The Writing Center   Washtenaw Community College

MLA Documentation Style: The Basics

Revised October 2018

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. 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—and you've shown the courtesy to acknowledge your debt to those 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?
The recent 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook* suggests that you 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 Is it possible that the source is out of date?

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?
The *MLA Handbook* suggests the following:
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 (8th ed., updated ed., etc.),
6. Number (vol. 1, no. 15, etc.),
7. Publisher (Harvard UP, The Art Institute of Chicago, etc.),
8. Publication date,
9. Location (pages or URL).

[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 or if it is a source from a website whose contents change frequently.]

Part 1: MLA Works Cited Page

Creating a Works Cited page

A Works Cited page is a list of all the sources cited in a paper.
- It appears at the end of a paper and provides publication information about all the sources cited in a paper.
- Each source cited in a paper must have an entry on the Works Cited page. Conversely, each source on the Works Cited page should be cited in the paper.
- The Works Cited should be double-spaced, be alphabetized by authors' last names (or, in some cases, article or book title), and use "hanging" indents that allow the authors' names to stand out.

Here is what a Works Cited page should look like:

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Edited by Arthur Kirsch, Princeton UP, 2000.

Bachrach, Hailey. "The Oregon Shakespeare Festival 2017." *Shakespeare Newsletter*, vol. 67, no. 1, Fall-

Winter 2017, pp. 14-21. *Literature Resource Center*, go.galegroup.com.

Crystal, David, and Ben Crystal. *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*. Preface by

Stanley Wells, Penguin Books, 2002.

Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*. Anchor Books, 2008.

Greenblatt, Stephen, et al., editors. *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Hamlet. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Performances by Branagh, Julie Christie, Derek Jacobi, and Kate

Winslet, Columbia Pictures, 1996.

"Hamlet (1996)." *Rotten Tomatoes*, Fandango, www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1075422_hamlet.

Accessed 8 May 2018.

Holland, Peter. "Shakespeare, William." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* Oxford UP, 2018,

doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25200.

Howes, Sophia. "Review: 'Hamlet' at Shakespeare Theatre Company." *DC Metro Theater Arts*, 25 Jan.

    2018, dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2018/01/25/review-hamlet-shakespeare-theatre-company/.

MLA Handbook. 8th ed., Modern Language Assn. of America, 2016.

Royal Shakespeare Company. "Synopsis | *A Midsummer Night's Dream:* A Play for the Nation | Royal

    Shakespeare Company." *YouTube,* 11 Dec. 2015,

    www.youtube.com/watch?v=knSvuVZBk_gdecwww.youtube.com/watch?v=knSvuVZB

    k_g. Accessed 9 June 2018.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. *The Bedford Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena

    Cowen Orlin, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 886-943.

"Sonnet." *Dictionary.com,* 2018, www.dictionary.com/browse/sonnet.

"William Shakespeare Biography." *Biography*, A&E Television Networks, LLC, 5 Aug. 2017,

    www.biography.com/people/william-shakespeare-9480323.

Sample Works Cited Entries

Basic Format for a Book

Author's Last Name, Author's First Name. *Title of Book*. Name of Publisher, Year of Publication.

Examples

Book with One Author

Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*. Anchor Books, 2008.

Book with Two Authors

Crystal, David, and Ben Crystal. *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*. Preface by

    Stanley Wells, Penguin Books, 2002.

Book with More Than Two Authors

Greenblatt, Stephen, et al., editors. *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

[Note: "Et al." is an abbreviation of a Latin phrase that means "and others."]

Book with No Author

MLA Handbook. 8ᵗʰ ed., Modern Language Assn. of America, 2016.

Book with an Author and an Editor

Auden, W.H. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Edited by Arthur Kirsch, Princeton UP, 2000.

Work in an Anthology

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. *The Bedford Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena

Cowen Orlin, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 886-943.

Basic Format for an Article in a Print or Web Source

Print

Author's Last Name, Author's First Name. "Title of Article." *Name of Magazine or Newspaper*, Pages.

Web

Author's Last Name, Author's First Name. "Title of Article." *Name of Website*, Publisher or Sponsor of

Website [if name is different from that of the Website], Date of Publication, URL [without

http://] or DOI.

Examples

Article in a Web Source

Howes, Sophia. "Review: 'Hamlet' at Shakespeare Theatre Company." *DC Metro Theater Arts*, 25 Jan.

2018, dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2018/01/25/review-hamlet-shakespeare-theatre-company/.

[Note: MLA style recommends removing the http:// *from URLs.]*

Article with No Author

"William Shakespeare Biography." *Biography*, A&E Television Networks, LLC, 5 Aug. 2017,

www.biography.com/people/william-shakespeare-9480323.

Journal Article in a Library Database

Bachrach, Hailey. "The Oregon Shakespeare Festival 2017." *Shakespeare Newsletter*, vol. 67, no. 1, Fall-

Winter 2017, pp. 14-21. *Literature Resource Center*, go.galegroup.com.

[Note that most journals have volume and issue numbers. The second italicized title is the name of the database.]

