What Is an MLA-Style Essay?

MLA (Modern Language Association) style is used mostly for analyzing documents in English and other humanities courses. When using material from a source, MLA style emphasizes identifying the author of the source.

The MLA document format requires the following elements (see fig. 1):

1. **A running header** in the top right margin: your last name, a space, and the page number.
2. Below, on the first page only, is the **heading** (left justified and double spaced):
   - Your Name
   - Instructor’s Name
   - Class
   - Date
3. On the next line, the **title of the essay** is centered. Capitalize the first and last words of your title and all the words in between **except** articles, prepositions, FANBOYS, and **to** in infinitive verbs.
4. Everything except the header is **double-spaced, left-justified, with one-inch margins**. Use plain 12-point Times New Roman or Calibri, no decorative fonts, not even for your title.
5. Press the “Tab” key to indent the first line of each paragraph ½ inch, with no extra line spacing between paragraphs.

![Fig. 1. Example of First Page of MLA Paper](http://bellevuecollege.edu/asc/writing)
MLA In-text Citation

**Being Clear About Who Says What**

The first time you introduce a text, give the full name and credential of the author (X), the title, and name the genre of the work (article from famous newspaper, trade journal, academic journal, TED Talk, university course website, conference presentation, etc.) in a signal phrase. Use a present tense or present perfect verb that indicates how the author says the information. The page number, if applicable, is given in parentheses before the period:

In his/her named genre, “Title,” X argues that _______ (page #).  
In her *Times* article “Insurance Reform,” journalist Mary Moe argues that______ (57).

After that first time, you may refer to the same author by his or her family name.

**Sample Templates for Introducing Quotations in MLA Style**

- X states, “_____” (##).
- As the prominent philosopher/teacher/businessman X puts it, “_____” (##).
- According to X, “_____” (##).
- Writing in the journal *Commentary*, X complains that “_____” (##).
- In X’s view, “_____” (##).
- X agrees/disagrees when she writes, “_____” (##).
- X complicates matters further when he writes, “_____” (##).

**Sample Templates for Introducing Challenges to What X Says in MLA Style**

- A number of _________ have recently suggested that X’s work has several fundamental problems.
- It has become common today for ________ to dismiss X’s contribution to the field of ________.
- In their recent work, Title, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of Dr. X for ____.

If the source information is not in the sentence, put the author’s last name and the page number in parentheses after the quotation or paraphrase. You do not need to write the title within the parentheses unless you cite more than one work by the same author (or works by authors with the same last name) in your paper. If you cite several facts from the same source, one after the other, you should include the author’s last name and the
page number in the first citation. In the following citations, use only the page number. However, if you cite another work, then you need to write the author’s name again:

A) First source

B) Same author, different source.

People who grew up there complain that Seattle is a damp city to live in (Wetly, *Memoirs* 219). This dampness, in fact, leads to frequent minor illnesses among the population in general (Wetly, *Dripping* 204). Often, these illnesses can last through the winter, and in at least one case, a common cold “dragged on for an entire hanky-soaked year” (274).

C) Same source as B, different page

Cite both a quotation and the author of the work in which it is found when they are different people:

Peter Whybrow, a neuroscientist who examines America’s economy and culture in his book *American Mania*, says “‘Operating in a world of instant communication with minimal social tethers, . . . America’s engines of commerce and desire [have become] turbocharged’” (McKibben 123).

As in the above example, if you need to omit part of a quote, use three spaced periods to show where the words were left out. If you need to insert or substitute a word or words in a quote, put square brackets around the substitution.

If your source is electronic and has no page numbers, you may identify the author in your sentence and omit a parenthetical citation. Furthermore, if your source has no author, you may put a shortened version of its title in the parentheses, punctuated according to the source type, instead.

**Long Quotes**

If you have a quotation that is more than four lines when typed into your essay, write an introduction to the quote, then start the quote on the next line; if your introduction is a sentence, end it with a colon. **Indent all lines of the quote half an inch from the left margin.** Put the parenthetical citation after the period at the end of the quote. Do not use quotation marks.

Fig. 2. Example of a Long Block Quote
MLA Works Cited Page
After your essay, on a separate page, list the works named in the paper.

