written is a full sentence, so a period follows the ellipsis, making four spaced periods. The paraphrase does not mention the author in the introductory word group, so the author’s name is given in parentheses at the end of the paraphrase; this is an acceptable variation. Lastly, neither the quotation nor the paraphrase has a number in parentheses at the end; this is because the source has no page numbers.

## Excerpt 4

While recognizing that the play was full of prophecies and visions, Forman places the blame for the murder squarely on the Macbeths themselves: “Macbeth contrived to kill Duncan and through the persuasion of his wife did that night murder the king in his own castle, being his guest.”

## Quotation 4

According to Simon Forman, a noted astrologer and playgoer of Shakespeare’s day, “Macbeth contrived to kill Duncan and through the persuasion of his wife did that night murder the king in his own castle, being his guest” (qtd. in Shapiro 192).

## Paraphrase 4

In his book *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*, James Shapiro comments that Simon Forman, a noted astrologer and playgoer of Shakespeare’s day, believed that the Macbeths, and not some supernatural agent, should bear the responsibility for the king’s death (192).

## Work Cited

Shapiro, James. *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.

Notes: Quotation 4 is an indirect source (a student quoting something that a source has quoted). In this instance, the student is borrowing a quotation from Simon Forman that appears on p. 192 of James Shapiro’s book. To cite this effectively, the student has placed Forman’s name in the introductory word group, quoted Forman, then indicated the source of the quotation with the parenthetical citation (qtd. in Shapiro 192). The paraphrase does not quote, so it simply names Shapiro, the author, in the phrase of attribution.

### Helpful Verbs for MLA Quoting and Paraphrasing (note that MLA prefers present-tense verbs)

according to	contends	holds	reports
agrees	contrasts	illuminates	responds
argues	declares	illustrates	reveals
asks	defends	implies	says
asserts	defines	infers	sees
believes	denies	insists	shows
boasts	describes	maintains	speculates
claims	disputes	notes	states
comments	emphasizes	observes	suggests
compares	explains	points out	thinks
concedes	extols	rejects	warns
considers	finds	relates	writes

For further information about MLA documentation style, consult the *MLA Handbook* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.), the Purdue OWL website, a recent grammar-and-style book, or a Writing Center staff member.