Article or Entry in an Encyclopedia or Dictionary

With an Author

Holland, Peter. "Shakespeare, William." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* Oxford UP,

2018, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25200.

With No Author

"Sonnet." *Dictionary.com,* 2018, www.dictionary.com/browse/sonnet.

Web Source with No Publication Date

"Hamlet (1996)." *Rotten Tomatoes*, Fandango, www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1075422_hamlet.

Accessed 8 May 2018.

[Note: Date of access is recommended for sources that have no date.]

Other Sources

Film

Hamlet. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Performances by Branagh, Julie Christie, Derek Jacobi, and Kate

Winslet, Columbia Pictures, 1996.

Video from the Web

Royal Shakespeare Company. "Synopsis | *A Midsummer Night's Dream:* A Play for the Nation | Royal

Shakespeare Company." *YouTube,* 11 Dec. 2015,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=knSvuVZBk_gdecwww.youtube.com/watch?v=knSvuVZB

k_g. Accessed 9 June 2018.

[Note: Date of access is recommended for sources from websites whose content changes frequently.]

Part 2: MLA 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 in quotation marks.
- A **paraphrase** is the borrowing of an idea for a source, and that borrowed idea is written in the student's own words. To do this, careful writers change both the wording and the sentence structure of what the author has written originally. A paraphrase is not put in quotation marks. *[Note: A paraphrase is not a summary of an entire work; it is merely the borrowing of an idea or two from a work.]*

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:

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 quoted words or the idea you've paraphrased appear).

Here are some examples of effective quoting and paraphrasing:

Quotation with Author in Phrase of Attribution

In a recent *Shakespeare Newsletter* article, Hailey Bachrach contends, "The big question of *Julius Caesar* in most cases is how to make all five acts seem necessary" (14).

Quotation with Author in Parentheses

A recent *Shakespeare Newsletter* article contends, "The big question of *Julius Caesar* in most cases is how to make all five acts seem necessary" (Bachrach 14).

Paraphrase with Author in Phrase of Attribution

W.H. Auden, in *Lectures on Shakespeare*, maintains that Hamlet's soliloquies are not well integrated into the play (159).

Paraphrase with Author in Parentheses

At least one notable critic maintains that Hamlet's soliloquies are not well integrated into the play (Auden 159).

Quotation with Author in Phrase of Attribution, Page Number Unknown

In a review of a 2018 performance of *Hamlet*, Sophia Howes describes Gertrude as follows: "The Queen, an enigmatic figure, is in deep reds and blues at first, then black and magenta, then black, which echoes her emotional journey."

Quotation with Author in Parentheses, Page Number Unknown

A review of a 2018 performance of *Hamlet* describes Gertrude as follows: "The Queen, an enigmatic figure, is in deep reds and blues at first, then black and magenta, then black, which echoes her emotional journey" (Howes).

Paraphrase with Author in Phrase of Attribution, Page Number Unknown

In the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Peter Holland mentions that Shakespeare wrote the tragedies *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1605 and 1606.

Paraphrase with Author in Parentheses, Page Number Unknown

Shakespeare wrote the tragedies *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1605 and 1606 (Holland).

<div align="center">

Other Examples

</div>

Quotation with Author Unknown, Article or Book Title in Phrase of Attribution

The article "William Shakespeare Biography" on the *Biography* website explains that "William Shakespeare's early plays were written in the conventional style of the day, with elaborate metaphors and rhetorical phrases that didn't always align naturally with the story's plot or characters."

Paraphrase with Author Unknown, Article or Book Title in Parentheses

The works of Shakespeare and the books of the Bible have long-established abbreviations that writers can use for citations (*MLA* 97).

[Note: Titles mentioned parenthetically may be shortened.]

Paraphrase with Two Authors

In their book *Shakespeare's Words*, David Crystal and Ben Crystal divide the characters in *Hamlet* into seven circles: the Danish Court, the Soldiers, the Norwegian Army, the Sailors, the English Ambassadors, the Players, and the Graveyard (529).

Paraphrase with More Than Two Authors

It is possible that Shakespeare did no acting during 1592-94, which were plague years (Greenblatt et al. 1106).

Indirect Source (Source Quoted in Another Source)

According to Irene Sharaff, the costume designer for *West Side Story*, "The T-shirt in the fifties was worn solely as underwear" (qtd. in Garber 49).

[Note: Sharaff is mentioned in the introductory phrase, and the parenthetical citation indicates that Sharaff's words are quoted in Garber on p. 49. Garber should appear in the Works Cited as the source. Sharaff should not.]

Long Quotation (More Than Four Lines)

Marjorie Garber, in *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, comments on a well-known artistic strategy:

> The play-within-the play has strong roots in the early modern period. In Shakespeare's time the device was constantly exploited, by revenge tragedies and comedies alike. The revenger in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* contrives to kill his enemies during the plot of a play they are performing. Both *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* present the spectacle of onstage audiences watching plays that—although they do not realize it—tell versions of their own stories, to comic effect. (220)

[Note: Long quotations are indented, and quotation marks are unnecessary.]

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

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

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