Center the heading “Works Cited” at the top of the page. Then type out the entries for each work and arrange them in alphabetical order by each primary author’s last name. If there is no author named, use the title (not including a, an, or the for the alphabetizing).

Fig. 3. Example of MLA Works Cited Page Format

Start a new paragraph for each work, but keep everything the same double line spacing as the rest of the paper. In Word, after typing out your works cited list, highlight the text and move (the bottom two portions of the slider) ½-inch to the right on the ruler, leaving the top part in place like this to create hanging indents.

Works Cited Entries in MLA 8th Edition Style
The MLA Handbook 8th edition uses a template of nine “core elements” and the idea of “containers” to organize the information you should provide in your list of works cited. Each core element is separated from the next by a period or a comma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>“Title of Source.”</th>
<th>Title of Container</th>
<th>Other contributors</th>
<th>Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Number,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publication date,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Location.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If a source doesn’t have an element, you may find the information in another reliable source and add it in square brackets, or just skip it. The goal is to clearly provide identification of your source, regardless of its medium, with information relevant to your work.

The Nine Core Elements with Punctuation
1) Author.

Authors may be individuals or organizations.
ONE AUTHOR:

TWO AUTHORS:

THREE OR MORE AUTHORS:

EDITOR AS AUTHOR:

GOVERNMENT AGENCY AS AUTHOR:
Omit “The” before the name of any organization in the works cited list.

If a government agency is the author, identify the government first, then the next smaller unit(s) that the agency is part of, and finally the agency followed by a period.


2) Title of source.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>“Title of Source.”</th>
<th>Title of Container, Other contributors, Version,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the title of a source is for a shorter work—such as an article, an episode of a TV series, an email message, a song, a poem—contained within a larger work, it should follow standard title capitalization and be enclosed in quotation marks. If the source is a book or a movie, for example, then the title should follow standard title capitalization and be italicized. The title of the source is punctuated with a period.


3) Title of container,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>“Title of Source.”</th>
<th>Title of Container</th>
<th>Other contributors</th>
<th>Version, Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The container may be any larger work that contains the source: e.g., a book, a periodical, a TV series, a web site, a blog; in turn, those “containers” may be inside larger containers with their own titles: a network of blogs (like WordPress), or the network containing a TV series (like Hulu, or Netflix, or Home Box Office). The container title is followed by a comma.

ONE CONTAINER:


TWO CONTAINERS:

In the above example, the first CONTAINER is The New York Times, and the version, number, publisher, publication date and location describes it. Then, in addition, this entire New York Times is located in ANOTHER CONTAINER, a database: ProQuest National Newspapers Core Collection.

4) Other contributors,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>“Title of Source.”</th>
<th>Title of Container</th>
<th>Other contributors</th>
<th>Version, Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Tigre, Tony D. “Re: Gazelle.” Received by Kapitano J. Squirrel, 21 June 2017.
5) Version,

Author. “Title of Source.” Title of Container, Other contributors, Version.
Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location.


6) Number,

Author. “Title of Source.” Title of Container, Other contributors, Version.
Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location.


7) Publisher,

Author. “Title of Source.” Title of Container, Other contributors, Version.
Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location.


If author and publisher are the same, start with the title of the work, and list only the organization as the publisher.
### 8) Publication date,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Title of Container</th>
<th>Other contributors</th>
<th>Version, Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


### 9) Location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>“Title of Source.”</th>
<th>Title of Container</th>
<th>Other contributors</th>
<th>Version, Number, Publisher, Publication date, Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

This is the element that still depends most on the medium of your source: print sources and PDFs have page numbers, online sources have URLs, DVD sets have disc numbers, and online journal articles can have DOIs. When providing a URL, omit “http://” or “https://” and use the actual web address, not a shortened version from a third party. (If your instructor prefers that you not include a URL, follow your instructor!) Even exhibits, artifacts in archives, performances, and lectures may be cited with their physical locations, if relevant to your writing.


### Optional Elements

Additional information that you decide is necessary may be added after the core element it relates to, or to the end of an entry. For example, with a reprint of a much older work, providing the original publication date right after the title can help give context. Similarly, if you used a transcript of another medium it can help to identify your actual source.
